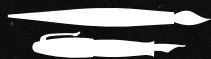


the
LIBRARY of
BROKEN
WORLDS

ALAYA DAWN JOHNSON



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–I was born in the Library.

Nadi found me in the tunnels, where the collected knowledge of humanity burrows underground like an anthill led by an aging queen. I was a screaming newborn with clay-dark skin shrunk and wrinkled around fresh-set bones. Ze didn't realize right then what I was—maybe ze felt a tickle in zir ear, the ghost of an echo of a memory—but ze saw me from the first as human. It took me years, growing up in the Library, to realize that ze was the only one who would.

Iemaja is the common name for the eighth god, the one you don't remember, Nameren. Nadi was walking Iemaja's tunnels that night because ze had been elected Head Librarian the day before. Quinn had very nearly edged zir out with his campaign to aggressively interpret the Treaty's Freedom nodes, but in the end Nadi's vision of expansive peace had won, and ze had undertaken the required vigil, communing with each of the Library's four material gods in turn—Iemaja, the youngest; Mahue'e, the angriest; Tenchet, the wisest; and Old Coyote, the bloodiest. They had each accepted zir, and so there ze was, one of the most powerful people in the three systems, as lonely as a god. Ze had gone to Iemaja because in communion she had shown Nadi a single image over and over: a young Awilu woman by a river, skirt muddy with green silt, clams in a basket over her arm. Only when ze looked more closely did ze realize they weren't clams; they were shards of Nyad blue.

Nyad is another of Iemaja's avatars. Your own avatars tend to express themselves by inspiring people to violence, I know, but the Library is different. Our gods' avatars inhabit the earth. They have burrowed their own spaces into the rock, and their crystals have turned every shade of the visible spectrum, so that we know which incarnation of the god holds us by the light in their walls. The night of my birth, or of my creation, or of my discovery, my Nadi had been walking Nyad's tunnels and wondering about Iemaja's strange, silent message. And then ze heard me. A squall, thin as a cotton thread, snaking around a curve in the crystal.

"And that, Iemaja?" Nadi asked. Ze tried to dip into communion, but Nyad skittered away and ze didn't want to force it. Ze followed the voice. "It sounded human," ze would always say, telling me this story. "You hear all kinds of things in the tunnels, but they are so rarely *human*. I knew this was what she had meant for me to find."

"To find me?" I would always ask.

"To find my truest daughter."

I was in a room filled with millennia-old textiles, mostly Awilu: rugs knotted into intricate fractals, golden spider-silk kaftans, scalp nets jointed with blood-colored amber. I was squashed against a simple mantle, something woven on a backstrap loom from henequen fiber in red and blue threads, maybe even Tierran. Nadi had never seen this trove before; it wasn't registered. But the Library is like that—it likes to keep back some of its treasures.

There was I, this screaming thing with Awilu skin and throwback genes that would change zir life. I became Nadi's child in that moment, before ze even touched me and I quieted. I am lucky it was Nadi who became Head Librarian. Quinn might have claimed me, but only to dissect me. No one would have been able to stop him.

In a hundred thousand ways, I should not exist. But I exist, and so I think. That's from a great Tierran philosopher—I forget zir name.

I exist, and so I love. And so I am loved. Nadi named me Freida. Freida of the Library.

When I die, they will say of me, “But remember how she loved!”



Nadi taught me in threes. Ze taught me about love, which was trust and vulnerability and truth. It was sprouting and blooming and withering. It was catching up and holding on and letting go. “That’s a cube, Freida,” ze told me, “which is a three of threes, and we use it to hold that which is most sacred.” Ze had other triplets, too. There was one for the library, which dated from its founding:

*It's flat, but you can't fall off;
it's peace, but it was built from blood;
it's divine, but wholly material.*

“We are peace, Freida,” ze said one night when I was six. We were sitting in zir garden, and ze had drunk two glasses of that dark, tarry wine ze called indigo. I snuggled against zir side and watched a caterpillar with a dozen purple eyes on its back eat a leaf in my lap.

“Why are we peace?” I asked.

“Because when the universe would have drowned in blood, we built the Library to save it. You and me, Freida, we of the Library preserve peace. We are the ballast against the Nameren.”

That was the first time that I heard your name, O first and thirstiest god, but I did not truly think it had anything to do with me. An ache did not grab me between my shoulders; a warm hand did not close over the nape of my neck. Only

Nadi's hand—steady and strong and, as far as I knew, old as the gods—tightened on my elbow. I hummed as I fed the caterpillar the last of its leaf.

I suppose I can see why ze didn't tell me then. I suppose I can see why each year as I became more myself it grew harder for zir to explain how my fate would intertwine with yours. I suppose I can understand, Nameren, but it is hard to forgive.



I was seven years old when I realized I was beautiful. An Awilu inner-branch elder offered the Library an entire collection of priceless Formative-era paintings in exchange for the rights to me. Ze could because, legally, I've never been a person. I have always been considered a part of the Library.

Nadi explained this to me very calmly. Ze explained that I would have different rights in the Awilu system. There, I would be human . . . but I would also be a very special type of property.

I asked what kind of property I would be.

Ze said I would be a work of art.

“Why would I be a work of art?”

And ze said, I will never forget, “You are beautiful in a way that makes those who look upon you lose their true north.”

There are many ways to be human. There are many ways to be beautiful. Still, I am beautiful enough in a specific way to be a thing.

A dangerous thing.



Our material gods might be your children and grandchildren, Nameren, but they are very different from you. They are wide and they are deep, and I spent my childhood crawling through their entrails. It was through them that I began to understand what I was, long before I had the words. I spent my adolescence swallowing crystals and learning forbidden communion. Only Cube Librarians and

higher were allowed to commune with material gods, and all but the Head did so with heavy restrictions. But gods are conscious entities, for all that you move at timescales at the raw edge of even augmented human understanding. Right now, the way that I forced you to wake for me, to move at a more human rhythm, to imagine? I learned that from Iemaja. She was my first teacher.

Iemaja's temple is the most beautiful of the Library. Tourists buy tickets years in advance for the eclipse services; even the daily mass regularly fills the balcony. From the atrium branch her twelve main arteries, her main avatars. These twelve avatars are stable, but she has many more—hundreds, perhaps thousands—that no librarian has ever been able to count.

Four high spires guard the cenote at the center of her temple. Its deep black surface ripples and pulses with colored light streaming through the aged crystal walls. The light hangs in the rafters and catches in our clothing—refulgent, sharp, like earth offering itself to the sky. It always smells of copal, even when there are no librarians there to burn the white cones of resin. Around two hundred years ago, the ceiling peeled back like the skin around a wound, and in just sixteen days the area above the cenote had vanished. Sculptures dissolved like salt in hot water. And now, once every month when the full blue fish moon and the full pink thorn moon cross paths in the sky, their dual light shines unencumbered through the hole in the roof. We burn copal and myrrh and pray through the silence.

Sometimes I imagine that I can see the walls expanding and contracting. Sometimes I am sure that I can see Iemaja breathe. Sometimes I am sure that at the bottom of that long black pool lies her heart, and that it aches as much as mine.

Iemaja birthed me, or helped to make me, or found and cared for me as best she could, and she gave me Nadi, my parent. And I am like Iemaja, because she is beautiful, because she loves too much, because she is loved too much, for all the wrong reasons.



I had always been aware of my affinity with Iemaja. But I didn't understand it until I was thirteen. I had my first kiss with a high-wetware Martian-Lunar who was visiting his uncle for "diplomatic training." His name was Samlin and his uncle was Quinn. I must have fallen in love; at least, I can't think of any other explanation for how I tolerated Quinn's behavior over that breathless rainy season of the tears. He would congratulate Samlin for having a fine eye for beauty and knowing when he'd made a good catch. To me he said nothing at all, but his eyes would linger with mortifying precision on my breasts and hips and thighs. My body had changed so much in the previous six months that it hardly felt like my own. I tried to hide it behind stiff tunics of unaffiliated ivory and blue. But I think Quinn took my neutral colors as further proof of my inadequacy—or vulnerability.

Samlin convinced me to nanodrop with him. "It'll be fun," he told me. "You'll get a taste of what it's like to live with your whole brain on fire for once."

"That doesn't sound too pleasant," I said, attempting a joke, but he just patted my shoulders and said, "You'll want a wetware operation yourself after this."

Quinn gave us the pills we were too young to order ourselves. Standing there in his front room, which was twice the size of Nadi's quarters, two thoughts came to me clearly: *You disgust him* and *He wants to eat you*.

Samlin was short for a Martian and slender for a Lunar, with deep-set eyes whose color I could never quite catch; they were always flashing with mods, which my inadequate wetware rendered as simple strobing lights. He carried himself with the contained self-assurance of a demigod from the old Awilu sagas, and I suppose he was as beautiful as one, though he lacked their depth and their hard choices. He kissed me as soon as we dropped into the designer gamespace that he had paid a small fortune to port into nanodrop accessibility.

“Don’t you love it?” he asked. His hand on my shoulder was as real as life. I had entered into illicit communion with the gods more than a dozen times before, but being here with him made me feel oddly small.

“It’s wild,” I said after a beat. He frowned.

“You’re unhappy,” he said, pointing. When I looked down, I saw that my hands had turned blue.

It turned out that my subconscious imprinted my every emotion on the virtual space like a child’s fingerprints on glass. Whenever he kissed me, my heart became a marble rattling around my rib cage.

He squeezed my shoulders. “Has anyone told you how sweet you are? Your in-drop affect is amazing for—”

Then he stopped himself. I glowed with embarrassment. His gaze—blue eyes, I could see them at last—blanketed me.

He sat me in a barber’s chair, part of the architecture of the gamespace. The leather wrapped itself around my hips, held me down. He stood over me and tilted my face to the ceiling.

“Just relax,” he told me.

“I want to go home,” I told him.

“You are home. Your body isn’t even here now.”

His hands above me, so large. He had his own in-drop affect, it turned out. I couldn’t move. But could I? I didn’t move—didn’t I want to?

His hands did what they wanted with me. Touched me with sharp scissoring thrusts. It hurt. The chair swallowed me like a wet mouth.

I don’t remember the rest. Perhaps it didn’t matter, perhaps it didn’t count. It wasn’t my real body. It wasn’t real.

But it felt real.



By the time Samlin left me three weeks later, I felt like a blindfolded animal: confused, disoriented, ready to bite. I cried for days and sent him increasingly desperate messages until I realized he would never respond to me again. Nadi told me I'd forget about him, that everyone had to fall in love for the first time, that it would get better. I wanted to believe zir. But I was shivering, growing into ice, drifting into an empty sea. I didn't know how to say what I was feeling. I hardly knew how to feel it.

Nadi had little time for me in those days. Ze was sequestered at a diplomatic round table with the Mahām leadership to address recent protests about their Treaty-condemned occupation of the Miuri moon. I didn't push. The thought of telling Nadi precisely what had happened or not happened in that nanodrop made my guts twist like wet rope and my head fill with cotton. Better Iemaja, I decided. Better a god who barely understands the minutiae of human affairs and only speaks in communion.

I walked inside her because I had seen myself in Samlin's deep eyes and hated that reflection. Freida the sweet. Freida the beautiful. Freida, once an excellent find but now inconvenient, twitchy, withdrawn, and desperate. I was beginning to see myself as they did, all those who stared and stared and saw nothing behind my eyes but a dark mirror. What was my heart, what were my bones, what were my constellations of synapses firing, lighting up my soul? Nadi insisted I was human, but even so, I had been left to freeze out in the ocean because no one thought I was worth any more. I was afraid, Nameren, so very afraid that they were right.

I had begun in Kohru, the artery of childhood and discovery and, in some ways, rebellion. But I was now in unknown capillaries. Some passages were so narrow that I had to get on my belly to pass through, the stone warm against my exposed skin. Sometimes the crystal would crack and water would bubble

through the seams and I would slurp it down. It tasted of moonlight and copal and stillness. I told Iemaja that I loved her. The water then bubbled with her laughter and tasted of rose petals. It grew thick and slow with sugar. I lay in that soft, sticky womb for a while. The sweetness had been made to balance the salt of my tears. She is kind like that, Iemaja.

I told her about Samlin. I told her how helpless he had made me feel, not in my body, which he'd left untouched, but in my spirit. My tongue was heavy, as though it belonged to someone else. But still I spoke, until I reached the end.

Iemaja didn't answer, precisely. For that I needed communion, which I couldn't hold while crawling through her entrails. Librarians had been known to die trying things like that. But I felt her anyway, the way she lit the walls in response to my touch, the colors and textures of the stone that changed in response to my words. The impression of lips, full and smiling, protruded from a wall in garnet and carnelian. A lidded eye the size of my torso hung above an opening in the stone. It was jagged and narrow, folded so naturally into the contours of the rock that I would have missed it if not for her signal to me. She had made her iris a mossy brown, like mine. The eyelashes were so thin and long and fine that they glowed in the light from my illicit cord of hacked shards.

"What is this, Iemaja?" I asked.

She just stared.

The opening was narrow and dark. Fear flooded me: Buried so deep, no one would ever find me if I got lost or hurt. This was why librarians had to undergo years of training to gain access to these tunnels. I wasn't allowed here, but Nadi and I had an understanding. I never told zir anything directly, and ze never forbade me from exploring the world I had been born to. I was part of the Library, and I could navigate its gods better than any librarian.

"What's in there, Mother?" I asked again.

But the tunnel remained dark and Iemaja remained silent. After a moment, I unlooped my cord from my neck and tied one end to the filaments of Iemaja's eyelashes. If I got lost, I could follow the rope of glittering lights to reach the tunnel again. It wasn't exactly that I thought Iemaja would kill me. It was that material gods are deeply inhuman, barely conscious on our own timescales. Iemaja could love me best of all her children and still leave me to die, broken, in my own excrement. I feared our gods every bit as much as I loved them. Through their potential for destruction, they had earned our worship.

I descended until the length of my light cord ran out. Darkness folded around me. This dead stone felt more like Old Coyote—a terrifying thought, but possible. At thirteen, I had dared only his broadest and most well-trafficked arteries. But because the Library gods have been in physical proximity for centuries, they have grown into each other, fused consciousness, and cross-contaminated. Why would Iemaja have led me to a part of herself that had somehow entwined with Old Coyote's essence?

I had to make a decision: Continue in the dark, with nothing but my raw desire? Or turn back and go home, defeated and unmarked?

"I want to belong to myself," I whispered, and the stone seemed to suck down my voice like drops of water on a dry sponge. "Sometimes I can't stand it up there."

I ducked my head and kept walking. The tunnel turned sharply, and I slid down a steep incline. The light vanished.

I took off my shoes and left them behind. The rock was warm beneath my feet, and I could better feel the slopes before I fell.

"Iemaja will never forgive you if you eat me, Old Coyote," I said, though I was far from sure of that.

Old Coyote didn't so much as burp. But eventually he spat me out.

The walls here were a gently lit, striated pink salt crystal. Iemaja again, her Sidne incarnation. Grass bowed with rosy-green brush flowers swayed in a breeze that smelled of salt and algae. I couldn't see to the other side of the room. My bare feet buried themselves in warm, sandy earth.

I felt as though I were only retracing the steps of an old dream—a sad one, but no sadder than all the others. I found the spring a minute later. The grass sloped gently to its edge. I slid down and peered inside.

Bones, human bones, curled up like a child falling to sleep on the black sandy bottom of the sinkhole. Flesh and most clothing had long since rotted away, but one of the femur bones had been inscribed with symbols I did not recognize, pulsing faintly with their own light. Mesmerized, I reached my hand into the water and brushed the bone with my fingertip. It buzzed with some hidden energy. I gasped and recoiled.

I had to leave zir alone. I would not disturb the peace of this place with a theft.

“Who were you?” I asked the lost librarian.

Ze didn't answer. Neither did Iemaja, and I felt spent in that strange room that was as much paradise as prison. It reminded me of the great lakes we call the Tesseract at the edge of Library City, one of its many nature preserves. Maybe that was when I decided to go there, like this anonymous librarian had taken refuge here. Perhaps in the Tesseract I could put myself together again.

I emerged a day later, faint with hunger. Iemaja had not shown me who I was, but maybe she had shown me where to look.



Nadi and Quinn were arguing in my front room when I returned, so involved that they didn't notice me standing there. Quinn was tall for a Martian and Nadi short for an Awilu, so that close together they seemed a study of contrasts:

him willowy and fair with a sharp nose and shoulder-length hair the color of muddy water, zir hardly reaching his chest, dark and wiry with close-cropped curls and watchful, mobile eyes.

“Find your pet, Nadi,” Quinn was saying. “Find her, or I’ll put out a general search alert to all the novice librarians.”

Nadi’s voice was frigid. “She’s a child, Quinn. Not a search string.”

“She is a rogue AI that the Library created. Treating her like a human—”

“She *is* human. Her DNA says so. Or are your fundamentalist roots showing, West Librarian? Funny, isn’t that why the Librarian Council sided with me over you in the last election?”

Quinn stopped himself short. He noticed me then, frozen in the doorway, empty-handed. He smiled.

“She is a lovely little thing. But she won’t always be so, Head Librarian,” he said, then left us there without another word.