

Visitor

Utunu woke to a light sprinkling of rain. The night was still dark and quiet, the only sounds the faintest rustle of the raindrops on the grasses and Mvua's soft breathing. A breeze brought with it a host of smells, intermingling with the scents nearby. There was the faint smell of distant prey, the various almost imperceptible scents of his tribemates back in their village, and the tinge of fire and wet firewood; they combined and mixed with the nearby smells of damp ground, wet grass, fur, and *mng'ongo* spices, along with the lingering sharp scent of arousal and the earthy scent of release.

He lay pressed against his friend, legs intertwined, his chest against Mvua's back and his muzzle resting in the curve between the other male's shoulder and neck. Gingerly extricating himself so as not to wake him, Utunu carefully pulled away and got to his feet. Glancing around he soon found his discarded loincloth lying in the grass nearby, damp with moisture, his flute wrapped protectively within. He tied the simple leather round his waist and made certain the flute was snug and safe at his side, then set out, wading through the long grasses.

Utunu's paws left shallow indentations in the earth, softened from last night's rain, as he made his way further from his village. He had a different destination in mind, one he often frequented when he wished to be alone and think. Long legs ate up the distance swiftly, his mind on other things, and Utunu was surprised to find himself there so soon, even as the lightening of the sky as dawn approached bore witness to the time that had passed. Only one or two scattered raindrops fell now. Utunu looked up the slope towards the kopje, its steep granite dome silhouetted against the faint light now coloring the sky, and made his way uphill.

The kopje was more abrupt than most; it jutted forth from the slightly sloped plain, looking more like a massive paw had pushed it out of the ground. It set it apart from its flatter, weathered brethren of the savanna near the village. Fortunately, Utunu's many previous visits provided him with the knowledge of the best holds for the climb, and he was soon well on his way up one of the smaller spurs of rock. A stretch across, and he was on the side of the largest piece, strong fingers and toes gripping at slight cracks and ledges of stone as he pulled himself up. The top of the kopje was flat and wide, small tufts of grass peeking through various crevices, and Utunu made his way to the front to seat himself on the edge.

He sat there awhile, leaning back with his paws braced behind him as he dangled his legs. The kopje angled in such a way that it was a straight drop down of perhaps ten strides or more, but Utunu was unbothered; his attention was on the view out across the savanna. It was something to behold – the kopje itself was on a small plateau, and from his vantage point Utunu could see for miles. The land stretched out before him, a sea of grass with an archipelago of trees, still as yet dim in the pre-dawn light, but Utunu could see the ripples and waves as the wind played across the savanna.

He savored this time. Within moments, the faintest sliver of light would peek above the horizon as Jua began his journey across the sky, sun held protectively in his paws. Utunu liked to greet him with song, so he reached down for his flute and brought it to his lips.

There was no particular tune that he would play. He would just *play*, and the notes would come. He thought of Jua's story from last night, and his music took on the color of the god's passion and his pursuit of Mwezi. As the first rays of light spread across the plains and the greens and golds of the grasses glowed with the new day, Utunu took them and wove them into his song. The sunlight played across both the reddish rocks of the nearby kopje and the distant blues of the mountain range, and he took them both and added them, threading them in with the rest. A herd of impala grazed far down on the savanna, wandering leisurely from one island of trees to the next, and he gave each of them a note as his song continued. As the palette of the land before him shifted, so too did Utunu's music. It almost felt as if the land around him reverberated back, speaking to him in a language he could almost understand but was just barely, frustratingly, out of reach.

"You play beautifully."

Utunu's heart leapt in his chest and his last note ended abruptly, as all his muscles tensed and he almost dropped the flute over the edge. He started to reach for his spear before realizing he had left it in the village, and instead gripped his flute tightly as he turned to stare at the intruder.

"I'm sorry! I did not mean to frighten you."

The stranger was seated next to him, close enough that Utunu could touch him. A member of the Tribe, certainly, but not one from of Utunu's own village. He smelled of rain and dust and grass and sun-warmed fur, but of something else too – something hard-to-place and exotic. Utunu scented mountains and valleys and ocean and the expanse of the savanna, all strange and somehow far away, but just as quickly the scent was gone, and whoever he was smelled simply of Tribe.

"How did you get up here? I did not hear nor scent you." As soon as he asked the question, Utunu felt silly; he was just giving voice to his confusion at the stranger's sudden appearance.

"I heard you playing, so I climbed up. Again, I am sorry." He paused, and glanced down at Utunu's flute. "Were you playing for Jua?"

Utunu paused, still staring, then nodded.

"Well, it was wonderful. May I see your flute?" A paw reached out, and Utunu eyed it for a moment before carefully setting his flute on the palm of the other male, his fingers brushing briefly across the soft paw pads. The stranger smiled, and held the flute gently with the tips of his fingers, rotating and examining it. Utunu's flute was about two paws long, of dark brown-gray, with ridges encircling its length. The base of the horn he had used to craft it was perhaps three fingers wide, and tapered to a point at the end. The natural ridges were set apart almost perfectly to accommodate fingers comfortably, and that was where Utunu had carved the five holes, near the top of the flute, one each per valley between the ridges.

Utunu watched nervously as it was examined. "You made this yourself?" At Utunu's nod, the stranger smiled and returned the flute to Utunu's relieved paws. "Nicely crafted!"

"Who are you?" Utunu blurted, having finally recovered from his surprise. It was not an aggressive question, for the stranger seemed friendly enough, but Utunu was genuinely curious. It was rare to see others of the Tribe nearby that didn't belong to the village.

“Ah!” The stranger gave an apologetic grin. “My name is Safi.” He reached out a paw to clasp Utunu’s forearm in greeting, and Utunu returned the gesture.

“Utunu,” responded Utunu.

Meeting Safi’s eyes, Utunu was struck by their color; it was hard to define. They were green and then suddenly they were not. He felt like he was looking across the vastness of the land; the variant colors of the savanna’s expanse stretched before him, along with golds of bordering deserts, blues and greys of mountains, and even the cerulean of the ocean. A great range of lands, seas, and more lay unveiled in the infinity of the stranger’s eyes, pulling at Utunu... he blinked, a frisson of curiosity and excitement traveling up his spine, and then Safi’s eyes were simply green, staring into his own, his expression friendly and open.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Utunu,” smiled Safi.

Confused and at a loss for words, Utunu responded with a nod and a shy smile, suddenly acutely aware of how he must appear; fur unruly and damp from the rain, his scent an obvious mixture of himself and Mvua and their intimacy. Safi, by contrast, seemed traveled yet pristine. His scent implied he hailed from far away, but he was clearly untouched by his journey. His loincloth was simple brown leather, decorated at its border with sigils Utunu did not recognize, but it was clean and unblemished, much like Safi himself. He was peculiar, and Utunu could not place why. Yet there was nothing overtly strange about him – he sat, much like Utunu did, his legs dangling over the edge of the kopje, as if it were something he did every day.

Utunu fumbled for words. He knew there were official ways to let a stranger know they were welcome at the village, but he was young and did not know them yet. Safi seemed to know he was about to speak, for he looked back over at him, which disconcerted Utunu even more.

“Safi, you would do our village honor with a visit.”

That sounds good, thought Utunu. It may not be exactly the right words, but... well, Mnenaji always said that the heart is more important.

“Ah,” said Safi, looking slightly embarrassed. “Honestly, Utunu, I am here because I heard you. I’m... just traveling through. I appreciate your offer, however! Tell Mnenaji that it’s better this way.” Safi smiled, and confused, Utunu nodded.

“I shall. Where are you headed?”

Safi’s paw waved ambiguously out towards the lands below the plateau. “Here and there. Nothing specific, really!” He chuckled, and his gaze turned towards Utunu again. It was a serious and intent expression, and it made Utunu nervous. Safi paused, then placed his paw gently on Utunu’s chest.

“You have a gift for music, you know. All can hear it. I would hear you play again, someday.”

Utunu blushed, and he couldn’t help but glance at the flute still sitting in his paw. Looking back up, he watched as the stranger got to his feet, his movements graceful and fluid, and start to walk back towards the rear of the kopje.

“Farewell, Utunu!” Safi smiled, as he reached the rear of the kopje and started to climb down, and soon he was lost from view.

Utunu looked back east, out towards the savanna. Jua was well on his way – the sun shone brightly, fully above the horizon now. Returning his flute to its place at his hip, Utunu stood and made his way to the edge of the rock, paws remembering the way as he made the descent. Curious, he circled the base of the kopje. There were some paw prints in the dirt, and Utunu followed them through the long grass for a while, but eventually lost the trace of Safi’s passage.

Much like his trip to the kopje, his return back was lost in thought, and he soon found himself at the outskirts of the village. Pausing, he considered. His questions for Mnenaji could wait, he decided, and he made his way through the long grass until he found his friend.

Mvua was still asleep, even though the sun had risen. Quietly, Utunu set his flute and loincloth carefully on the ground, and laid back down against his friend. Mvua mumbled briefly and stirred, wriggling slightly to press closer.

“Utu?” Mvua’s voice was bleary and unfocused from sleep, but his tone said all Utunu needed to hear. Moving closer, Utunu smiled fondly and nuzzled at his friend, and it was not long before Mvua was very much awake and willing.