

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Witch Doctor: Doubtwalker

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The war began at sunrise, as it always did.

Benu and ten other witch doctors from the Clan of the Seven Stones stalked into the heart of the Teganze as swift and silent as panthers. Only the faint rattle of bone and iron charms dangling from their tribal masks warned of their presence. Striped in white, yellow, and red paint and decorated in bright bokai feathers, their bodies blended with the vibrant jungle around them.

Soon the emerald canopy grew thick, leaving the undergrowth in perpetual gloom. Benu pricked up his ears at every sound, listening for any hint of movement... any hint of his human prey.

The *Igani Bawe*, the Harvest of Souls, had come.

It was Benu's first ritual war, and his heart thundered like a drum in anticipation. Elsewhere in the wilds, perhaps close by, rival witch doctors from the Five Hills and Clouded Valley tribes were hunting as well, called to action by their high priests just as Benu and his kin had been.

The Seven Stones war party stopped to rest within the borders of the Five Hills. Two witch doctors slipped through the trees ahead to scout for signs of their enemies.

"Do you *tremble* at the battle to come?" Benu's elder, Ungate, whispered at his side. A single ivory horn, crowned by violet plumage, extended from the top of his fearsome wooden mask.

"I do not," Benu replied.

"Show me your hand."

Benu breathed to calm his nerves before obeying. He was pleased to see that his hand was motionless.

"Do you *fear* the battle to come?" Ungate edged closer, lowering his voice.

"All men fear. Such is the way of this world of shadow. My hand is still because I know this truth. If I hide from it, that emotion will control me," the young witch doctor responded.

Ungate lightly gripped Benu's shoulder in approval. The latter sighed in relief. He was not afraid, but he was anxious. He had longed for this day throughout the years of his training. There was no greater honor than to battle in the Igani. It was this ancient ceremony that had allowed his people and their faith to endure for generations. By sundown, when the hunt drew to a close, Benu would either return home in triumph or die at the hands of a rival tribe.

Each outcome was honorable in its own way. If he captured tributes, he would earn the praise and admiration of his kin. If he himself was taken, his spirit would be freed from this shadow world and ushered into the true reality of *Mbwiru Eikura*, the Unformed Land.

Such was his destiny as a witch doctor, a guardian of umbaru heritage and a living bridge between this world and the other. So it had always been for those of his station. So it would always be.

"To live is to sacrifice." He raised his head as his chest swelled with pride.

Ungate completed the old umbaru words. "To sacrifice is to live."

A scout glided out of the surrounding jungle, using hand signals to relay what he had seen: a Five Hills witch doctor. Alone.

The warriors sprang into action. They forged through the undergrowth, stretching out into a tight semicircle. The jungle thinned until they emerged into an area known as the Hills of Mist. Before long, they found the man shrouded in the low-lying clouds: an elderly witch doctor, his tribal mask as scarred and weathered as his skin.

Ungate kneeled, pulling a dart blower the length of his forearm from his belt and placing it through an opening in his mask. He sent a dart laced with the poison of the uapa toads whistling toward the enemy. It pierced the man's back before he even knew he had been found. The paralysis was swift; the elder sank to his knees in moments. That was the limit of the poison's effects. The intent was to injure and capture. Killing opponents in this stage of the Igani was a deplorable taboo.

Clearly outnumbered and defeated, the enemy witch doctor yielded as custom dictated.

"Seven Stones..." he said. "You come far into my lands."

"To find a worthy tribute," Ungate replied. "You are the great Zuwadza, yes?"

"It is so." The old man bowed his head.

Benu watched the exchange from afar, taking in the movements of his more experienced kin. He had studied the rules of battle well, but seeing them unfold before his eyes filled him with a sense of completion, of culminating everything he had ever learned and believed was right.

"You are a greater warrior than I." Ungate stepped forward and embraced Zuwadza. "Here we are enemies, but in Mbwiru Eikura we are brothers eternal. I await my chance to meet you there."

Zuwadza rose on his own, the poison's effects already dwindling. Benu tipped his chin down out of respect as he drew near. He envied the elder. Tonight the high priests would

end his suffering. The elder's blood and organs would be offered to the spirits of the Unformed Land not only to nourish that realm for those who would come later, but also to strengthen this world. Healthy crops, the change of seasons, and the very lives of the umbaru depended on his sacrifice. He was a hero in Benu's eyes.

The war party set out toward home. Zuwadza observed well *Te Wok Nu'cha*, the Final March. He held his head high, at peace with the fate that awaited him.

"Leave him!" A voice cut through the mists just as Benu and his kin reached the jungle's edge. The entire party, Zuwadza included, whirled in confusion, searching for the speaker.

"Leave him and go. There is no reason to end his life. He has much yet to teach." A witch doctor emerged from the low clouds, adorned in paint, feathers, and mask as all participants of the Igani were. From the markings scrawled on his body, Benu learned that he was of the Five Hills.

"I am theirs by law," Zuwadza said. From his tone, it seemed as if he was not surprised by the turn of events. "They are only acting as they have been taught."

"The spirits do not want your life, master," the other Five Hills witch doctor replied.

Ungate pointed a ceremonial dagger at the rival. "You are wrong to interrupt *Te Wok Nu'cha*."

"So the high priests tell you. They command these wars, not the spirits. Life in this realm should not be given up so easily. There is no need for this sacrifice... this Igani. It is a tool of fear and control."

Benu's kin hissed in disapproval. Rage filled him as well. He had never heard of someone defying the sacred laws of the Igani. It was clear this man had been taken by madness.

"Begone!" Ungate roared.

The younger Five Hills witch doctor ignored the call, walking forward with his open palms held in the air. "I offer all of you life. Return to your village. Ask the high priests what they have truly seen in the Unformed Land, what the spirits have said. I wish only to spare my master."

Overcome with anger, Benu drew his dagger and lunged at the heretic. The foe swiftly thrust out his hand, and a wisp of bluish-green energy exploded from his palm. The spirit bolt was carefully placed; it glanced off of Benu's shoulder with just enough force to knock him to the ground, momentarily dazed.

"Release my master. That is all I ask!" the man pleaded.

Ungate and his allies charged forward in unison. Eyes heavy with regret, the Five Hills interloper slashed his hand downward and shouted a lethal hex, which was forbidden in the Igani. The Seven Stones warriors stumbled to their knees and clutched their throats as pale violet foam boiled out of their mouths. After only a few seconds, Benu's kin lay lifeless on the ground.

"You are young." The heretic loomed over him. "Truth will come easier to you."

Benu reached for his dagger where it had fallen, but the other witch doctor kicked it aside. Far off, voices drifted through the mists. Shouts and calls no doubt drawn by the battle.

"My kin..." the enemy witch doctor said. "If they find you, you will be sacrificed."

"A death to be proud of!" Benu yelled. Tears welled up in his eyes at the massacre he had witnessed, at the dishonorable deaths of his kin. "Something you know nothing about!"

"No. You have barely tasted life. You do not see its blessings. *You are blind.*"

The last words rang in Benu's ears. A hex. His vision dimmed, and he thrashed wildly.

"You adhere to the commands of the high priests. *You bow to fear.*"

Another curse took hold of Benu. His deepest fears roiled up from his soul, filling him with uncontrollable terror. Although blind, he sensed his body moving, racing through the jungle, and somehow he knew where to set his feet. All the while, the voice of the heretic, the man who had defiled Benu's first Igani, whispered to him like a phantom at his side.

"Go. Run home. Look in places unseen. Ask questions unanswered. Seek truth."

"Speak of this to no one," Guwate'ka commanded. The eldest high priest of the Seven Stones stood over Benu, his feathered headdress rising a full three feet above his wrinkled brow. He was lathered in white paint from head to toe, prepared for the ritual sacrifices that were soon to come.

"The spirits know you acted with honor, Benu. This is not your fault," another high priest said. In total, five of the Seven Stones' eldest leaders had crowded into the hut. Benu had sought them out immediately after he had returned to his village, recounting the heinous events he had witnessed.

Benu nodded in agreement, but the anger lingered within him. He felt soiled, and he wondered if the spirits truly understood that he had tried—with all his strength—to stop the heretic.

"Come." Guwate'ka turned toward the hut's exit.

Outside, a bonfire roared at the center of the village. Witch doctors swayed at the inferno's edge, stomping their feet in time to steady drumbeats and a haunting, rhythmic chant voiced by a crowd of watching villagers. Elsewhere, torches flitted among scattered huts like bloated fireflies, carried by men and women who were readying empty blood-stained jugs for the night's offerings.

Benu noted the witch doctors who had returned and those who had not. In addition to the rest of his ill-fated war party, ten of the clan's warriors were missing. He imagined them in the villages of the Five Hills and the Clouded Valley, being smeared in ritual oils and prepared for their journey to Mbwiru Eikura just as his own clan's tributes were.

The entire village entered into a song of respect and admiration as ceremonial attendants led the first captive to the bonfire. Guwate'ka approached the tribute, an ornate metal dagger clutched in the high priest's hand.

"We celebrate you!" the high priest bellowed. "We give you to the greater tribe, where all umbaru are one people. In the hours to follow, we will sing in honor of your sacrifice, for it is great."

"And when you too arrive in the Unformed Land, I will be there to greet you," the tribute calmly stated.

Guwate'ka's arm sliced in a lateral motion, cutting the witch doctor's neck with practiced care. The tribute did not scream or twist in agony. He died with honor as he should have. What was the pain of this world compared to the glorious eternity that awaited him in the realm beyond?

The high priest tipped his head skyward and outstretched his arms, his body trembling violently. Before long, a breathtaking azure aura formed around him and illuminated his features.

Benu watched as the elder entered the Ghost Trance, a state of mind that allowed some umbaru to look upon Mbwiru Eikura. The young witch doctor knew the ritual well. Like all of his calling, he had been born tethered to the Unformed Land. His connection was stronger than most, but it paled in comparison to that of the high priests. In the other world, Benu saw only impressions. The leaders of his clan were said to commune with the spirits directly, gleaning insight and commands.

Ceremonial attendants rushed forward to collect the tribute's blood in earthenware. His body was eviscerated, and his organs were carefully—even lovingly—removed and placed in jars.

Guwate'ka emerged from the trance shortly thereafter. He gazed out over the breathless villagers with unfocused eyes as if he had to reacclimate himself to the physical world. Time in the Unformed Land, Benu had learned, was different than it was here. A trance could last for minutes in the realm beyond, while only seconds would pass in this world.

"This tribute has reached Mbwiru Eikura, and he sings his song of thanks!" Guwate'ka announced.

The villagers clapped their hands in jubilation. Tears streamed down some of their faces.

It was midnight when the last of the tributes had been liberated. The villagers shuffled off to long wooden huts to feast and talk of the witch doctors whose lives had been given. The celebration would continue into the morning. Benu lingered by the fire as his kin dispersed.

Something troubled him, a distant unease. Although hours had passed since his encounter with Zuwadza's pupil, still the fool's voice echoed unwanted in his head.

"Look in places unseen. Ask questions unanswered."

Benu clenched his fists. It was not the rival witch doctor's words that bothered him; it was the thought that he had been cursed by the heretic, despite the assurances of the high priests.

There was something else as well. Somewhere, he sensed a clawing at the veil between worlds, beckoning him in unheard whispers.

The young witch doctor wandered to the edge of the village, far from the chatter and the chorus of songs thrumming from the feasting huts. For those of Benu's station, entering the Ghost Trance following the Igani was prohibited. The high priests said it disoriented the souls of the recently sacrificed tributes. But Benu wanted—*he needed*—to know his standing with the spirits.

It would have to be done quickly.

He willed his spirit to detach from his flesh. Warm milky tears raced down his cheeks. With each drop, the world around him faded away, revealing the formless topography of Mbwiru Eikura. Energy blazed across the sky, although it did not illuminate the shifting land below.

"Do I remain in your favor?" he called out.

In reply, a dozen figures with chalky white eyes and bodies of pure darkness appeared before him. Their features were indiscernible, but due to Benu's rare connection with the Unformed Land, he recognized their identities. They were the spirits of the sacrificed tributes, the men and women who, according to Guwate'ka, had entered Mbwiru Eikura filled with peace.

Except they were anything but serene. The specters reached their shadowy arms toward Benu.

Although he could not hear their words, their confusion pierced his soul like spears. The Unformed Land was not what the apparitions had expected it to be. They writhed in uncertainty. It was as if their whole worldview had shattered.

It was as if everything they had ever believed was a lie.

Benu dared not linger. Before he withdrew, a single thought reached him, emerging like a drifting fog from much deeper in the shapeless realm. It proffered to him a warning.

Beware.

"To live is to sacrifice. To sacrifice is to live," Benu whispered into the humid air as painted bodies shifted around him. The Igani Bawe had come again, earlier than expected, and the Seven Stones villagers were busy preparing for the war, which would begin at sunrise. The battles usually followed the change of seasons, but only a week had passed since the last Igani.

Benu sat with his back to the bonfire at the center of the village, pondering recent events and watching the shadow of his lean frame thrash as the flames clawed at the sky. Guwate'ka and the other high priests claimed that the spirits demanded the war in response to the actions of the heretic Five Hills witch doctor. Despite Benu's silence on the matter, word of Zuwadza and his wayward pupil had spread from the Five Hills like wildfire via the trade routes that existed among the umbaru in times of peace. It was said that the heretic had even slaughtered his own kin when they found him in the jungle. In the end, he and his master had disappeared into the wilds and had not been heard from since.

Rumors followed the stories. Some described the errant witch doctor as a madman who had massacred the Seven Stones warriors out of sheer bloodlust. Others told of the heretic eating the flesh of slain witch doctors and becoming a cannibal—a *kareeb*. Such an act was

unthinkable, for those who committed it were denied entrance to Mbwiru Eikura. Benu dismissed these tales for the meaningless and unfounded gossip that they were.

"In this Igani, we will purify what has been tainted!" Guwate'ka bellowed from his place near the fire, ringed by the clan's other high priests. "We will assure the spirits that we remain faithful!"

The villagers around Benu roared their approval, but he remained silent. Gone was his pride in the Igani. Gone was the clarity of self and purpose that the ritual had once offered him. There was only doubt now, a heavy, gnawing unease that sat in the pit of his stomach. Even here, surrounded by his kin, graced with the songs of his people, he could not help but think of the confused spirits he had seen in the Ghost Trance. The memory of them—and of the warning that had been issued from the depths—haunted him in waking and in dreams.

Had it all been a figment of his imagination, or was it real? He felt torn between the urge to have faith in the high priests' words and the growing desire to question what they had said.

Benu closed his eyes and shook his head in disgust. *What is this sickness in me? The spirits of Mbwiru Eikura are not upset. Why now, after a lifetime of clarity, do I question the ways of my people?*

The young witch doctor turned toward the fire in time to watch Guwate'ka enter the Ghost Trance, azure light glowing across his features. Benu rose and joined in the dancing at the fire's edge, telling himself that everything he had seen was merely the remnant of a curse placed on him. The high priests were infallible. Their connection with Mbwiru Eikura was beyond Benu's comprehension.

Glistening with sweat, Benu gave himself to the song and dance. His worries faded. For a brief moment the ritual rekindled his pride, and he longed for tomorrow's honorable combat.

Suddenly he felt the Unformed Land and the spirits within it summoning him again. The sensation was dire, almost frantic. Movement flashed at the corner of his eye, shifting among the shadows near the fire. What resembled dozens of dark spectral hands reached out toward him, grasping and clawing.

The spirits... come to take revenge for the lies they were told, Benu thought as he stumbled back, wild and anxious. When he looked at the fire again, however, he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

My mind is playing tricks on me, he tried to convince himself, but he could not shake off his unease. The world pressed in on him, the bodies, paint, and feathers blending into a suffocating sea of color and sound.

Benu staggered away from the fire and walked among the empty huts, gasping for breath. A cold hand shot out from the darkness and clasped his shoulder. With the speed of a corpse spider's strike, he turned, unsure of what awaited him. There, bathed in shadow save for her face, stood a woman. A beautiful woman.

"Benu," she said. "Strange that you avoid the ritual on this glorious night."

"Who are you?" he offered, his voice recovering from the startle.

"I am Adiya, wife of Guwate'ka."

Benu lowered his eyes out of respect. He was unworthy to look upon the wife of a high priest. Those of her revered position rarely left their huts, even in ceremony.

Adiya cupped her hand below Benu's chin, raising it until their eyes met. "You have my permission to look. I have come to see if the spirits spoke truly about you..."

"What—" Benu began, but Adiya gently pressed her fingers on his mouth, silencing him.

"They say something troubles you. An illness of sorts. I see it too."

Benu looked away, distraught that one of his kin knew of the confusion that plagued him.

"Be not ashamed. You are in good company here. The high priests believe me to be a healer. This poison that lingers in your mind can be purged," she said.

"And you would heal *me*?"

"I would," she assured him with an indefinable, loving energy. Adiya caressed Benu's arm with her hand and then grabbed his wet palm.

"Come."

Benu obliged, enticed by the woman's confidence. Once the lit forms of the village had become no more than untouchable stars in the distance, Adiya stopped, beckoning for the young witch doctor to kneel upon a woven mat. There spread out before him were the tools of his trade: his body paint; his bejeweled dagger; his fearsome horned mask, adorned in feathers and wrought in the visage of an inhuman scowl; and an assortment of potions and talismans.

Adiya appeared only slightly older than Benu. She was alluring, strong yet with softness along her defined hips. Her sun-kissed face was rich in color like the bark of a healthy baree tree. The wind pulled at wild plumage attached to metal cuffs at her wrists and ankles.

"The paint," she said, scooping up a handful of the grainy paste, "from the marrow of the most fearsome jungle beasts. May it instill courage in you when you face your enemies." Adiya smeared the cool mixture over Benu's face.

"A claw dagger, lethal as the behemoth that shed it. Carefully and precisely will you guide its hungry edge." The woman slung Benu's weapon at his side.

The witch doctor froze as Adiya suddenly leaned forward. Her lips pressed against his before he could turn away. "A kiss, to show we are as one in this," she added afterward.

"A mask, bled from the nightmares of our forefathers," Adiya continued as she lifted the wooden visage and placed it on Benu, "to ward off the spirits that conspire against our good hunting."

Adiya stared intently at him. "Honor is more than a hollow death in battle."

Benu's eye twitched at the implication. "There is no hollow death in the Igani."

"Is that what you believe, or is that what you have been taught?" Adiya asked. "The spirits say you walk two paths and waver between destinies. One side, forever a child of the Seven Stones, seeking a grace the high priests can never give. The other, a wildfire, unforgiving and bright, bringing newness and life to these stagnant jungles. Tomorrow, you will be made to choose."

Her words bordered on heresy, but Benu could not ignore the fact that, in some small way, they reflected his recent inner turmoil. "Which is correct?" he asked. "What is the gain to be had by either?"

"To provide those answers is not my place. I only advise. But know this: the spirits are uneasy. They say we umbaru are no longer unique or worth celebrating. They say we lie to ourselves when we claim that our sacrifices are for the whole of our people. They say—" Adiya hesitated. "No. It is not my place. I am not a high priest."

"Speak. I will not judge." Benu teetered on the balls of his feet, enraptured.

Adiya whispered, barely audible, "They say we are *blind*."

Benu's pulse raced as memories of the heretic witch doctor flashed through his mind.

"The high priests act as if they speak to the spirits daily, but it is not so," Adiya continued.

"Often, Guwate'ka and those of his station only glimpse the Unformed Land in passing. The Igani, the laws that rule our lives, they are there for the high priests to control us, to suppress who we are."

"I am sworn to uphold our ways," Benu replied, but his voice lacked conviction.

"You have seen evidence in Mbwiru Eikura that things are not as the leaders say, yes?"

Benu swallowed, unsure how safe it was to divulge what he had witnessed. "I have seen many things in the Unformed Land. Some are true; some are mere interpretations. Such is the nature of that place."

Adiya looked into Benu's eyes, narrowing her own. Her mouth stretched wide in a smile, and then she clapped her hands together. "Yes, yes. You *have* seen something. The spirits spoke the truth."

Suddenly they heard voices close by, echoing off the hut walls. Two men were wandering through the outskirts of the village. Adiya crouched low, and Benu mirrored her. His skin prickled with fear at the thought of being caught not only with a high priest's wife, but also questioning the revered leaders' teachings. After a moment, the speakers passed by and continued on their way.

"I know the price of station," Adiya said. "I know the burden you bear as a witch doctor." Her brow knitted in anger. "It is unspoken slavery. I have come to you in the hopes of liberation, that you might change our ways."

Benu regarded the dagger at his side and the carved mask on his face. "I do not understand. Why do you help me prepare for the Igani if you believe the ancient ways are wrong?"

"To see the right path, you must first look upon the wrong. At sunrise, you will perform the harvest as you have been taught, but you will do so with eyes open. This is what the spirits foretold."

Adiya stepped back and peered at her work. "Before me is not a man, but a witch doctor. A warrior of Mbwiru Eikura. A champion, not a servant. Never forget this."

Benu rose, his mind wild with thoughts of radical change. The possibilities of what he might soon learn invigorated him. He had a *purpose*. It was the most complete he had felt in days.

"Good hunting," said Adiya.

Hours later, the war parties of the Seven Stones had fanned out through the thickets and vines of their jungle home. Benu forged ahead alone, hoping that solitude would grant him clarity. He commanded a pair of gaunt, naked hounds. They were unearthly creatures, vicious and exact, born of carrion and old umbaru magic.

Each season, after the Igani, the emptied husks of tributes were carefully sewn together in the shapes of dogs, their bodies filled with herbal composts and dried leaves. A boiled skull of a beast was used as the head, attached just above a mane of feathers. With the blessing of the spirits, these zombified beings served as loyal minions at a witch doctor's beck and call.

The high priests had gifted two to Benu before his first Igani, but he had not used them. Pride had made him face that ritual war armed with his wits and his strength alone. Now, he thought only of survival. He had named the dogs Chena (which meant *fever*) and Owaze

(meaning *flight*). Through the dense and wild undergrowth, they wove flawlessly in tandem, racing to the beat of phantom hearts.

A laugh, high in pitch and haunting, exploded through the leaves from an unknown source. Chena and Owaze froze, anxiously throwing their glances in all directions. Skidding to a halt, Benu spun to find the origin of the sound. He clasped the dagger on his belt, hearing the familiar shrill as he drew it.

The voice cackled. In the jungle gloom, the shadows had a way of hiding things. Suddenly, a small pouch no bigger than a child's palm fell from the canopy above. Benu instinctively edged away, for he knew to fear the thousand curses that could be contained within.

His dogs, however, did not. Darting for the object as though they were fighting for a fresh bone, they tore into the bag with their fangs, releasing a sickly green cloud of dust. The hounds stumbled as if disoriented from vertigo. As they struggled to catch their bearings, Benu could only watch and wonder what fate had befallen them.

The unseen voice screamed a quick incantation: "*Gowaia fen! Bo'ta!*" The hiss of a small-grained rattle accentuated the call. This shook Benu into understanding. Together, the spell and the pouch were a sloppy attempt at mind control. It would have failed on Benu or any other able witch doctor, but the dogs were simple creatures, weak of will.

"Coward!" Benu yelled into the jungle.

Chena and Owaze growled with their fleshless mouths. They pounced, and with tooth and gnarled claw they swept at the exposed flesh between Benu's ceremonial vestments.

Dodging their savagery, the witch doctor grabbed a skull attached to his belt, treated with incendiary oils and magic. He hurled the object at his servants, and it ignited on contact. The pained effigy of a man flared to life, engulfing its targets. The hungry flames enveloped the beasts, but they pressed on nonetheless, their corpse bodies unfeeling and undeterred.

Benu evaded their advance. He cast a melodic counter curse, forming motes of blue energy from his mouth that he tore away and threw at the hounds like ghostly rags. This proved ineffective against the unseen voice's spell. Even if Benu could avoid the dogs, he knew that his enemy was preparing another attack.

To surrender would make everything as it should be, as the umbaru had practiced for thousands of years. But he could not comprehend yielding willingly.

"Life in this realm should not be given up so easily. There is no need for this sacrifice... this Igani," the heretic had said. The words did not sound as dishonorable as they once had.

Benu strengthened his grip on his dagger, desperate to find an opening. As Chena and Owaze wailed with each step, the voice above them laughed, pleased with itself. Benu's throat tightened. His chest heaved with labored breaths. He sliced with his dagger, cutting through Chena's hide just as Owaze leapt toward him. The witch doctor dove to the ground, narrowly evading the assault. The hounds circled him, ready to strike.

Without warning, the emerald undergrowth behind Owaze broke, revealing a daughter of the Seven Stones. She was frightening to behold in her full feathered dress. Four gnarled horns rose from her mask, crowned by deep crimson plumage. The newcomer extended her palm before her lips, which were visible through a wedge cut in the bottom of her wooden guise. Then, with a long, guttural cough, she vomited a swarm of locusts that roiled into the trees above.

The hidden witch doctor screamed, and the hexed dogs slumped to the ground, their bodies still ablaze.

Within seconds the insects had found their target, stealing from him his camouflage and balance. A fall. A pained shout. A man's lifeless body upon the vine-covered floor. The

many-toothed locusts, assured of their victory, scattered in a thousand directions like smoke.

Benu, although thankful for his life, could not help but feel guilty as he looked upon the corpse. His enemy's skin was swollen with welts, red boils that had formed after the hungry bites of the swarm.

"Do you see? Another umbaru killed without reason," the masked woman said. "Though we are not made for this shadow world, we must do what we can to survive it."

Benu recognized the voice immediately. "Adiya?" he replied, both shocked and horrorstruck. "You are not a witch doctor! Why are you here?"

"The spirits urged me to follow you, and it is good I obeyed." She cocked her head.

"The rules of the Igani forbid killing the witch doc—"

"Rules?" Adiya growled. "You talk of rules after everything you have seen? Mbwiru Eikura is not an earned thing; it awaits all umbaru. This you know. The high priests set these games in motion. The heretic from the Five Hills, he saw the truth. Why do you deny it?"

"I..." Benu began, but he had no argument to offer, at least not one that he truly believed. She was right. The *heretic* was right.

Overwhelmed by a flood of emotion, Benu embraced Adiya and her words. It was more than just desire; it was the thrill of disobeying the stringent laws of the high priests. As Chena's and Owaze's remains lit the small enclave, Benu removed Adiya's mask and gently traced her lips with his finger. Without caution he kissed her, then pulled back and said, "To show we are as one in this."

There was a sudden gnawing plea from the Unformed Land as Adiya grinned knowingly. She closed her eyes to invite further indulgence, and Benu, pushing aside his disquiet, leaned in. When their lips met, he was surprised to hear shouts and howls as a band of masked tribesmen leapt out of the surrounding jungle. In the wonderment of their distraction, both members of the Seven Stones had failed to recognize the danger.

The enemy's death wail and the flares that were once Benu's loyal hounds had summoned the witch doctors of the Clouded Valley tribe.

Solemnity was all Benu could muster as his captors led him toward the encroaching dusk. Before them lay the home of the Clouded Valley. To his eyes, it looked exactly like the village of the Seven Stones. Thatch-roofed huts crowded around an open central area, where a bonfire raged. Blood-stained jugs sat nearby, yearning for the offerings that would soon fill them.

Benu did not celebrate *Te Wok Nu'cha*, for Adiya's desire for life had penetrated him deeply. Even now, her longing stare called him to defy his heritage and strike against his captors. Such an act was forbidden, unthinkable.

The takings for the Clouded Valley were a meager three heads: Benu, Adiya, and an elder witch doctor known as Edwasi. As the party neared the bonfire, it was welcomed by ceremonial attendants, and other villagers were chanting, beating drums, and dancing in observance of the ritual.

Stripped of their masks and weapons, the three were laid upon low tables within a grass-walled hut, then lathered in oils of citrus. The captives were smeared with a seeded ichor, an agent that would protect their bodies from the rot of death in the hours to come. At the far end of the room, the silver-haired Edwasi breathed deep to soothe his anxiety.

From the table next to Benu, Adiya stared at him with a look of helplessness, stretching her hand toward him. He suddenly felt ill.

Having completed their work, the attendants departed and opened the hut's door to a large, muscular man wielding a crescent jawbone sickle. Benu did not know his name, but his impressive headdress signaled that he was an elder high priest. At his back were the others of his caste, decorated in colorful feathers and clutching mojo dolls in their hands.

The lead high priest gestured with his chin and then stepped back, away from the hut. Two skirted men entered the room and gripped Edwasi's wrists. The elder witch doctor gave no resistance to his escorts as they led him outside and presented him before the high priest. Edwasi embraced his fate.

Through the hut's open doorway, Benu observed the ceremony as if he were seeing it for the first time. The participants went through the same actions that he had witnessed at Iganis throughout his life. Words were spoken. Edwasi's blood was spilled. Attendants collected his organs in jars as the other villagers continued their singing. The ritual and all its pageantry were as they had always been. But to the young witch doctor, they seemed devoid of any substance.

"We umbaru hide our senseless violence with rousing melodies," Adiya spat.

By now, Benu surmised, Edwasi's vaporous spirit had retreated from this world. The young witch doctor thought suddenly of the confused phantoms he had seen in Mbwiru Eikura, shattered by the realization that things were not as they had been led to believe.

"A life cut short, for what?" Adiya hissed. "We need not follow his path. There is another way out."

Benu's heart raced. His mind whirled. "They are many, and we are two. What way is there?"

"We willingly offer umbaru flesh to the spirits, but we are forbidden to eat of this bounty. Have you ever questioned why?"

Benu reeled at the suggestion. "*Kareeb* are damned by the spirits!"

"More stories crafted by the high priests." Adiya waved her hand in dismissal. "I have heard secrets in the company of my husband. He spoke of legends that say eating witch doctor flesh unlocks the forbidden path to godhood. Lies were created that the truth might never be discovered. But you, champion, are wise and would harness this power for your own. With it, you could reform our broken culture. No one could stop you."

Benu stared at Adiya, her eyes commanding and sincere.

"As our killers draw near, meet them with defiance," Adiya whispered. "Follow me, and the umbaru will flourish in an age of true enlightenment, not darkness."

As expected, the skirted men returned, their arms and chests smattered with gore. They reached for Adiya's wrists, but—unexpectedly—they were met with bestial wrath.

The woman jumped on the table and dove, catching one of the men by his head and turning it as she rode the momentum of her attack. A hollow snap revealed her success. Before the remaining escort could react, Adiya's cold touch grasped the back of his neck, and she pushed his head down as her knee drove up into his nose. He fell to the floor, motionless.

Benu could not believe what had just happened, nor could he fathom the speed and precision at which the kills had been performed. Never had he seen or heard of such ferocity. Grabbing his hand, Adiya pulled the stunned witch doctor to a run as they burst forth from the hut's doorway.

The Clouded Valley villagers were outraged. Pushing past the elder high priest—who, despite being armed, could only look stupefied—Adiya lunged for the jars holding Edwasi's

organs. One by one she pulled off the lids while the crowd backed away, cursing the woman's actions but unsure of what to do.

"See how pathetic and dependent on rules they are?" she asked. "Umbaru are so flawed. We kill and die not for honor, but for fear."

In a blue earthenware jug, Adiya found the prize she had been searching for: Edwasi's warm, still heart. Plucking it up and drawing it to her face, she said, "Greater are we than the injustices we have weathered."

She bit the tender meat as if it were ripe fruit, the heart gushing blood as though it still delivered life. Screams broke out from the Clouded Valley villagers, for never before had they witnessed such sacrilege.

Adiya swallowed a mouthful, further upsetting the onlookers, and she smiled at their discomfort. She began to tremble, and then without warning a violet light erupted from within her, illuminating the gray sky and the simple structures nearby. Those closest to her scattered, frightened and desperate for the security they had enjoyed moments ago.

Gazing angrily upon the fleeing tribe, Adiya screamed, driving the elder high priest to abandon his blade and clumsily attempt his own escape. Pleased for the privacy, she veered toward her would-be lover, fixed in his place. The woman's form remained unchanged, but she bristled with power.

"Join me," she said, her voice amplified and echoing. "Kill the servant within you!"

With that, she raised her radiant palm and offered the bitten heart to Benu. This, he understood, was the moment Adiya had spoken of.

The Clouded Valley members shouted from all sides, their temporary shock wearing off. Benu knew they would attack soon. Many of them were armed with daggers and spears.

He hesitated. This was the promise of a new life, free from lies, free from senseless wars and the burdens of custom. He recalled everything he had seen and felt: the tormented spirits in the Unformed Land, the warning, the pleas from Mbwiru Eikura, the heretic witch doctor who had rebelled against the old ways...

But that man had not been a *kareeb*, nor had he welcomed the fight. It was Benu who had attacked first, making the bloodshed inevitable. The heretic had defied the laws to spare his master—to save a life—not to become a god among men.

The insistent call of the Unformed Land returned a thousandfold, nearly forcing Benu to his knees.

"With this you can remake the Teganze!" Adiya howled. "Never again will life be thrown away without meaning. Never again will lies poison the hearts of our people!"

Staring at the faces of the Clouded Valley villagers, Benu was filled with a profound sense of clarity. These people were wrong in their ways—that was clear—but they were not his enemies. He had no desire to fight them, for such was not the path of truth. He wished only to enlighten them.

"I cannot," Benu said.

Adiya crushed the heart in her hand, her body shooting bolts of energy in a tantrum, casting Benu with great force to the earth.

"Filth!" she cried. "Coward!"

As Benu struggled to his feet, his head dizzy and his vision blurred, he could no longer deny the spirits' summons. Death was coming, and the ancestors demanded audience. *It must be a sign*, he thought.

Shaking with concentration and gritting his teeth, Benu willed himself into the Ghost Trance. Milky azure tears fell from the stunned warrior's eyes. With each droplet, the veil of the shadow realm tore away, revealing the empyrean topography of the Unformed Land. His heart began to thunder. His gaze was directionless, but then he saw in the soft light thousands of chalky white eyes on humanlike beings of pure darkness.

At the center of the gathering stood a solitary figure, its shadowy arm beckoning Benu. A thought formed in his mind—an impression.

Come.

Benu trembled in apprehension as he stepped toward the spirit.

You are Benu, this I know.

Benu remained motionless. The spirits had never before *spoken* to him, never before communicated with such clarity.

You stray far from the truth. What is true is this: the Unformed Land is not as the high priests teach. The one you call heretic knew this. That is why he defied law.

Images swirled and flashed before Benu like smoke and lightning. He glimpsed the so-called heretic wandering through strange lands the young witch doctor did not know. A falling star blazed in the night sky, and Benu followed it to where it crashed on the earth—a small town beset by evil.

"If he knew, then why did he leave? Why did he not teach his kin?"

All umbaru walk their own paths. No two are the same. He will teach in his own way, and you will teach in another. You, Benu, straddle the world of shadow and the Unformed Land as if

you were born at the border between them. It is this connection that will prove to be your greatest tool.

"What is it that you wish me to teach?"

Life in the shadow world is precious. It should not be wasted. The umbaru wars do not benefit the Unformed Land. Mbwiru Eikura is a land eternal, this is so. But there is sorrow as well as joy here, just as there is in your world. These are the truths you will teach.

"This I saw when I gazed upon the spirits sacrificed during the Igani," Benu replied.

You saw, but you did not believe.

Benu was speechless. The words were sharp and true.

There is another truth as well. The phantom motioned over Benu's shoulder. There, the veil between worlds softened, and Adiya in her ascension stood frozen in time.

"She is Adiya," Benu said, "wife of our clan's eldest high priest. She is a *kareeb*, and in being so, a god."

She is no god. The figure's orblike, unchanging eyes somehow showed disapproval. *This is a demon.*

With those words, Adiya's body melted and, in an act that defied the laws of reality, reconstituted to reveal another creature entirely. Before Benu writhed Adiya's naked torso atop countless limbs of tentacles, each covered in hundreds of bile-rimmed mouths. Three horns rose through her ratty hair. In lieu of a jaw, a gaping orifice pulsed at the bottom of her head, slavering in anticipation of a meal.

"Demon..." Benu shuddered. He had heard of them, ancient evils born of the ages and beyond understanding. Never had he seen one.

The demon sensed your doubt and was drawn to our sacred jungle.

"To what purpose does it haunt me?"

The spirit raised its arm, conjuring new images. Benu saw himself eating of the heart. Despite Adiya's claims, it did not grant him godlike powers. It did nothing. The spectral vision transformed again to show Benu cast out from the Seven Stones, left to wander the Teganze a *kareeb*, alone and destitute, consumed by sadness and shame. All the while, Adiya followed close by.

It would have made you eat of the heart and abandon everything that you are. Only afterward would you have realized how grave a mistake you had made. In the years to come, the creature would have gorged on your tormented spirit, as it has countless others. But when tempted by the demon, you refused its offer. Why?

"We umbaru are not weak or fearful, as the demon claimed. We follow the old ways out of honor and pride. Fighting those who hold tight to custom will accomplish nothing. I must *teach* them."

This time, the thoughts came from all the figures as if they were communicating in unison.

Yes. Blind you were, but no longer. Before us stands a teacher. A spiritual leader and a healer. A warrior who defends life but knows the necessity of death. Before us stands a witch doctor.

"What of the demon?" Benu asked. Only the lead spirit replied.

It was you who led it here. It is you who must drive it away. Great is that task, but remember always that the spirits are here to guide you. We are bound eternal to you by the Unformed Land.

Benu bowed his head. "I thank you—"

Without warning, the Unformed Land disappeared in a stunning flash of light. Benu opened his eyes as if awakening from a dream.

He could hear Adiya approaching, a slithering sound like that of snakes squirming through mud. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed her true form as it had appeared to him in the Unformed Land.

He leapt backward as one of the creature's tentacles whipped out in a low, sweeping arc. The appendage screamed through the air, slicing into the torsos of two nearby umbaru. As the other villagers turned and ran, the demon wailed, sending waves of energy rippling out from its body.

The barrage knocked Benu off his feet, and he slammed into a rock outcropping. His head swam from the trauma as he rolled to his side. A few villagers mustered a defense, firing darts or jabbing with ceremonial daggers. Adiya, unstoppable in this form, easily swatted the attacks away.

The villagers were going to die. *He* was going to die.

The demon tore through the defending villagers. Waves of violet energy cascaded off its body, leveling huts and tossing umbaru into the air like mojo dolls. Adiya's tentacles wrapped tight around necks, legs, and torsos. The bile-rimmed mouths devoured flesh and bone.

The witch doctor marched toward the creature, lifting the elder high priest's abandoned blade and a spear from the ground. "Demon!" Benu roared. "Leave this place!" He hurled the spear, and it sailed high, barely nicking Adiya's shoulder. But it was enough to draw the demon's ire.

Adiya tossed aside the lifeless bodies held by her tentacles, and turned. The Clouded Valley defenders risked glances from behind the huts where they had taken cover. Just as Benu had hoped, they slowly trickled away, disappearing into the safety of the thick jungle.

Benu ran the blade across his open palm and then formed a tight fist, drawing more blood from the wound. "I am Benu of the Clan of the Seven Stones. In me flows the power of my people!"

"Your *people* abandoned you." The demon's otherworldly laugh echoed. "You are alone."

"I am bound eternal to the Unformed Land. I am the living bridge to Mbwiru Eikura! At my side stand the spirits of the realm beyond. Always they guide me with their wisdom. And sometimes..."

The witch doctor opened his palm and cast the blood in front of the demon. Adiya's many mouths frothed with saliva at the scent of their next meal.

"*They aid me with their strength!*"

A pool of pale green energy erupted around Adiya. In an instant, a hundred unearthly arms rose, reaching through the veil separating this world from Mbwiru Eikura. The angered limbs grasped and clawed at the demon, robbing the creature of its flesh.

Before Adiya could be ripped apart, magic exploded from its body, dissolving the spirits' arms into wisps of jade-colored smoke. A tentacle coiled around Benu's neck and dragged him forward until his face was inches from the pulsating mouth on the demon's head. Its putrid breath washed over him.

Benu thrashed as the tentacle's maws began chewing at his neck. The mouths tore deep, devouring whatever flesh and blood they touched. The witch doctor's hands went limp from the pain, and he was dimly aware of the sickle slipping slowly through his fingers.

Mustering the last reserves of his strength, he tightened his grip. Benu kicked hard against the demon's chest, and the creature briefly recoiled... enough for the young umbaru to find his opening.

He thrust the blade into his enemy's brow, pushing it through the back of the demon's head. A look of disbelief flashed across its inhuman eyes before its body shuddered like a bare tree caught in a violent wind. Tentacles flailed in the air, hurling Benu aside.

The thing called Adiya withered and crumpled to the earth, lifeless.

The world around Benu seemed to slow as he lay on his back, blood cascading from his neck. Trees at the village's edge swayed with a light breeze. The calls of birds and beasts echoed from the wilds. The sun disappeared below the horizon, signaling an end to another Igani.

Death took him shortly afterward. Initially, he struggled against it, confused that fate had led him here and afraid that nothing he had learned would reach the ears of his kin. But just before his heart beat for the last time, he remembered the words of the spirits...

You, Benu, straddle the world of shadow and the Unformed Land as if you were born at the border between them. It is this connection that will prove to be your greatest tool.

... and was at peace.

The witch doctors of the Seven Stones clan settled by the bonfire, preparing for the Ghost Trance. Less than a week had passed since the last Igani. All of them had heard the tale of Benu and his fight against the demon. If the stories were true, he had sacrificed himself to spare the Tribe of the Clouded Valley.

But rumors followed the stories, as they always did. Such was the way of things. There was talk from the Clouded Valley that Benu had defied the laws of Igani, that he had even been a *kareeb*.

The high priests of the Seven Stones spoke of the spirits' anger over these events. Although they deemed Benu a hero, they claimed that the presence of the demon had sullied the ritual war.

And so another Igani Bawe had been commanded.

Seeking the blessings of the spirits, the Seven Stones witch doctors entered the Ghost Trance. Time slowed as they shifted into the realm beyond. The village peeled away, and the twisting energies of the Unformed Land stretched out endlessly in all directions.

Normally, the warriors would each see and hear different spirits, if they saw or heard anything at all. This time, however, every witch doctor witnessed the same pitch-black figure beckoning them. The spirit's thoughts formed as words in their minds, clear as crystals and sharp as daggers.

You are blind.

The witch doctors were unsure of what to make of the spirit's accusation. They apologized and asked for forgiveness. Many of them broke off from the trance, fearful that they had somehow angered the spirits.

Those warriors were not ready, but others were.

"What is it you wish for us to see?" the few lingering witch doctors asked.

Truth. You might die in this Igani. For what reason?

"To honor you and your kin," one replied.

"The high priests command it. Such is my duty as a witch doctor," said another.

"To live is to sacrifice. To sacrifice is to live," a young warrior stated.

The spirit approached the last speaker, pondering those words. Once, in the other world, he had worn them as armor and wielded them as a blade. But lives should not be given up so easily, so needlessly.

I do not want your sacrifice. This land does not need it.

Confusion and unease rippled off the young witch doctor. He hesitated before speaking.

"Then what do you ask of me? What is there besides sacrifice?"

Life.

In the end, only the young warrior had remained in the trance, but the spirit once named Benu harbored no ill will toward those who had fled. If it took days, weeks, or even years, he would guide them to enlightenment. All umbaru walked their own paths to truth. No two were the same.