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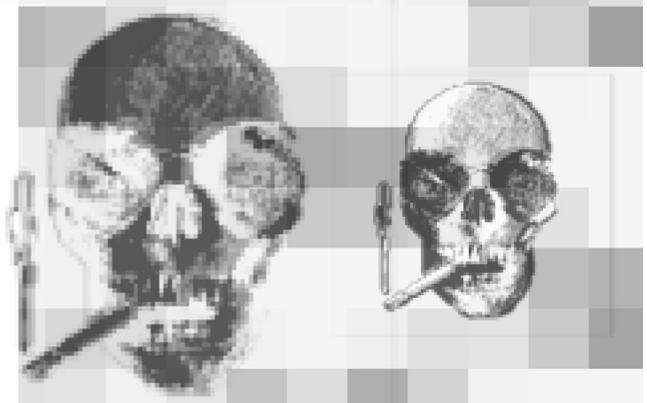
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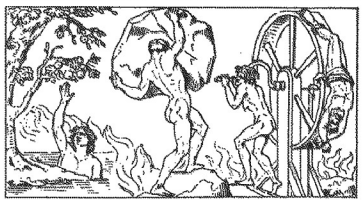
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ONE

My name is Eyeh. Or rather it was, until milky white patches leaked from my koko brown skin, here and there, many little ones on my face. Now they call me Hamehacua, the Sun-and-Moon-Cow.

I am to be given to the Wundaga, nine moons from today.

I want to run.

But I cannot. Here upon this lonely mountain, the sacred Wundo, I weave my dhumkat. It will enshroud my pierced body, its knots and braids and colours all woven together to tell my story of piety to the Wundaga, to those who would rest their eyes on my sullen tomb.

The priests tell me to not weave of the old gods nor profane the name of the Wundaga. To do so, they say, will certainly evoke its wrath. Come the day of the Giving, it may not accept me. It is my sole duty to make sure that it does.

I sit against the coarse stone wall of the meager cave which I call home, high up in the mountains of Fey Roo, the land of my people. With splattered hands, I weave. My eyes gaze out toward the cave opening, where a sea of sky and forest loom in the distance. The cold bites my skin like mosquitoes. I see my breath wisp and shiver in the air, and I wonder. If I tell my story aloud, will the wind keep it? Will the birds catch it upon their wings and carry it beyond the borders of my land? Upon whose ears will my somber tale fall?

My fingers ache. I have been weaving for hours, stopping only to make water and nibble some food. I get up and walk towards the entrance. The chill wind cuts through me like a blade made of ice, so I adjust my jaguar cloak. Poor creature. Once the proud lord of Dokhma, and now a blanket for a coward. Would the old gods hate me if I ran?

I ask the sky. It does not answer.

TWO

The medicine man comes in the early hours of the morning. He heralds his approach with three great knocks of a branch against the walls of the cave. The air responds with low hums, like the sad songs of the waloos far below the ocean. I put my hands over my eyes. Boheta, I say, and footsteps echo throughout the cave. I lie down on my bed and spread my legs, letting the medicine man's fingers pull me apart. It would be at this phase of the moon that I would feel pain in my womb. Today the moonblood did not come, as expected. It will not come until the day of the Giving.

The medicine man's touch disappears. With one hand I feel for the jaguar cloak at the foot of my bed, and drape it over my naked waist and legs. Moments later I hear the waloos singing in the cave. The medicine man has left. I lower my hand from my eyes. In a little niche carved into the wall, I see a pouch and a jug. Food and water.

One moon ago he gave me the tools to weave my dhumkat. They were specially made, as I lead with Mehah's hand, less common than that of Hameh's. This will please the Wundaga, the priests told me. My skin, they said, carries the touch of Hameh and Mehah. On my birth I have traversed through the empty homes of the old gods in the night sky.

There are many things that the priests have told me. But as I lie on my bed, staring at the stone ceiling of this cave, brushing the soft fur of my jaguar cloak with a wandering hand, no great surge of power rises in my chest like the breath before a plunge into the ocean deep. I am just a girl, alone and afraid and invisible.

My fingers trace the scars of the fire-from-the-sky, thousands of crooked lines haunting, strangling my brown and pink skin, cow skin, skin of the gods. Closing my eyes, I remember.

One moon ago, they brought me to the height of the Wundo, above the cave I now call home.

First, they drenched me in the warm blood of a lamb. The sickly stench of iron invaded my nose, my body shuddering from frost and nausea. They handed me a gilded chalice: more blood. The sweet, intoxicating aroma of uyumu, hidden beneath the iron stench, crept up my nostrils as I consumed the red. My tongue was engulfed in a bitter and metallic red sea, its waters thick like syrup. I closed my eyes. The tempest was here, and a torrent of salt and blood ran down my throat and strangled my lungs in a vice.

The rain beat down on us, stinging my skin like daggers in the dark. The wind howled and tickled the insides of my ears. Drumbeats in the air, the thunderclouds rolling in to meet me, their slave.

I raised the iron dagger to the sky. The priests watched with hands outstretched, murmuring prayers. We waited for the fire-from-the-sky. We waited for the Wundaga.

It came, and I was set alight.

My body echoes them. My heart beats to their rhythm, I feel them in the earth, snaking up my feet. The beats tease me and my body wants more. The drums hear this.

My arms contort into strange shapes, my legs kicking and jumping, my body tossing itself here and there. I fall and thrash against the cobbled stone floor. I throw myself at the spectators, but they break their formation before I land on them. I am on my back, and I watch their faces as my chest jerks to the sky and my fingers violate my hair and skin and shift. Their lips move to the chants of the priests, but their eyes do not meet the words they speak. I try to tell them with my eyes. Tell them the truth.

I crawl back to the centre. There on the ground is the iron dagger.

The drums beat faster. The chanting meets their speed. My body is drenched in sweat, my shift sticking to my body. I can smell blood, though my skin has not broken. I see nothing that is mine, but only the colours of those around me.

The Wundaga is here. I can smell it, a bloated mass of absolute sin and fear. It is among the priests, the people, everywhere. It is in me. An infection. I must get it out. I must purge the beast.

My hand jerks upwards. A great shadow falls on the temple wall, a silhouette of my body, the dagger reaching to the apex of the pyramid. The dagger falls towards my breast.

The drums have stopped. The priests and the people are silent. There is no blood to be seen.

I see Huago, as clear as a beautiful day, in front of me. Only steps away.

I lower my head and I see the floor of the square beneath me. My knees and feet are bloodied with scrapes. I look up and turn around, my eyes scanning the crowd. The priests stare at me, their faces contorted in confusion. The people of Fey Roo are still, as if holding their breaths as one. I must let them breathe.
I turn back to Huago. Every detail of his face is revealed to me. Nothing has changed since I last saw him, nine moons ago at the clearing. Mem and Deboboh are beside him. They are all holding hands.

I fiddle with the dagger in my hand. I must finish my duty.

I raise the dagger. A great shadow falls across my face and onto the temple wall, a silhouette of my body, the dagger reaching to the apex of the pyramid. I plunge the dagger into my breast.

The wind howls, threatening to carry me off. The glyphs are swept away, a cloud of dust and blood, but their power remains.

I stop singing. There is not much left to do now. I must wait. In all of this, my only peace lies in my thoughts of home. Of Mem, Deboboh, Huago.

It is the Day of the Giving.

It has been nine days since the storm. It finally went away at dawn. It is not dead. Only waiting.

At noon the priests come up to inspect me one last time. I cannot contain my drunken state, and my hands slip from my eyes in an attempt to hide them. One of the priests manages to blindfold me. The medicine man sticks his finger in me one last time. I can feel him feeling my false virginity. He says nothing, but I hear no betrayal. They take my false dhumkat, complete in all its glory. The true dhumkat remains under the cliff.

After they dress me in a white shift, they lead me by the hand to my fate.

It is nearly sunset when they finally stop me. My blindfold is removed and I can open my eyes. Hameh slowly sinks in the east, opposite the temple, reluctant to leave. There is one more thing he must see before going to sleep. A shadow of Mehah peeks from above her husband. She is early.

All around me in the square the people of Fey Roo have gathered. Their faces are blurred, I stumble in my steps, but nobody steadies me. The priests have gone away to begin their chants. The wind caresses my skin and travels through my hair like a lover’s fingers. Is Huago watching?

I do not know. Cannot know. The drums begin.

THREE

Today the priests grant me the privilege of speaking to my family. Yet they may not see my face, nor I theirs. The Wundaga is in my eyes. I have no looking-glass to see. I feel no change in my eyes, but if the Wundaga stares out instead of myself, I must remain blind. Until the day of the Giving, I must face the wall as I speak.

I sit in a corner of the cave, as far removed from the light of day as possible. In front of me is only my shadow and dark grey stone. Mem and Deboboh ask about my health. I tell them I am fine. Deboboh snorts and mutters. I can almost hear her wrinkled hands swatting the air at invisible flies. An old habit. I wish I could see it.

Mem is sniffling as she speaks. I see the wall in front of me glisten. There are streaks of wetness trailing down. Mem weeps, and the walls weep with her. I blink. The wall is dry.

A priest announces that they must leave. I hear Mem shift, as if she is reaching out to touch me, but I hear Deboboh swat her daughter's hand away. I wish I could see it.

The waloos sing in my home, and my chin quivers. I weep. The walls do not weep with me.

FOUR

Today is a day of rest, and so I do not weave. Instead I sit on the edge of the cliff extending from the cave, dangling my legs over the side.

On days like these, my Deboboh brought me to her hut to create pots and figures out of clay to sell in the market, or took me out to hunt for herbs in the thick of the forest, far from the village. She whispered to me their uses as if they were secret. And they are. The old ways are old, and have no place in the time of the Wundaga.

Deboboh told me that the old gods wait where the godless cannot find them, in the hearts of those who still believe. Except for Deboboh, nobody believes anymore. There is only the Wundaga. Everyone has seen why there is only the Wundaga, and no one wants to see that again. I do not know if I still believe. My heart is far away from here, at home, with Mem and Deboboh and Huago. Not here.

I shield my eyes as Hameh peeks out from the clouds. I am done reminiscing for the day. Next to weaving, it is all I do. Now I must return to my task.

I pick up my hook and stretch the fabrics from the basket. Inspecting my last patterns, I set to work. Yet my mind still wanders and soon I lose myself in the dusty patterns on the ground.

A hiccup snaps me out of my trance and I look down at my work. I have missed several knots and mixed up the order of the colours. My fingers clench and I feel my hook creaking under the pressure. My head feels hot. The touch of this thing on my palms itches. The sight of it disgusts me. I want to vomit. Instead I scream, hurling the thing across the cave with every bit of my strength. It lands with a soft thud on the ground. I am not done with it yet. I cross the room and spit on this sacred art.

I hear my Deboboh laughing. I whip around, searching for her short and heavy body waddling through the room, her face forever fixed in a grimace. She is not there, but her laughter echoes across the walls. I try to imagine her pinching my cheeks and ruffling my wild hair. Coyuateh, she would call me. Coyote.

I pick up the dhumkat and fold it, placing it neatly on my bed. It will wait for now. It is already dusk.

With my hook I go back to my loom and stretch out new streams of fabric. I begin to weave the truth.



NINE

I ask Huago to bring me some clay.

It is twenty-two days until the Giving. My restrained moonblood pumps through my veins, and every day its power grows stronger. I feel my temples throbbing and my eyes glazing. The Wundaga continues to eat me. Huago holds me in his arms, rocking back and forth with my shivering bones. He sings to me. Whether in pain or in fatigue, the only two feelings I now know, I continue to weave my dhumkhati, day and night. The priests see the false one and are impressed, nodding and murmuring in agreement. Mem taught me the art of weaving well.

It is thirteen days until the Giving. Most days, I spend more time drunk from power and pain than sober and tired. My lungs now rasp like Deboboh smoking her tobkoh. My vision blurs, but I strain my eyes for my dhumkhati. They are almost finished. A few more days. Just a few more days.

Nine days until the Giving. A rare bit of sunshine today. I put the bit of clay Huago gave me outside. Returning to the cave, I kneel down, using my finger to draw into the dirt. The glyphs are ancient, going back a hundred generations. Deboboh would be proud.

Cleaning my finger with spit, I pick at the inside of my nose until a sharp sting jerks my head away. I feel a wetness so foreign yet so delightful and welcoming to see. I have not bled my womb for nine moons, and any shedding of blood is absolutely forbidden in my place.

The redness drips into the dirt. I pool the blood into my right palm and dip my left forefinger into it. With my brush, I dye the glyphs.

The cave grows dark and I look outside. Hameh has disappeared behind some dark clouds, and the wind begins to pick up. I stand and retrieve the bit of clay, putting it inside me, up in the path to my womb.

The tempest begins. I sit behind the glyphs, facing the mouth of the cave. In only a few moments the wind begins to howl through my shelter, the cold it carries biting my skin. My jaguar cloak remains untouched. I must wait.

I close my eyes and sing. A hymn, Mem would say, for the hopeless and the lost to find their way to the gates of Dokhma'yama, to be welcomed by the embrace of Hameh and Mehah. Mem never spoke of the old gods, but now I know she keeps them in her heart, where the godless cannot find them.

EIGHT

The priests murmur among themselves. Only the medicine man remains silent as he inspects the path to my womb. It is exactly one moon turn to the Giving. I must not fail. I will not.

The air inside the cave is thick with humidity, in spite of the chill that the mountain seems to breathe through its stones. Trickles of sweat trail down my bare body. There is the constant hiss of the priests fanning themselves with their macaw-feather fans. When the medicine man removes his fingers from my womb, footsteps shuffle the dusty ground. The waloos sing once more.

I release my hand from my eyes. My fingers yearn to hold a looking-glass. Over the last eight moons I have seen the milky splotches on my skin grow, vines enveloping my body in a sweet embrace. I touch my face and snake my fingers through my hair. I miss the braids and the beads that Mem used to put in my hair. Now it is as wild as the wool of a wealthy shepherd's taman.

I bend down to reach for my robe, but a rustle underneath the moaning wind stops me. Huago. I stare at the wall. His feet come closer and I feel his breath on my neck. So close. My heart dances wildly. I can feel his own beating with mine. A beautiful rhythm. The thunder outside joins in our music. I close my eyes and slowly turn around. His lips nearly brush my forehead. My breath shudders and in all this heat, I feel the winter in me.

We fall together. The ground is coarse against our skin as we struggle to love each other as much as we can. Blindly I reach out and grab the false dhumkat nearby and place it under us.

I cannot not see my Huago. But his touch is more than enough.



FIVE

After five moons, I finally see Huago. Or rather, I hear him. His voice is the same, but I hear it shaking. Is it anger or nervousness? I want to kiss him. If we had made love before my Telling, I would not be here. Another girl would take my place and I would be free. Not truly free, but free to live and free to love. Is that all what freedom is?

The day of the Telling, I stayed in my room.

Mem and Deboboh wept in the kitchen, holding hands. They were Told. I fiddled with the Marker. It weighed heavy in my hand, and I played with rolling the smooth edges in the creases of my palm. There was one more to Tell.

I got up and climbed out of the window. I ran barefoot through the forest, jumping and dodging the branches in my path, savouring the crunch of twigs and the caress of thick moss underneath my feet. My breath strained as my legs lumbered their way up the hill leading to the clearing, the secret place. But I kept going.

The clearing was a cliff, overlooking the great Fey River and the surrounding forests of the land. High above was a waterfall, snaking from the roots of the Wundo some distance away. Below the cliff, the waterfall broke into a thousand cascades. The blue sky towered over it all, the great Hameh shining his lordly rays on every surface, glistening on green and blue alike. It was a beautiful sight.

I knew it was the last time I would set foot here.

Behind me the bushes rustled and I turned. From the path emerged Huago. He smiled. All I wished to do was fall into his arms, already outstretched for an embrace. My bones were bound by fear. I could not move. Huago saw this and stopped. His face was just a breath away from mine, mine which was like stone, save for the grief that my eyes betray. Huago saw this.

My palm opened, the fingers unfurling like a flower in bloom. The Marker sat in the centre, its dark and dull surface rejecting the glory of Hameh.

Huago saw this. He fell to his knees and pressed his forehead against my stomach. I dropped the Marker and let my arms wrap around his beautiful head, running my fingers through his thick curls. I closed my eyes and listened to the water. I heard nothing else, not the screech of monkeys hidden in the canopies of the forest nor the calls of the macaws speaking to one another.

SIX

The Wundaga comes.

Sometimes the walls glisten with thick red tears. When I breathe, the smell of burning flesh enters instead of the crisp cold air. When the wind finds a way into the cave, its touch carries a thousand screams.
I sit in the farthest corner inside the cave, rocking back and forth on my knees. Invisible daggers are piercing my womb and the fires of Dokhma'hul burn every inch of my skin. With every movement my bones creak, threatening to break. I want to stop moving. Why can I not stop moving? Mem? Where are you?

The Wundaga is eating me, eating the power of Hameh and Mehah and all the rest that live in me. Now I feel it, now I miss it. My spine cries out as I force myself to look towards the entrance. The storm dances outside. My true dhumkat whips wildly in the gale from under the cliff. Under the screaming wind, I hear whispers. Words that were once lost. Words that call to me, to join them.

Ignoring the protests of my body, I abandon my jaguar cloak and crawl towards the open air. With every breath I shudder, my knees and elbows scraping against the stone floor, the skin sloughing off like a snake in heat. Streaks of red mark my path behind. I feel wetness dripping from my eyes and I taste the salt trailing down to my lips. I want to stop, but the storm is calling. I cannot refuse the storm.

I do not stop when I am outside. The storm is not satisfied. I continue to crawl, inching closer and closer to the cliff. Finally my head peeks over the edge. A black sea greets me, strangely still in the midst of a tempest. It seems so close that my arm reaches out to touch it. My fingers feel nothing, but the sea breaks its silence and I see it all.

Fey Roo. My village. Mem. Deboboh. Huago. The girls given to the Wundaga before me. And somewhere, slipping through the cracks of the abyss, the old gods.

Underneath the tempest, I hear a whisper.

Vengeance.

I raise myself to my knees and look up to the sky. I scream. The wind screams with me.

SEVEN

Both the true and false dhumkati are almost complete. The lie is out in the open for all to see. The truth hangs under the cliff, suspended by vines that Huago pulled from the forest below. Though the truth is outside, no one can see it. No one looks for the truth when they already have their own.

The priests do not suspect that Huago is committing sacrilege by sneaking up to see me. He is a hunter by trade; stealth is his proficiency. Usually he brings food and drink and we share a communion, speaking in whispers. Sometimes we laugh, but the echoes throughout the cave threaten to betray us to the world outside. Though we still cannot touch or see each other, it is better than nothing at all.

He sings to me when the Wundaga screams inside me. Sometimes I sing with him, trying to drown out the Wundaga, and I feel a little better. How I wish I could fall into the arms of Huago and sleep forever.

It is dusk now. I kneel over the cliff, reaching to pull the vines to retrieve the true dhumkat. The rhythm of footsteps reach my body through the ground. Thinking it is Huago, I smile and cover my eyes. Bohe, I say.

You never say such a thing to a man as respected as one of medicine.

The response I hear is foreign, gruff and old like tree bark. I drop my hand and turn. I am looking straight into the eyes of the medicine man. It has been seven moons since I have seen a face, since the Wundaga has seen a face.

The medicine man lets out a yell and drops to his knees, pressing his forehead to the ground and stretching his arms outwards, palms facing the sky.

He asks for mercy.

His breath is shaking, heaving like a male hacua in heat. His fingers quiver, as if he were forcing himself not to fidget. Look at me, I ask.

He refuses. Mercy, he asks.

Something rises in my chest. For a moment my skin prickles with goosebumps, and then softens into warm honey. I stand and look down at this creature.

Look at me, I command.

The creature peeks under his shaggy black hair. He understands. Getting up, he bows and turns, leaving me alone.