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## Into The Fire

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The summons from Main Jye had been sudden and curious.

The sun was near second place, and the breeze couldn't move Ralo's kilt. Distracted, he chewed his lip while walking through Pempamsie's Central Market, dodging shoppers and kora players and stall keepers without thought. He swatted at buzzing black flies, and almost had a plait swallowed by a leashed ostrich.

Among the Markets in the three hamlets of the Tri-Village, Pempamsie's was the largest. Some stalls were rickety wooden stands, with boxes of bananas and kola nuts and mangos for barter; others were just towels laid on the short grass, with folded stacks of new linens for trade.

"Yams! Fresh yams from the fields!" Mama Kiza yelled, knitting on her worn ebony stool next to a blanket piled with the brown tubers.

"For the first time ever, blades from Nugypt! For a few cowries, kill like the Candace's Guard kills!" screamed hunter-turned-tradesman Papa Npyongo, the imported, well-used swords laid out on his marula hand-carved stand.

Ralo ignored pungent perfumes and incenses, the casual feculence from horses and camels, the calming fragrance of shea and cocoa butter. Not even the Mama Ashanti's sweet cherry-oranges, a regular vice, distracted him. Rata normally picked up rations, but she was filling in at Gye's vineyards for a sick worker. Ralo never liked errands. But the current task was second in his mind.

The summons from Main Jye had been sudden and curious, wiping Ralo's plans of wrestling and hieroglyph instruction with his age-set. Mamou, Takembe and Diou were already at the Learning Tree. Main Jye was always a busy man--it was rare for him to have time for anyone besides elders and other Mains. Sudden and curious. Ralo kept chewing his lip.

His leather-sandaled feet reached their destination. Two were ahead of Ralo in line at the Market's biggest stall. He waited, arms crossed. Three girls, younger than Ralo, entered line after him. Giggling, they waved to the two in front of Ralo, who returned the greetings with large smiles. When Ralo turned to look at them, the trio noticed him and all looked away, hands over their pretty faces.

Ralo began chewing again, too concerned with the summons to dwell yet again on his stigma. Then the man behind the booth gave his usual toothless grin when he spoke, and the loud voice knocked Ralo from his fog.

"Son Takio, life on the rise for you?" He reached hard, crusted hands into one of several carts behind the stall, splitting his attention between searching in the cart and looking at the child he'd addressed. "So it's your mama's time to get her rations?"

"Hi Papa Njon, I'm good," replied the short ball of energy. "Mama says hi." The child's long, black sidelock plait bounced when he jumped up and down in place. Papa Njon smiled at the energetic display while handing over rations, but Ralo looked away in sadness. The tense, wiggly fingers, the constant moving eyes as if searching out danger, the deep bags under eyes from tortured sleep, the nappy unmaintained plait: Takio's mother must be abusing palm wine again.

"Daughter Jayza," Papa Njon greeted the next in line, "here's your rations, that enough kola nuts for your father?"

"Hmmm, yeah," replied the chubby woman, after opening one of the palm leaf wrapped packages inside her bag. "That's great Papa Njon. Dad'll love this." Papa Njon winked. Jayza's paler skin betrayed her by showing a weak blush before she walked away too quickly, her dress wrinkled and hair more tangled than normal, arms wrapped around her bag like a shield--Ralo remembered the two stealing peeks at each other during the fading glow of third place at last week's Hunter's Horn. Ralo shook his head, knowing both of them were married to others.

Ralo approached the stall. Papa Njon's smile died. "I thought your sister was coming," he said. His back to Ralo, he took a moment to search through the farthest cart. "Here," he said, turning and handing Ralo the large sack with one hand while covering his face with the other.

Ralo took the cumbersome bag and left. Main Jye was waiting for him. He chewed his lip.

#

Main Jye's hut was quiet; the door down on the first floor was closed, Ralo's weekly ration sack lying next to it; the lion-shaped windows were shuttered; and despite the Market outside, the red brick walls smothered all noise.

Ralo sat on the floor, his legs folded beneath him.

"And how are your lessons going?" Main Jye asked.

"Uh, ok..." the youth responded, picking at one of the myriad of embroidered crocodile characters on his brown kilt. "I like using ma'at. Rata's really patient...she's a good teacher. She doesn't like using ma'at though. I wish she knew more about Orderer Traditions; I get that mostly from talking with Griotte Kenke. And Rata's warnings all the time get old..."

Care, or die... her voice came to Ralo unbidden. He realized he was rambling. It bothered him. He never rambled.

"She means well," said the elder. "And she's right. It's easy to hurt people with Ordering. And...Pempamsie, Sankofa, Gye--none of the Tri-Village has ever taken well to its people using ma'at." Main Jye paused then, reflecting on something. His ivory anklets jiggled while he adjusted his posture to sit straighter. "None of the continent takes well to ma'at," he continued, "not since the War." He held Ralo's eyes, and a melancholy reached his voice. "I understand. I've never used ma'at where people could see. It was hard on me too, growing up." Main Jye shrugged.

Ralo swallowed. Thinking of his stigma always deflated him.

"You're a terrible empath," a smiling Main Jye told Ralo.

Ralo frowned.

"We've been chatting for five minutes," Main Jye explained, "and you've been trying to read me. And failing."

Ralo's frown grew, and his brown eyes narrowed. The chief of Pempamsie sat there, a dark, wrinkled man of sixty years. His slight gut sagged over his long, pattered blue and red kilt. His eyes were alert and wide and shining, his thin hands relaxed in his lap.

"Do you know why you've been failing?" Main Jye asked.

Ralo was forced to shake his head.

"It's because you've never read someone who was open. People hide themselves. They talk one thing, but they're thinking about going to the Market later, or where their husband really goes at night, or if you think their braids look old. We live difficult, scary lives.

"Saying, 'That person is screaming, therefore they are angry,' is easy. But are they angry? Is this the first time they've screamed? Are they screaming at you, or something else? Why are they screaming? How can they be stopped? Should they?"

"An empath is one who's observant, outward focused enough, to see through that--and figure out who people are. Really are. Hence, the old tales about us stealing souls." Jye's smile deepened. "I've always thought that separation from self, for others, is why Mother Ma'at allows us empaths to Order." He smacked his lips. "But...I admit there could be more to it."

Ralo looked upwards, not sure what exactly was happening. The conical, brown straw roof of the hut had Jye's family crest--a pouncing lion--painted large in black.

Main Jye waited for a response. When he did not get one, he made a click with his tongue, and said, "Rata has also told me your lessons are going well. I'm happy for you. You have a power, you should control it. Too few in the Tri-Village--in Panorama--can Order. If I had the time..." His smile faltered then. Suddenly, a tray started floating toward them. "...if I had the time I'd teach you myself. But all three villages are larger than ever, and more people mean more problems." He sighed. "I actually must leave soon--Main Ute needs me in Sankofa. I worry for my people."

There was no jiggling as the wooden tray rose in the air, came between them in the center of the room, and floated downwards with a quiet landing. It held a large calabash, two small bowls, and a closed metal box. Ralo's mouth hung open: Main Jye could talk while Ordering ma'at. When Ralo Ordered, he couldn't do anything but Order--he might as well have tried to fly while dancing.

"I--you've never talked to me before, Main Jye. Not like this. Why am I here, Main?"

"However," Jye, smile gone, went on, "there is one thing I can teach you, with these few minutes. Now, are you ready to learn..." He poured himself a bowl of thick shea tea while talking--by Ordering ma'at. The invisible power lifted the calabash gourd into the air, tipping itself to pour bronze colored steaming liquid into the cup closest to Ralo.

That decided it. Ralo closed his eyes.

Ma'at was minute bits of invisible force that had to be collectively moved to do anything with. It required an intense concentration, like a painful wishing. As Mother Ma'at moved the sun through the sky, so humans could move ma'at. When he concentrated, he felt the power around him, like sensing water while drowning. Piece by piece, he Ordered ma'at to come together. Piece by minute piece. Straining and grunting, eyes shut so tight they hurt, he Ordered the combined ma'at underneath the calabash, intent to pour his elder a drink. He tried to raise the gourd. The calabash flew upwards, tearing a hole through the roof on its crazy path into the bright sky.

Main Jye made another click. "Well," he said, grinning more than smiling, "Rata was right, you are getting stronger..."

Ralo hung his head.

Sparing a glimpse toward his new skylight, Main Jye grabbed the blue metal box and slid the tray to the side. Detaching a metal latch on the box, he reached his long fingers into a compartment inside. Eyes on the floor, he took the pinch of black sand and made a large circle. He then made a line through the circle to divide it.

He motioned to the youth. "Come closer to the fire," he entreated, and Ralo scooted closer to the elder and the circle, wondering why Main Jye used the traditional welcoming.

"I'm not sure what you're hearing under the Learning Tree now," Main Jye said, reaching into another compartment. "She's bold--a Griot teaching writing." He chuckled. "But Griotte Kenke was always bad with this sort of thing." He looked up, holding Ralo's confused eyes. "This is secret knowledge, knowledge I've gained from the elders, the ancestors, and from my time in Nugypt and the Highlands."

Eyes downward again, Main Jye reached to his right, sprinkling black sand to make a smaller circle on the larger one.

"Life."

Again his fingers dove into a compartment. Taking them out, he traced a index finger along the bigger circle, careful not to disturb his creation. Coming to the circle's top, his middle and thumb released red sand to create another small disk.

"Power."

Again into the box. Again a quarter along the circle.

"Death," he said when the white disk was complete. Ralo noted that it was directly opposite of Life.

Again into the box. Again along the circle.

"Knowledge," he whispered, rubbing yellow powder from his fingers.

After one last time in the box, he removed his fingers and placed them in the largest circle's

middle, along the dividing line.

"Ma'at." It was blue.

Ralo held his breath.

"This is the Kosmogram," Main Jye said. He pointed at the small black. "You're born--Life." He traced his fingers up to the red. "You rise to your prominence--Power." He moved down to the white. "You end--Death." He traced to the yellow. "You learn from the ancestors--you gain Knowledge." Then back to the black. "You are again because you were. Life. Its why we tell time by the place of the sun--" he pointed at each in turn, "--rising is first movement, mid-day second place, setting is third, night is fourth, and first movement again."

Ralo chewed on his lip, eyes burning a hole into the Kosmogram.

Main Jye pressed on, eyes intent on Ralo's face. "The Kosmogram is living and dying--everything lives and dies, even the lives within lives. You're born, you grow, you die, you learn with the ancestors, you're born again. Within that circle there's another circle. You're a child, you grow, your childhood dies, you take the knowledge from your last life into adulthood.

"You, Ralo, are entering the V of your life."

When the youth gave a blank face, Main Jye took his index finger and carved a, "V" into the largest circle: the red Power stood right in the middle of the character's opening.

"See how the lines of this V cut into the circle at the height of your rise to Power, and again before the downward slope to Death? With Power in the middle. You're entering your V. You're reaching your prominence, you're reaching the point in a man's life when he has the biggest impact on the community, and the community needs him most."

Main Jye was leaning forward now, eyes wide and intense. "You haven't always been tied into the community--and they haven't been tied into you. Maybe too much time only with your age-set. And so many think an empath will read your soul and steal it." Main Jye spat that line. "And I know you want to Order. And so many hate ma'at. And I know it's hard to go from being a boy to a man in a changing world. But you have to do it--for Pempamsie, for your sister, for your age-set, and for you.

"Rata came into the community by learning skills, being determined, obedient, and useful to everyone. People learned to trust me for my thinking and decision making, so here I am. And you? You'll have to use everything and everyone possible to be understood, to find your place. Can you resist using ma'at around people. Do you understand? Can you do it?"

Ralo had never felt so overwhelmed. He knew only stutters would come out, so he did not respond. He kept his eyes on the blue sand, so he didn't see Main Jye's tongue click before a deep exhale blew the Kosmogram away forever.

#

Ralo's long plaits rolled like a mop in a storm.

"No, no...ugh, Rata would kill me." Ralo moved toward his hut's crocodile-shaped window, turning away from his age-set. The sun was at fourth place. The night was quiet. The empty rations sack sat folded in a corner, but his conversation with Main Jye was full in his mind. Why should he have to change? It's the community that should grow up. He simply was what he was. Nothing would change that. He sighed.

"Ya gotta," Mamou demanded, ignoring Ralo's sigh while sitting ankles crossed on the woven straw floor. He put down the ivory handle, thin blade knife he'd been sharpening, and leaned forward, red novice hunter chain dangling over his bare chest. His face still had flakes of white paint--the hunter death mask--from training that morning on the savanna. "All these years, you've never shown us magic!"

Ralo turned his smooth, round face from the window, looking over his shoulder with arms crossed while talking. "There's reasons for that."

"And, I would surmise, good ones," Takembe said from his corner wooden stool, not looking up from the myriad hieroglyphs on his papyrus document. His skinny frame and black kilt

were barely visible in the candle lights. He squinted over his father's inventory records. "One would assume that a power of such magnitude as ma'at was not to be trifled with."

Care, or die... Ralo's sister always warned him during training, often while smiling.

Mamou groaned. "Talk like men, not like books," the novice hunter told Takembe. Then Mamou sent a filthy look at Ralo. "Men shouldn't fear their sisters." Ralo snorted. Mamou lifted his gaze off into the unknown. "Men need adventures, men gotta be brave--"

--but not reckless," Diou interrupted. He sat on the stool closest to the window, carving away at the thumb-sized GongGong for his new DameDame set, all quick motions with soft hands. In DameDame, only the messenger GongGong could get close enough to stab the king. "Only empaths can Order ma'at," Diou continued. "I always figured that was important. Maybe that's Mother Ma'at saying those with the most empathy should wield the worst powers."

The four were silenced. The night leaked in. The chill of the just departed rain season lingered--Ralo appreciated the fresh air, since the rich lavender candles were always loved by guests but made his eyes water. Tomorrow, after Ordering drills, he'd ask Rata to trade for another scent at the Central Market before it closed during third place. He rubbed his eyes and spoke.

"People don't really understand empaths..."

"Maybe, maybe not," Diou replied, "I'm pretty sure you haven't stolen my soul, true, so that's garbage. But there's something there. You can read people." He paused his carving and leaned forward for a moment, pointing with his knife. "Remember the First Fruits a few years ago, when you knew just from watching Kilala during Circumcision Day that he'd try to kill his step dad? And then a day later he did?"

"And," Takembe continued over his documents, "the time at Temple when you knew from observing the Priest that he would return to Nugypt due to homesickness?"

"And," Mamou picked up, "how I was tryin' to bed all those girls over in Sankofa last month?"

Ralo wrinkled his lips and turned to Mamou. "That was a secret?"

On cue, all three of Ralo's friends raised their hands in mock horror, one in front of their face and the other stretched out, saying, "No, no, my soul. No."

Ralo rolled his eyes.

"Empathy and Ma'at are tied," Diou said, dropping his hands again and allowing himself a stupid grin. "We know you. But most people don't really understand either--and who wants to have their soul stolen or be blown up? Ma'at is dangerous..." He lifted his eyes in thought. "...I guess..."

"Um--I don't... I don't think its like that." Ralo looked at his age-set in turn, struggling for words he had never said aloud. "It's not that special. Or bad. Ordering ma'at...It's easier just to do stuff by hand."

"So you've said," Diou responded, holding his wooden GongGong at eye level to examine it. "But out of 1,000 people in all three villages, three can Order--your family, and Main Jye. That's it. And you never do it in public." Diou started carving again. "Most of us connect ma'at to the stories we hear from Griotte Kenke."

Mamou nodded. "And from our parents. About the Ten Years War. Cities fallin' in the ocean." He crossed his muscled arms and let his back hit the floor, once again looking off. "Nugypt and Highland soldiers dyin' by the thousands..."

Takembe looked up from his hieroglyphs. "Like I said: Not. To be. Trifled with," the nasally bureaucrat lectured.

Ralo tilted his head, frowning. He looked at his friends again. They returned his gaze.

Care...

They thought ma'at was evil. He couldn't lose his friends. Main Jye said as much. They understood him being an empath, somewhat, so maybe they could come to understand ma'at.

"I'll show you," Ralo announced.

They stood.

At night the Tri-Village was lit by ubiquitous candles in glass spheres on the sides of huts. It made for dim lighting and deep shadows jumping from form to form like dark ghosts.

Ralo peered outside. The open-air Market lay abandoned. It was surrounded by bushes, then houses, including his, with the two-story hut of Main Jye at the Market's opposite end the most prominent.

"According to Rata," he began, and then looked around, as if saying her name would summon her. It did not--she remained at the Braiding House. He continued. "Rata thinks it takes about five years of study before you can do anything with ma'at."

His age-set was frowning.

"I'm serious. Griotte Kenke and Main Jye say Priests of Ma'at in Nugypt need six years before they can be raised." He paused. "A lot of what we knew about Ordering--that's...using ma'at, 'Ordering'--was lost a hundred years ago, in the Ten Years War. A lot of Orderers were killed. Things were probably different before then." Unsure, he shrugged. His friends looked doubtful.

Across the Market, a young girl was riding an ostrich. Her long, extravagant braids were rowed to her oval head, and the thin purple fabric of her two piece dress bobbed with her as she bounced on the ostrich's feathery hide while holding it's tall pink neck. She held a small ngoni in her other hand--likely she was returning home from practice.

The age-set crowded the window at Ralo's gesture.

"Gimmele," Takembe said, stepping closer to the window. Ralo nodded: even with her broad nose in the air, like it often was, she was beautiful.

"She wearin' cowrie shells?" Mamou asked, disapproving of the extravagance. A few Market stalls recently began taking cowrie shells--previously worthless, except for looking pretty--for currency, to allow for easier trade with Nugyptian and Highland merchants. It was becoming common to see old cowrie jewelry traded in for clothes and furniture. Mamou shook his head. "Dummy is wearin' money."

"It's hard to use" Ralo complained, "there's only so much I can do with ma'at. But I'll show you..." The ostrich was walking away from their hut. He would gently raise the animal, just a hand above the ground; Gimmele would suspect the beast had stepped on an unseen ant hill, his age-set would see that ma'at was safe, and boring. Simple. He closed his eyes.

Hands balled, his body trembled. He could sense ma'at everywhere--like feeling tiny thorns while falling through an acacia. Body shaking. His mind collected it. Forcing together piece by piece. Shaking. Piece by piece. His body wavered. This was more than he had ever controlled before. Piece by piece. Collected, he pushed it toward the ostrich's feet. Then pushed upwards.

Ralo heard the scream before his eyes opened.

The ostrich was flung into the air, Gimmele holding on in terror while the animal crashed through Main Jye's straw roof head first. Ralo opened his eyes, tasting blood from his nose. Between sweat drops he could see the ostrich's frantic, pumping feet and wide wings sticking out from the shattered roof of Main Jye's hut. Diou and Takembe were rolling on the floor laughing. People outside were running and hut lights coming on in response to Gimmele's screams. Ralo grimaced on unsteady feet. He almost felt pride at his strength.

"Ralo!" Mamou shouted while grabbing his friend's shoulders, shaking him. The novice hunter was laughing between words. "Good Motha! That was amazing!" Teasing, Mamou held out a balled fist, offering the celebratory gesture of age-set brothers. "I'd never seen a ostrich fly before!"

Ralo's didn't tap the offered fist. His grimace deepened. "I...ugh. I think I'm in trouble." The fallout would be horrific. At least his friends weren't afraid of ma'at anymore?

"No," Rata answered from the doorway, black eyes narrowed. The laughter stopped. Takembe, the closest to the door, began floating off the ground. "You're all in trouble." Then Takembe was upside down. Three of them screamed; Ralo just closed his eyes.

#

It was the punch from Gima's left that felled Ralo. Gima was smaller, but he followed through on his strikes, pivoting his narrow waist and rotating muscular shoulders. The left was so fast it was soundless to Ralo, but a colored panorama of flashes crossed his eyes before he fell backwards onto grass, face toward the first place sun.

"Ok--dat's enough," Mamou said while walking forward, placing his larger bulk between Gima and Ralo. Takembe and Diou helped the empath to his feet. Gima's age-set was chuckling at the Learning Tree a few hands away. Mamou nonchalantly eyed the four boys before telling Gima, "You got your sister's honor in check Gima, she's fine, you're fine, move it on move it on."

Gima was a head shorter than Mamou, and two years younger, but did not back down. With bloody fists clenched and his breathing heavy, he scowled red eyes at Mamou.

"Well," Mamou asked, taking a step forward with hands close to--but not on--the hunter's knife at his belt, "how's this gonna happen?" Diou and Takembe tensed while holding onto Ralo's arms. The other age-set stopped laughing. Mamou and Gima were close enough to kiss. A crowd was gathering around the grassy hill. Ralo closed his eyes, not wanting to witness his friends dragged into chaos.

The unarmed Gima glanced at the ivory handled knife at Mamou's waist, then at Ralo, then back at Mamou again.

"Children!" said Griotte Kenke from behind them, causing everyone to jump. "How are we this beautiful morning?" Her hands, carying writing brushes and papyrus, were thick and soft, equaling her voluptuous frame that was almost hidden by the garish yellow and green dashiki dragging on the ground. The tight wrap on her head matched her clothes. Her voice, toned by years of use as Pempamsie's main oral historian, had boomed through them, making everyone turn in her direction. Her acacia brown eyes flickered to Ralo's battered face, then Gima.

"Did we hear," she said, addressing everyone, "that on a warm clear day like today, in the month of the Hippo like this month, the Nugyptian Candace, queen of the burnt desert kingdom, witnessed a black hawk in the sky attack and murder another black hawk, and saw in that ominous omen that if she did not release the slaves in her kingdom, they would help to tear her land apart? A day that helped lead to the freedom of our ancestors should be one celebrated with peace, yes?"

Gima lowered his head, and spat off to the side. Motioning for them to follow, he and his age-set began to walk away. "We're coming for you," he said, glaring at Ralo, his right hand covering his face. "We all are."

Some of the crowd made way for Gima's age-set, and gave Ralo enraged looks behind hiding hands before scattering. Griotte Kenke gave a sympathetic glance to Ralo, then continued on to the Tree.

Ralo put a grimy finger in his mouth, checking for loose teeth.

"Honorable of you to not engage him back," Takembe said, picking dust and grass out of Ralo's braids.

"Yea. Real honory," Mamou said while frowning, arms tense and crossed.

Ralo spit blood. All of his teeth were in place.

"You see Gima's eyes?" the empath asked. "Red--he didn't sleep. Never saw that before. Even after the nights he helps his dad with the yam crops, Gima never looks that bad. Must have been up all night fretting over Gimmele." Takembe and Diou stood to his side. Ralo turned to Diou. "Glad you could get the vomit out of your hair."

Diou's short afro was clean. The DameDame master reached up and began twisting it when he talked. "Took a lot of praying to Mother Ma'at, and washing." He pulled on a strand a little harder. "More washing though. Felt like Auntie Di had my head in the Filindi for an hour. Didn't know river water was that cold at night." He shook his head, looking helpless. "She probably did it as punishment." He kicked at Mamou then, who dodged to the side.

"Sorry, sorry," Mamou said with a bittersweet chuckle, "Hurlin' wasn't fun for me either. I don't do well upside down. And even if I did, Rata ain't really gentle."



"Father..." Takebe started, hands behind his back and eyes distant, "father was not pleased."

Ralo felt his face. It would be swollen within an hour, but his balance and vision were fine. His papyrus, writing brush, and ink tin were in the dirt where he'd dropped them. After retrieving them, he pivoted toward his hut. The outskirts of the Market were just visible through myriad shrubbery and houses.

"Don't feel like learning heiroglyphs now. Sorry to drag you all into this. I'll do what I can to keep you out." Ralo walked off, passers-by continuing to look hidden frowns and glares his way. Head aching, Main Jye's words pummeled his mind, and Ralo thought them lies: this was the community that he needed, and needed him? This was his rise to power? "Do you understand? Can you do it?" Ralo groaned as he walked.

#

"Hi," Ralo greeted his sister before wiping blood from his lips. She sat in the dirt, leaning on their front door. Rata looked at him. Though not even twenty, the responsibilities heaped on her shoulders for so many years left distinct signs--shadows of black bags under round brown eyes, hardened skin on small hands, an immediate gravitas lacking in other women her age. Her thin, unadorned braids hung down below wide shoulders, and the dark yellow cloth of her baggy blouse and long skirt was unabashedly plain.

Her anger went away when she saw his face. She stood, dusting herself off.

"You might as well have fought back," she said. "I didn't spend the night apologizing to half the village so you could be beat like a lazy ostrich."

Ralo, almost smiling, raised an eyebrow at her. She raised one back.

"Your knuckles are too clean," she explained. She was waving a finger at him now. "You never have loose hands or follow through with your punches--you'd likely have hurt your fists if you'd fought back. And we would have been lynched by now if you'd used ma'at on Gima's age-set in daylight. We're lucky Gimmele only had a few scrapes, or we might have been hung no matter what."

She stopped, and did an appraisal of her younger brother.

"To be real, that was a strong ma'at movement. I doubt I could have lifted that ostrich...and a rider...I doubt Jye could have..."

"Anyway, come little one, Auntie Di gave me some cocoa butter that will soothe those bruises." She went inside, expecting him to follow.

Ralo peeked toward the Market--it was still early, and merchants were setting up. On the Market's opposite end, workers, surrounded by boxes of tools and mounds of unbound straw, were placing ladders against Main Jye's hut. The empath moved to duck into his house when the sound of quick footsteps made him turn.

The GongGong was behind him, taking deep, controlled breaths. Like the DameDame piece, he wore a short kilt that stopped at hard, scarred knees, with a simple Nugyptian-style white linen shirt. Around his neck was a bronze band of tiny, flat bell shapes, in homage of the days when GongGongs used bells before proclamations.

"Mains Jani, Ute and Jye confer in Sankofa now," he began without preamble. "You're to appear at the Life Tree tomorrow at first movement, where you're to be judged by Main Jye and the rest of the Council for bearing the crime of assault against the community." The GongGong's voice was flat, his body upright but not stiff. He looked Ralo in the eye, without hiding his sweating face. Ralo noticed and found it curious.

"We've never talked," he said, "but, you're not hiding your face, or scared of me." He couldn't remember when that last happened. Childhood, perhaps? Before it became obvious he was an empath.

The GongGong hesitated. His small brow furrowed, and he chewed on his tongue for a moment, making the three scars etched onto each cheek move like a cat's whiskers.

"After the Highland slaves were freed from Nugypt and came south," he started, lowering

his voice and looking around while merchants were beginning to notice them, "...well...my great grandmother was among the first born in the Tri-Village...she was also one of the first Orderers born here..."

"Nemi," Ralo said without thinking. Ralo learned the history--Traditions--of Orderers in the Tri-Village from Griotte Kenke and Rata, taking in whatever he could. Nemi was born in Sankofa, and mentored Main Jye's father in her sad final years.

"I see you around the village," the GongGong said. "You seem sad when you're by yourself. But you smile with your friends around. I think, if my grandmother had had friends, she might have been like that." He moved to go, but stopped, held Ralo's eyes, and said, "No one likes the messenger, either."

Ralo, taken aback by the solidarity, just nodded, and the GongGong sprinted off.

Was he sad?

He turned to see Rata standing in the doorway.

"Sister," he asked, "how bad is this?"

She put her hands on her narrow hips. "Bad. No one's Ordered in the Tri-Village in decades--no one's hurt someone with ma'at for generations. It's hard enough just being an empath and showing people you won't take their souls...add on top of that how everyone feels about ma'at..."

She shook her head.

"I told you to, 'Care.' I meant it. A Council judgement at the Life Tree--Good Mother Ma'at," she cursed. "We could be banished."

She rubbed her eyes. "When I was going to Main Jye from Gimmele's, people actually raised their hands to protect their faces. That hasn't happened to me in years..."

A rotten orange hit Ralo in the head. He spun, stunned, to see Papa Njon's chubby, stocky frame looking at him from fifty hands away, across the grass and bushes that separate houses from the Market. Through the old leathery hands protecting Papa Njon's face, Ralo could see angry eyes. Ralo stepped toward the Market, squashing the moldy gray fruit under heel.

"Little brother..." Rata warned, while Papa Njon turned to flee in panic.

Ralo exhaled, a wave of tiredness hitting him, and then moved toward his door. He tried to ignore his headache.

#

He awoke to the sound of footsteps running away. He rolled off his cot without thinking, grabbing his wooden headrest for a weapon then going for the door.

"No, Ralo!" Rata warned, still half-asleep in her bedroll.

Ralo opened the wooden door, then stepped out. He could see men running away, but could not tell if they were the noise he'd heard or if they were only taking care of Market business. Studying the area, the Market was bustling as always, and in the other direction the gathering of scattered huts, grass and bushes was pristine. Eyes jumping around, he turned to go back inside--

--and saw the marks on his house.

In red paint, written fat on both the hut's brick and door's wood, were the heiroglyphs for, "Die, Evil."

#

Ralo and Diou sat on the grassy bank of the Filindi. The trickling water cooled their bare feet. Chirping green birds drank on the opposite bank, and fat rabbits were playing in the sparse bushes beyond. Ralo twisted to his left where, about 10,000 hands away, past a plethora of full acacias and baobabs and marulas, the Deadline Mountains in the south stood stone tall overhead--their snow white tips, shining back the days' bright sun, threatened to poke a hole into Mother Ma'at's domain.

To his right was the north, a long green savanna that eventually ended in jungle.

Ahead of him, across the wide tame river, was more grassland, with the eastern end of the Deadline range just visible in the far distance. And behind him was the Tri-Village wall, the thick

stone monument twice his height that enclosed Gye, Sankofa, and Pempamsie.

"Sorry you're dragged into this," the empath told his friend, hands lazy in his lap. The indentations from gripping the headrest were still visible on Ralo's palms. He chewed his lip.

"Well..." Diou began, inhaling crisp air free of human sweat and camel dung, "we did goad you..." he acknowledged with a shrug. "...and you're a friend..."

"Friends are good," came a woman's booming voice. Ralo and Diou jumped. "A group of friends is just a small community," she told them.

"Griotte Kenke," they both said in greeting.

"Children," the Griotte responded, removing leather sandals and sitting next to Ralo. "May I find your lives on the rise." A sharp intake of breath occurred when she put her feet into the water, and then a release, her healthy bosom lowering in relief. She adjusted her body to face the pair.

"On the travels to trade the new exotic coweries for cloth," she intoned, rolling the diminutive brown foreign shells in her hand, "past vandalized huts and angry villagers, beyond the houses nursing injured, grievous artists and warriors--the people were witness to a young female empath, dedicated of purpose, with two male guardians, on her way to Sankofa to treaty with the most powerful Council to ever stand at the foot of the Deadline Valley."

Ralo almost sighed. "Yeah, Takembe and Mamou are watching over Rata. She said she'd go around and play peacemaker as much as possible before the Life Tree judgement. Again."

Diou nodded. "People like Rata," he said absentmindedly. Then he turned penetrating eyes on Ralo. "People like Rata. Ralo, you've studied the Traditions from Rata and Main Jye and Griotte Kenke."

"Main Jye..." Ralo interrupted, then hesitated. "...he hasn't taught me much."

Diou waved a hand and continued. "You're the only person in the Tri-Village who's done that--likely the first ever to combine ma'at history and training from three different, respected people."

Griotte Kenke nodded. "The Tri-Village has only had a handful of Orderers throughout the few generations it's been here. Other Griots ignored their stories in shame." She shook her head, and turned a determined gaze to Ralo, reflecting on all their conversations over the years. "Trust that you've heard what remain of their Traditions."

Diou grabbed his friend's shoulder. "Come on Ralo. The other Orderers who lived here--after the Ten Years War, and with the empath stigma, how did they manage to live here?"

Ralo struggled. Griotte Kenke's downcast eyes could have answered for him. "Nemi was a hermit, she died alone, the father of her child too ashamed to come forward...Mago left Sankofa in anger and never returned...Jilltu accidentally killed a child with ma'at and committed suicide...and Ada was murdered by a mob during a drought..."

Diou let go of Ralo's shoulder, and punched moist grass with his other hand. "That's not helpful. So Rata and Main Jye are new exceptions, not the rule..."

Ralo's eyes blinked. He felt tired, and his face hurt. "Neither of them like Ordering ma'at. I like Ordering ma'at." He kicked at the water. "I don't want to spend my life hiding. But I don't want to be with people afraid I'll steal their souls or blow them up or--" He spat those last words. He was too angry and exhausted to clarify it, but something was tingling in the back of his mind.

Griotte Kenke looked at the river, then asked in a tiny, gentle voice, "The word, 'I' is in the air a lot today. It appears that even empaths have blind spots. It appears they are human after all. Son Ralo, do you know why they hate?"

Ralo did not hesitate. "They think the old wives tales of empaths reading and stealing souls are true, I'll kill them and they think I'm terrible and ma'at is evil and--"

She shook her head, and lifted her dashiki further up to make sure no water damaged it. "Still a lot of 'I's. How unfortunate." Diou and Ralo shared a glance.

"Fear takes many forms. Like anger." She frowned, crossing her arms over her chest. "Say there are two groups. One has the power of Gods. The other does not." She pointed toward the Wall,

her usual pompousness was gone. "Maybe 'cause you're ignorant of other peoples you lack perspective. We share a history of slavery, we share a Wall, share food, share knowledge, share our childhoods with others in our age-sets. We are a community. It's how we live. It's all we have. For other peoples, like in Nugypt, the ultimate punishment for crime is death. Here, the worst you get at the Life Tree is banishment. Now, for those who don't have that power of Gods--that means there's a community, a powerful vital community, they're not part of. They're banished, always on the outside. It's a death sentence, to be alone and weak in a scary world that enslaved your grandparents." Terror lurked in her voice, and for a moment, Ralo was back in Main Jye's hut.

The Kosmogram was forever lost to the Universe in a miniature storm of colored sand that swirled in the air through the pillar of sun from the skylight. His legs were aching from sitting on them on the straw floor. Main Jye was across from him, looking at the strange sand on the wind, face unreadable. He turned to Ralo.

"Remember--Life, Power, Death, Knowledge, Life," he instructed. "You rise from Life to Power, you decline from Power to Death, Death to Knowledge is a rise, and Knowledge to Life is a fall. That's why we greet each other, 'I hope your life is on the rise.' You saw ma'at was in the Kosmogram's center: it ignited the original fire that's the source of all. Away from the center is a fall; closer is a rise. That's why we say, 'You look unwell, come closer to the fire.'"

Main Jye stood, moving to the door, somber when he said, "You're rising from Life to Power, and have a long way to go before the Power to Death fall. For us, and for you, I hope on your way into the V, your path brings you closer to our fire."

A fish nibbled at Ralo's left big toe. Seeing its tiny mouth emerging from a slimy scaly body below the water, Ralo kicked at it. It darted away. A heartbeat later, the water calmed, and he saw himself, a bruised, black and blue round face, half hidden by fat hanging plaits. Through all the pain, that tingling sensation was back in Ralo's head, and he fought with it.

#

Diou looked over. "Griotte Kenke?"

"Hmm?" responded the woman, keeping pace. Ralo walked next to her, mulling that sensation. The tepid third place sun stretched the long moving shadows of merchants breaking down, making way for hunters to show their catches in the Hunter's Horn ceremony at the Market's heart. They entered the Market from the north. Ralo could see work being done on Main Jye's hut: men were on the roof, with one manning the flimsy wooden ladder to carry tools up and down.

"I always wondered..." Diou said, "...all the other Griots hate writing. None of them use it. No one's ever taught it. But you do it, and teach it. Why's that?"

"Because the world is changing," she responded, meeting his eyes as they walked, "and as much as the spoken word should be adored, other peoples, stronger peoples, write--"

"Down!" Ralo yelled as he fell on both of them, the crooked steel throwing knife missing over their heads. Finishing its curved arc, it lodged with a loud thud into a cart just hands from the trio.

Scrambling to his feet, Ralo saw the knife was shaped like a V.

The boys and men surrounding them were ragged--seven in total, some from Gima's age-set. Their faces were masked by the sweat and white paint of a hunter's death mask.

"Evil!" Papa Njon snarled, dark lips protruding through the unnatural white. The way forward was blocked by their assailants. A nervous crowd developed behind the attackers, whispers passing among them like disease. No one moved to intervene. Hunters were coming from the Market's center for a better view, cautious eyes and heads peered out from huts on the periphery, and the men on Main Jye's roof and ladder stopped working to watch.

Gima stood behind his father, whose thick bare-chested bulk bore several scars. One veined fist was clenched and the other hand, spotted with white paint, pointed at Ralo.

"You hurt my daughter," the man yelled, his son nodding behind him like a toy doll dancing on a string. "And you killed my crops! You shamed my family!"

Ralo shared a confused glance with Diou. "But ma'at can't--I didn't--"

Griotte Kenke raised her hands, straightened her back and lifted her head to project. "Sons of Pempamsie, please, reflect on this--a member of the community is attacked for unrelated events and accidents! Ralo is--" she hesitated then, knowing she needed to say the word. "--Ralo is my student. And your community! You know his sister--adore her!"

Gima's father snorted. "I never liked that bitch anyway, filthy empath. Thinks words will make me feel better." He chortled, a sound that reminded Ralo of a sick pig. "Nineteen and unmarried, probably too damn dry."

The boys and men laughed.

Ralo looked at the men and saw veined legs bent and ready to pounce, arms raised and tense, heavy breathing from excited hearts, weapons clenched, and dehumanizing stares in faces of death. Talking was pointless.

"And I'm the evil one?" Ralo asked, head high.

"Shut up!" Gima yelled, running at Ralo. No honor, this time. Ralo ducked the quick left, and when he rose, lifted his right knee into Gima's groin; finishing the motion, Ralo extended his leg to kick the crumpling, whimpering figure back to his father's feet.

Then it was chaos.

Two charged Ralo at once. Diou kicked at a knee of Gima's father on Ralo's left. To the right, the other attacker swung a thick branch like a club at Ralo's head. The empath side-stepped, unable to get within arms reach as quick swings kept him distanced. He ducked a high horizontal swing, and was tackled by a member of Gima's age-set. The younger sat on his chest and punched him on the forehead, raising his left to strike again.

"Nope!" came Mamou's voice when he kicked the boy in his eye, knocking him off Ralo as the sprawling attacker's hands reached for his bloody eye socket. Slightly dizzy, Ralo held out his hand--Mamou took it, helping his friend to his feet.

"Thank da GongGong," Mamou said in explanation, already pointing his hunter's knife toward circling white-faced assailants, with Ralo covering his back. Between sweat and blood, Ralo could make out Griotte Kenke entreating for calm, and Takembe and Rata moving and punching, engaged for their lives. Rata. He had to reach her.

Mamou said, "He saw men looking for you and found us--"

"I will if we li--down!" He fell on Mamou. This time he saw the thrower; the curved throwing knife whizzed overhead, slicing through thick evening shadows. The thrower, another from Gima's age-set, stood sneering as the knife soared for twenty hands, then hit a leg on the ladder of Main Jye's hut. The leg shattered, crumpling the steps; a kilted, shirtless man at the top of it tried to grab the roof but grasped only a handful of untied straw.

He fell. People screamed.

Ralo closed his eyes. Ma'at was everywhere, like panic in a fight. Piece by piece. Desperate, he combined what he could, he didn't need much, but he hoped it was enough, piece by piece, piece by piece, then he pushed...

The worker's fall slowed. He continued to drop, but it was more that he was lowered. The man's heavy bulk fought against the ma'at, and Ralo collected more while he pushed upwards against the body. The worker's back hit the grass with a soft thud. Ralo released his hold on ma'at, and breathed.

When Ralo's eyes opened, everyone was still. Some of the crowd looked on in amazement. Some had their faces covered. All of the attackers, even with their white death masks, were hiding behind hands, eyes wide in the wonder of one who'd never seen ma'at Ordered. The worker gazed around, hobbling to his feet and unsure what had happened.

But Ralo was sure. He saved a man's life.

With ma'at.

A path was being made through the mob, and Ralo could make out Main Jye's blue and red

kilt approaching them.

Mamou, wordless next to him, impressed, held out a fist, knife still in his other hand. They tapped fists in the gesture of true age-set brothers, and that tingling sensation exploded, and with the sun setting overhead, under the glare of Main Jye's scowl, among the rabble of confusion, it occurred to Ralo what he needed to do.

#

The Life Tree was a baobab. Planted on the first day the freed slaves spent at the foot of the Deadline Valley, it was not the oldest or tallest plant on the continent--the Final Tree in the Western Highlands was said to touch the clouds, and to have provided shade and shelter to one of mankind's first kingdoms thousands of years ago.

But the baobab was the first thing to belong to the slaves--it was planted with their own hands, in their own land, for themselves, and for their future. To them, and those that came after them, it was their Tree of Life.

Ralo stood under it. On the hill, under the fresh light of the first place sun, he could see his hut to the northwest, as empty as the Central Market. His back to the rough, lion-colored trunk, he was facing the Council--Mains Jye, Ute and Jani, all old and black and proud in fresh blue and red kilts, with ivory anklets on their right legs. Behind the three men, in a large ring around the tree beyond its cool shade, stood hundreds silent and curious, from all three hamlets.

Mamou, Takembe, Diou, Griotte Kenke, and Rata, anxious and wary, waited at the front of the swarm, ten hands behind the Council. The boys looked ready for a fight.

Main Jye lifted an arm, and all chatter stopped. "Son Ralo, you've been accused of bearing the crime of assault against the community," he said, his face murky in the shade.

Ralo could see Gimmele, Gima, and their father near the front; all scowling except for Gimmele, whose arm was in a sling and held onto her brother for support. He breathed.

"I'm guilty," Ralo confessed, ignoring the loud whispers and gasps. "By accident." He turned to Gimmele, who flinched at the attention, her cowering necklace shaking along with her body. "I...made a mistake, a small thing grew out of control; you weren't an intended target. I'm sorry. I should have told you that the moment it happened. It's my failing that I didn't." Gimmele turned away, grimacing.

Main Jye moved to speak, but Ralo took the chance and overrode him.

"I've made mistakes," he began, ignoring the fire from Main Jye's eyes. "I, I apologize and am ready to work to redeem myself. You've seen ma'at can be dangerous...and now so have I. And you've also seen it can be used for good."

The ladder worker, still shirtless and kilted, glumly nodded in at the crowd's front. A few others did too--those who were there, who saw the falling man survive. Some murmured. Ralo stepped forward onto an elevated root of the baobab, raising his voice to help carry the momentum and cover the sound of his pounding heart.

"Ma'at..." he grasped for the words. "...ma'at can be dangerous--but we live in a dangerous world. Our ancestors were enslaved prisoners of war--we would not be here if the world wasn't scary. Some of our ancestors died by ma'at in the Ten Years War, but just as many died by the sword."

Griotte Kenke was nodding, as were Ralo's friends.

"Think of where we are. We're changing. The outside world influences more than ever--now we trade with Kingdoms, we use money, we use writing. For the first time in our history, you've seen that empaths can contribute and be liked--one leads you, the other supports you in your endeavors. And for the first time, you have an Orderer trained by a Griot, an empath, and a Main--you have an Orderer who wasn't cast out, who has been warmed by the brightest embers of the fire, who has shown you that ma'at can help--you have me." He let that sit. "And I have you."

The murmurs grew louder. Somewhere out of sight a baby was crying. He thought he saw the GongGong nodding. Ralo couldn't stop to process all of the whispers and awkward body

language and confused eyes. He dare not.

"You were wrong to be scared, but right to be concerned. Fire burns, but don't let the fear blind you to its value. Ma'at is the source of all, the fire that Mother Ma'at used to forge Panorama. Don't push the warmth away--let it work for you, protect you. We've never had anyone control the fire before." Here it was. He licked his lips. "Let me be the fire for you. Let me be Pempamsie's First Fire."

There it was, the tingling realized. He chewed his lip.

The murmurs increased. The Mains looked at each other, exchanging words that Ralo couldn't hear.

He pleaded with his eyes to Griotte Kenke then, whose smile threatened to break her face. She read the hint. She turned to face the people, and in the loudest voice he'd ever heard, she announced, "Ralo has been, and will be, my student, and I will make sure that he is immersed in all of the Traditions of the Tri-Village before he becomes our first ever First Fire, I promise on the trust you have given me as Pempamsie's Griot."

The crowd fell quiet.

Griotte Kenke gave a look to Rata, who stepped forward and testified.

"Ralo has been, will be, my student, and I will make sure that he is wise, intelligent, and careful in the ways of using ma'at before he becomes our First Fire, I promise on the trust you have given me as a friend and worker of the Tri-Village."

"Ralo's gonna be my student--" Mamou began, garnering some chuckles. Diou elbowed him in the stomach. "Uh--Ralo's our friend," Mamou continued, rubbing his flat belly, "and we'll make sure he does Pempamsie good as our Fire. I promise on the trust you've given me as a hu--novice hunter." Diou and Takembe nodded at that, smiling.

There was only one voice left: Ralo was a native of Pempamsie, so although Mains Ute and Jani could give input, the final say for his fate was with one Main. And there was only one other who could Order in the Tri-Village--no one would respect the new tradition if Main Jye would not acknowledge him, guide him.

Mains Ute and Jani were taken aback, as if a poisonous snake had appeared next to their favorite stool. Main Jye's eyes were narrow, but his hands loose. Ralo had trouble seeing his face in the shade. Main Jye stepped forward, and spoke...

#

Ralo almost tripped over his shovel. Again. His experiments at strapping it to his back sword-style were, he had to admit, a failure. And the wheelbarrow was heavy, with large old wheels that squeaked more than anything he'd ever heard--but he was developing the calluses to make the pushing and pulling easier, the splinters weren't so bad, and at least the dense smell of ripe fertilizer was no longer making him sick.

He stopped at the assigned plot of land, an empty grass patch near the Wall, behind a small group of houses. Few would notice the tree there, but that was fine--once his punishment ended in another month, Pempamsie would be greener, and he could begin the long initiation to become the First Fire.

If he hurt anyone else with Ma'at, it had been made clear, he'd likely be expelled. But then he remembered the worker, alive and nodding at his words; and his friends and family, testifying for him. Once people saw the value of ma'at...

He smiled, shovel in hand, ready to break ground.

Papa Njon stepped outside of his hut, closed his door while yawning, and looked around--to see Ralo standing thirty hands away, smiling at him. The older man froze, eyes bulging. He raised crusted hands to his face, and his kilt flew as he sped in the opposite direction toward the Market.

Ralo's smile didn't break; he knew eventually, everyone would come closer to the Fire. He raised the shovel, and began digging.

END