**ANCIENT BABBLES**

 Many a calm river begins as a turbulent waterfall, yet none hurtles and foams all the way to the sea.

-Mikhail Lermontov

The natural world was once loud. In those prehistoric days, the earth incessantly poured out speech into the atmosphere, communing with man and beast, singing, laughing, whispering, and guiding the lost hands of the two-legged animals with tools. Nature was a chatterbox. The seas did more than roar and the mountains seldom tremble, rather called tribes to their feet and taught them new ways of greatness. Mountains placed, deep inside their hearts, desires for grandeur, while shimmering skies gave them sound direction, softly guided them to food, oasis, and the supple breasts of water. Those were the archaic days. Centuries past and nature grew still, small yet restless.

Not rivers.

Rivers pioneered gossip, giggling and whispering to anyone who would listen to and spread news across every known territory. They tickled the ear of anyone with the heart to hear. The streams of gladness were the only evidence of the earth's willingness to endure with men and enlighten them in the ways of the Spirit. Men huddled around its edges to hear of her whimsical ideas of progress and conquest. Rivers made men believe there was always something greater on the other side. Promised lands, mines of gold, abundance, treasure, more. Long after the two legged beasts had turned against the earth, rivers still cuddled near them to feed them weak lies. Generations after, when they ceased to listen, the rivers still spoke.

Relentlessly.

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It was his first day tasked with scrounging for food alone. After hours of walking against the dusty winds of the wilderness, the learning man left his diprotodon tethered to the trunk of the nearest Baobab tree to rest by the banks. He laid his gatherings of the hunt aside, just out of reach of the grip of the diprotodon's tongue and rotting oversized teeth. Ripening wolgol were its favorite. The blubbery beast flopped over on its side, letting out a soft groan and panting slowly.

The invitation to be unburdened before the grassy land was more enticing than the red honey before him. They had travelled for miles before finding this basin of greenery. The ache to rest made the young haggard man drop the rope without fussing over the knots. He brushed his sweat-soaked straggling strands out of his face and began to unbraid his dark hair. As this is the ritual of this new tribe. He unfurled his canvas dhoti and followed the soothing melody of the river. Drunk on exhaustion, he did not bother to fold it in the honorable way the clansmen had showed him, but dropped it to the wet grounds and began, in his new tongue, to mutter to himself:

*Be cleansed, be clean. Be cleansed, be clean. Be cleansed, be clean.*

He bored his way through the palms and yellowing ferns, into a wide basin of bush closest to the bank of the river. He exhaled. The sun bursts golden plumes upon the rugged terrain, covering all with its anticipation. The knotted vines of the forests float in the breath of the cool wind flowing down from the rocky arch above. Birds swoop down into valley riding the whisper of the wind, perching into trees to find rest too. But there she is… River, in her child-like wonder, playfully tumbling over the grey silt, squeezing through the crowd of boulders and sand grains. She is quite eager today.

*Be cleansed, be clean. Be cleansed, be clean. Be cleansed, be clean.*

The weary traveler's knees buckle as he reaches towards the bank. The heat had drained him of his strength. The soles of his feet finally greeted the waters. The pain melted from him as chills ran up his spine. He repeated the phrase, then reached down to fetch two smooth stones of the equal size. One he placed in either hand. He took a deep breath and pressed against the current into deep water. His muttering became hushed and into himself. *Be cleansed, be clean. Be cleansed, be clean,* he focused. Dutifully, every hunter must purge himself to bless the meal of the day. This new tribe had many rules around handling meats, fruits and fur; unlike his former tribe who hunted together only to ravenously eat right after every catch. Then praised the gods in dance for the day's meal. No, this tribe was reverent and respectful of all life ~~had~~ given and taken away.

The glistening blues creep up to his shoulders. He could no longer feel the mossy pile of stones beneath him. He took a sharp breath and dove down into the river. With his eyes closed, he clasps the rocks together and concentrated on the sounds they made when repeatedly struck together. He hopes he has done it right. The rocks etch against each other's grains and echo through the tides. He hopes he has driven the spirits away… or at least that's what it should do. As breath gave way, he kicked towards the surface and released the rocks to return to the others. This is pointless, he thought, coming up for mouth full of air. There was no one around to tell him whether he had honored the customs of these people. After all, he was an outsider. He treaded towards the banks, to where he could stand. He washed the dust of the day from out of his hair and scrubbed his scrawny legs of the crusted mud. The serene pool was medicinal, just the thing he needed to reward himself for his day's work. He felt the invitation to stay a while longer, leaning into the faint ripples. He squeezed his eyes shut and melted down again; his hair curtained after him. For only a moment, there was stillness.

"Remember me…" A voice whispered below. The sound punctured the quiet.

Nearly a hundred tents struggled to withstand the consumption of the red flames. Shrieks of women burning under fabric soaked the air. Smoke veiled the mountains and blinded him from seeing any survivors. The stench of war and defeat filled his nostrils. Scorched flesh and blood stain the rocky mountain beds. One of his brothers stumbled towards him with gashes in his chest. He wailed in agony, reaching out towards him. He looked down at his bloody hands in shock, trembling in a raging stupor. The crimson blade machette laid at his bare feet.

His muscles tense and his chest heaved under the river. The water bore down a familiar weight upon his shoulders and held him there. The voice was clear and unified but had been like no sound he had ever heard. The imagery seared through him.

"Remember us…" A harmony of voices emerged, gliding over the surface was the waters