

Solstice

Utunu sat cross-legged on the dusty ground, enjoying the warmth of the nearby bonfire, and watched the raucous celebration. He was pensive, uncertainty gnawing at him, but even then he still found a smile for his tribemates' happiness.

Behind him, licks of flame danced and cavorted against the clear night sky; the fire was easily three strides in size and threatened to escape the shallow depression intended to contain it. Sparks and embers, cracking branches, and sudden tendrils of flame prompted to brave the darkness by the breeze's urgings all made the fire seem that much more a living thing, struggling to break its bonds and run rampant. The firelight reflected off the faces of his tribemates, they themselves burning with excitement and life as they overshadowed the bonfire's presence with their revelry, their many voices swirling around each other in a polyphony of laughter, words, and song.

He observed as his elders sat and talked while younger pups chased and wrestled, enjoying the heat of the nearby fire and the coolness of the earth and grass as they rolled and tumbled. Snippets of conversations floated by, easily caught by Utunu's large and sensitive ears.

"...did you see her strike?"

"...had no doubt Kimkuki would be Chosen, he has shown his prowess..."

"...a great thrust, no hesitation there!"

"...gods smile upon us, the signs are good..."

"...she does Mwindi proud..."

"...ill luck to not be in the sight of the gods!"

Utunu winced at the words. The worry churned inside him, and he looked away, embarrassed. Nearby, a few of the tribe's hunters broke into song. Glad for the distraction, Utunu joined in, his voice strong and sure.

*"The night departs
The day arrives
And as Jua picks up his burden
Mwindi calls the Tribe*

*The herds await
The scent is strong
And all our spears are sharp and sturdy
Mwindi guides the Tribe*

*The herds look up
The prey takes flight
And as one we swiftly chase it down
Mwindi shows the Tribe*

*The kill is made
The hunt is done
And as Jua seeks his Mwezi
Mwindi leads us home*

Utunu's ear swiveled, hearing the young voices of his friends raised in song as well; he could sense their excitement, for they were all of an age and this was the first solstice where, together, they were finally riding that cusp between childhood and adulthood. They were now members of the hunt. They had been Chosen by the gods and affirmed by Mnenaji, the tribe's shaman. Now they were adolescents, their bodies' strength and size having grown significantly in the past seasons, and had reached a maturity they had begun, warily at first but then with gleeful abandon, to explore with one another.

Like most all of his tribe, Utunu possessed the lithe strength and agility of a hunter; his adolescence had brought with it a wiry body with long legs slender but muscular, and arms strong from many seasons of practice with the spear. What little puppy fat he might have retained having long since burned away from many chases and hunts. The large round ears indicative of his species framed a tan face with a black muzzle and dark fur continuing in a line up his forehead, sharp white teeth in strong jaws, and blue eyes (an uncommon occurrence) both friendly and inquisitive. As with others of his kind, the tri-colored patterning of his fur, black, tan, and white, was unique; no two of the Tribe shared the same pattern. Two gold earrings hung from his left ear, glinting in the firelight, and at his waist he wore a simple unadorned loincloth of soft reddish-brown leather.

The paeon for Mwinda heralded the feast. Hunks of meat were torn off and passed around; Utunu's faint blush at being one of the first to receive his share was hidden by the heat of the fire. But he had the right to it; his sudden turn and strike had staggered the oryx. In the split-second that followed, as it stumbled and righted itself, Samawi was there – her spear hit home, her weight behind it, and the kill was theirs. It had been the first time he had been involved in a kill on prey so large, and his first bite was heady with the scents and taste; his nostrils flared with the sharp scent of burning wood and roasting meat from the nearby fire, and he savored the rich taste of oryx meat, crisped with fat and sprinkled with herbs. The taste was even sweeter, for it was a kill Utunu had been part of, and he smiled as he ripped off another chunk.

Chewing on his share, Utunu let his gaze wander. He spied his friends Samawi and Kimkuki perhaps ten strides away, she nuzzling at his neck while he laughed. Mnenaji had summoned Kimkuki earlier in the day, for the shaman had communed with the gods and Mwinda had spoken. Kimkuki was Chosen. He had certainly proven himself on many hunts, and Utunu was glad for the honor he had received. It was a special time to be selected by the gods; the solstice was always a fortuitous event, and the change in the year mirrored the change in his friend's status. *Looks like they'll go off in a bit to have a little fun,* thought Utunu, his eyes glittering with amusement. *Perhaps I should join them.* His thoughts distracted as he watched the two of them, Utunu was startled by the sudden nose in his ear.

"Gods, your nose is cold!" Utunu jerked away from the unwelcome intrusion, unable to resist returning the grin of his friend Mvua, who then sat on his haunches next to him.

Mvua, slightly shorter than Utunu but more muscular, motioned with a smirk and a nod towards their two friends. "Heh, I know what you're thinking."

Laughing, Utunu blushed. "Was it that obvious? No, actually I was just thinking on 'Kuki's Choosing today."

"Ah." Mvua was silent for a moment, yielding to the background susurrations of voices and the crackle of the fire. His black muzzle nudged at his friend. "Is something wrong?"

Utunu paused briefly, then shook his head. “No.” He paused, and added, “I’m proud of him. Mwinda will be proud of him.”

“Mmm hmm. You’re thinking about something else though, aren’t you.”

Sighing, Utunu nodded.

“Thought so,” Mvua added. “You shouldn’t worry about it. Even Mnenaji said so. He said the gods will choose when they choose. I know that’s not particularly helpful, but if Mnenaji isn’t worried, you shouldn’t be worried.”

“I know. But look around.” Utunu waved his paw half-heartedly, directionless. “All those not Chosen are many seasons younger... they’re just pups! ‘Kuki was the last of us, last of our group. Besides me.”

Mvua sat silent for several moments, studying his friend. Reaching out a paw, he grasped Utunu’s muzzle, turning it around to face him, and pressed his nose up to his, his dark orange eyes staring into Utunu’s own. “Utu. Don’t worry about it! It’s the solstice. Enjoy yourself. They are!” His eyes flicked over to where Samawi and Kimkuki sat, chatting and laughing.

Staring back briefly, Utunu then dropped his gaze, smiling embarrassedly. “I know. I’m fine, really.” Mvua’s amused expression was infectious, and Utunu chuckled, pushing his friend over with a shove. Mvua laughed, picking himself up and leaving Utunu to his thoughts as he wandered over to where their friends were seated; Kimkuki and Samawi both smiled at his approach and soon the trio were chatting amongst themselves. Utunu watched them fondly for a while, his mind drifting back to earlier in the day and his discussion with the tribe’s shaman, Mnenaji.

Peering in through the entrance to the hut, Utunu had spied the shaman busy within. He paused, not wanting to bother him, and started to turn away.

“Utunu.” Mnenaji’s back faced him as he spoke. “I thought you might visit.”

Utunu spent a moment looking around the shaman’s hut – he always found it fascinating. There were so many peculiar objects that Mnenaji had collected over the many seasons he had been the tribe’s shaman. He had built makeshift shelves out of sturdy branches with antelope hides stretched across to support all the various ceremonial items, herbs, strange stones, wooden carvings, animal teeth, fangs, and hides, along with some things Utunu couldn’t even identify. Pulling his attention from all the distractions, Utunu focused again on the shaman, and summoned up his courage.

“I am sorry if I have intruded, Mnenaji. I am...”

“Worried, I know,” interrupted Mnenaji, still busy with replacing and organizing the various carvings and totems on the shelves, having used a number of them in the ceremony earlier in the day. Utunu had never figured out the order or reason to the items; it seemed they were just haphazardly placed, as if he had grabbed a paw full of pebbles and strewn them over the entirety of his hut, yet Mnenaji never paused in reaching for exactly the thing he needed.

“You know why then.” It was not a question; Utunu was confident in his tribe’s shaman. Mnenaji had been around since before he could remember, and had always been willing to talk to a young pup.

“You want to know why the gods have not seen fit to select you yet.”

The anxiety and hurt started to well up in Utunu – something he had not accepted nor been willing to show when his friend was Chosen. Eyes down, staring unfocused at the ground, Utunu could only nod; Mnenaji paused for a moment, then looked around at him.

“You have not been Chosen because the gods have said nothing. I am but their voice, Utunu. They speak, and I listen. These are not choices I make, but pass along. Kimkuki has shown his prowess, and Mwinda is pleased. He has told me so.”

Upset, the younger male tried to explain. “Mnenaji! I hunt well, I am fast, I listen to the hunt leader. Why would Mwinda not want me?”

The shaman sighed, having fully expected the question and not having a suitable answer. “I know, Utunu. You have not disappointed. However, I cannot say why Mwinda, or any of the other gods, are silent. Not because I will not, mind you, but because they have not made their intentions known to me. They don’t tell me everything, after all!” Mnenaji chuckled, and continued, “Often, I at least hear of their interest, and soon thereafter they will say they have chosen one of the tribe. But for you... they have been silent.” At the youngster’s downcast expression, Mnenaji hastily added, “That is not to mean they do not see you, Utunu. It just means they have yet to decide how best you can help the tribe. It is not as if I can ask them; I can only listen and hope they choose to speak to me.”

A sudden loud pop from the bonfire startled Utunu from his reverie, bringing his thoughts back to the present. Mnenaji had just gotten to his feet and seemed prepared to speak. He was not particularly tall or strong, and age had started to take its toll, but there was a power to him. For Mnenaji could call the elements; his knowledge of earth and air were strong, and even his self-professed weakness at fire was sufficient to have started the merrily burning blaze earlier that evening (much to the fascination of the pups). It reminded Utunu of how only two seasons ago the shaman had declared Mvua Chosen by Dhoruba, the rain god. Utunu was envious of his friend’s ability; like most of his tribe, Utunu had no magic of his own, but Mvua’s knack with water was the strongest they had seen in a generation.

Slowly, the various groups around the fire quieted as they noticed the shaman. He stood there silently, and it wasn’t long before the only noises were the pops and crackles of the fire as the tribe waited expectantly. Mnenaji was not only their shaman, with knowledge of magic, herbs, and lore, but he was their storyteller; he could speak for hours of legends, history, and gods, and touch but the surface of all he remembered. Utunu wondered what story he would tell today, and was startled when Mnenaji uttered his name.

“Utunu. You still have your flute, yes? Then please play as I speak. A good story is pleasant to hear, and with music even more so.”

Flushing with the sudden attention, Utunu fumbled at his waist, retrieving the flute from its place. It was a simple instrument; he had crafted it himself from a blesbok horn and had carved five holes along its length. His first notes were tentative, but as the shaman began to speak, Utunu’s confidence increased, and soon he was caught up in the story like all the others.

"Jua chuckled in defeat," Mnenaji began, his voice clear and resonant, "and stopped his pursuit as he laid down his burden and sat back upon his haunches."

Utunu grinned; he recognized the story. It was a short one, but he had always loved it. Knowing what was to come, Utunu closed his eyes as he played and allowed his music to speak through him.

"It was Mwezi's time now, after all – the night was her domain," Mnenaji continued. "He watched, smiling, as she ran nimbly to and fro amongst the stars, finding purchase where he could not, until all Jua could make out was the shining white of her tail as it dipped and waved with her movements. His courtship temporarily thwarted, Jua continued to gaze at his lover as she gradually made her way across that black expanse; Mwezi would wait until night had fled before secreting herself somewhere in the hopes Jua might not find her with the arrival of morning. It was a game they played, she and he, and Jua welcomed the challenge."

"Jua had caught her before, of course; sometimes he found her, sometimes she let herself be found. But he fondly remembered that last time – he had come upon her hiding place and tackled her as she leapt forth. He had set his burden down, darkening the sky with its loss, and held her as she laughed and wriggled in a futile attempt to escape. He had mounted her then, with all the land and sky as witness to their union. It was all over too quickly however, and their brief tie had ended as Mwezi had scampered off and Jua, alone once more, had leant over to pick up his burden so that he might continue to warm and brighten the land for his people."

"It was a rare occurrence, certainly; perhaps only once in a generation would his people view their coupling. But Jua was not saddened or discouraged. His ardor was heightened by his reminiscence and, as the stars around him began to fade with night's ending, he bent down to pick up the sun. Cradling it protectively to his chest with its flames playing across his body, Jua resumed his never-ending chase."

It was such a familiar story, but each telling brought new and intriguing images to Utunu's mind. His knowledge of the tale certainly helped him accompany it with his music, and he imagined himself with Jua and Mwezi, sharing their passion and joy. The emotions therein were given voice with Utunu's playing, and as he let the last note trail off, he noticed with some embarrassment the gazes of many of his tribe fixed upon him. Utunu blushed, but Mnenaji's nod of encouragement and acknowledgement in his direction told him he had done well. Silence held for a few moments, and uncertain, Utunu kept his eyes downcast.

"The nights will become shorter now," Mnenaji began, "and the days longer. Jua shall bear the weight of the sun for us, and the Tribe is thankful." Utunu let himself relax, for the attention of his tribemates had turned back to the shaman, and he took the time to return the flute to its place snug against his hip, held there by the tie of his loincloth.

"Only some of you will remember the last time Jua and Mwezi united. Remember them, as we take joy in the Tribe and each other, and hope that they too might be together soon." Mnenaji sat back down, and soon the chatter of voices again filled the night air.

At some point during Utunu's playing Mvua must have returned, though he hadn't noticed at the time, and the nudge from his friend's muzzle made him grin. "You wait there!" Mvua jumped to his feet, winding his way through the scattering of his tribemates, and soon returned bearing simple clay bowls, one in each paw. Handing one to Utunu, Mvua smirked. "Drink up! It's *mng'ongo*, I know you like it."

Smiling at his friend in thanks, Utunu accepted the proffered bowl. Mng'ongo came from the marula tree, and as pups many of the tribe had been sent to climb and pick its fruit, which was then fermented into a potent drink. It was a favorite of the tribe, and a recipe that had been handed down through many generations. Utunu tilted the bowl to his lips, his eyes meeting Mvua's orange ones as his friend mirrored his action and lifted his own bowl to drink. The tang of the citrus, sweet and sharp, combined wonderfully with the many spices to give it a fascinating taste, and Utunu gave a happy sigh at the smooth warmth that suffused him. A few more swallows were made together in companionable silence, and then Mvua trotted off again. *Probably to refill his bowl*, thought Utunu, amused. Finishing his own, he got to his feet to search out one of the large pots that had been set out for the celebration, ladling out some more into his bowl, then finding a quieter spot far from the fire where he could lie on his back and watch the night sky.

Taking occasional sips from his bowl, Utunu rested it on his belly and watched the slow turn of the stars across the heavens. The night was warm; every now and then a breeze would stir and ruffle his fur. It was altogether a beautiful evening. Utunu didn't realize how long he had lain there until he finished his bowl and looked around to see how few of his tribemates were still present. His friends Samawi, Kimkuki, and Mvua were nowhere to be seen, but Utunu wasn't particularly surprised by that. *I hope they're having a good time*, he thought fondly. Relaxing back, he again lifted his gaze upward to track his ancestors as they slowly traversed the clear sky.

The faint sound of pawpads approached and a familiar figure silhouetted itself against the starry backdrop. "Mvua," grinned Utunu. His friend paused, then sat on his haunches next to him.

"Utunu." Mvua's orange eyes were dark and intent. With a shy smile, he reached a paw down towards the other male and helped him to his feet. Utunu blushed, his friend's scent betraying his want, and let Mvua take his paw and lead him from the clearing out among the tall grasses of the savanna.