

The Rite

The twelve-year-old boys and girls sat on the ground in a semi-circle, with their fathers sitting behind them, facing the king. The king was seated on the royal throne in full regalia—leopard-skin cape, lion-tooth necklace, golden bracelets encrusted with jewels on both his wrists and ankles, his scepter was made of zebra wood and topped with an amethyst crystal as large as a man's fist. He wore a dark purple robe that covered his entire body to his calves. The sun was dropping beneath the horizon and darkness was slowly spreading over the village. The king looked at each of the young candidates for a second or two and began.

“This evening,” he said in slow measured tones, “marks the beginning of your passage from childhood to adulthood. Tonight begins the rite of ascension, that by our ‘mesora’, our tradition, determines who will become warriors. Many will try and many will fail. Those that fail may become goat herders. And that task is also very important. Because we all need to eat, do we not?” He paused to receive a collective head nod of assent.

“Those that fail,” he continued, “may also become watchers of cucumbers. And that task, too, is also very important. Because we do not survive on meat alone. Is that not also true?” He paused to receive another nod of assent.

“Over the past years,” the king went on, “you have been trained to hunt and fish; how to make a fire and a camp; how to track wild animals and how to avoid dangerous beasts. And through it all, you were always told to ‘never go into the Dark Woods alone.’ Tonight that will change.” The king paused to let that sink in.

“Tonight,” he continued, “you will be blindfolded and lead by your fathers deep into the Dark Woods. You will stay there, alone, from high-night until sunrise. Without food or water. Be warned: If you cry out or if you attempt to find your way out of the Woods or fall asleep, you may be devoured by some of the dangerous beasts you have been taught to avoid...Now stand and face your fathers.”

They all stood and faced their respective fathers. The fathers reached into a pouch hanging from their shoulders and withdrew an object wrapped in leather. Upon

unwrapping it, it was a beautiful hand made knife. And as one, they recited the traditional words:

“Take this knife which I have made by my own two hands much in the way that my father, and his father, and his father’s father made knives for them on their night of their rite of ascension. Keep it close and it will protect you from harm and many evils. Whatever tasks await you, it is yours alone and can never be taken from you.” With that, they handed the gleaming knives over to their children.

The king nodded this approval and the fathers and their children broke up into individual groups.

“Father,” said K’el, “I have never been in the Dark Woods before, let alone at night, by myself, and blindfolded! What am I to do?”

“Do not worry, my son,” said T’shea, “you have been taught well by me and the others. Just remember your lessons. I have found a spot in the Woods, it is a far distance from the village, but when last I saw it, it looked like there were no wild animals there. That is where I will leave you. Remember, do not fall asleep or cry out or you may draw the creatures to you. You will have your knife, your training, your wits, and the spirits of our ancestors. You will be fine. And also remember, no matter what happens, and no matter what you decide, your mother and I will always love you.” With that, T’shea reached into the pouch and withdrew a blindfold, wrapped it around K’el’s head securely covering his eyes, and proceeded to lead his son to his fate in the Dark Woods.

T’shea lead his son on a very circuitous route that encountered fallen trees, big rocks, a ravine or two, and even required them to ford a small stream. After two hours of walking, T’shea announced that they had arrived at the spot that he had previously found. He sat K’el on the ground next to a large tree.

“It is a bit past high-night. The sun will rise on your right hand in six hours. When you feel the sun, you may remove the blindfold. Until then, your thought will be your own. And remember, do not sleep or cry out or you may draw the creatures to you.” With that, he drew his son’s head to his, kissed his son on the forehead, and was gone into the Woods.

K'el was more than a bit dismayed. *What am I going to do?* He thought. *I don't have a spear. I don't have bow or arrow. All I have is a knife. The Dark Wood is very large and I am very small and if I am not very careful I could end up as some beast's dinner. I tried talking to some of the other warriors about what happened on their ascension night. They all laughed at me and said that I would have to see for myself when my time came. Great! Well, my time has finally come and their help was no help at all. Perhaps if I just sat for a while and just listened to my surrounding I might get a feeling as to what is around me.*

K'el did just that. He sat and listened very intently. He could hear the wind through the trees. And if he listened really hard, he thought he could identify what kind of trees they were and tried to remember where those types of trees were in relation to the village. He gave up on that task in short order. Next he tried to listen to the insects. He identified several that he knew. But they were very commonplace. Next he listened for other animal sounds. He heard some he knew, but many he didn't. It was the ones he didn't know that worried him. They didn't sound like they were small harmless beasts, either. Over the next few hours he used each of his senses to explore his environment...all without moving from his tree.

If I could just remove this stupid blindfold, then I might be able to figure out where I am and to possibly defend myself against any wild beast that might attack me.

With each passing hour K'el became increasingly more anxious. He was fearful. He wondered if other warriors experienced this kind of fear. *Of course not. Warriors are fearless! Maybe the king was right. Maybe I'm not cut out to be a warrior. Maybe I 'am' destined to be a herder of goats.*

Just then he heard a twig snap off to his left and slightly behind him. Immediately he was on his feet, crouched in a defensive posture, his new knife gleaming in his hand. He waited, trying to calm his breathing. He cocked his head from left to right trying to pinpoint any other sounds, but none were forthcoming. And after several harrowing minutes, K'el put the knife away and returned to his seat under the tree and his dark thoughts.

And then he heard them! The Calypso birds. They were the harbingers of the morning. And then, the bangangas. These small creatures were one of the first out in the day to forage for their morning meals. K'el smiled and slowly rose to his feet. He

turned to his right and slowly removed the blindfold. And there was the most beautiful sight he has ever seen, the sun. He had survived! He had made it through his rite of ascension. Maybe he could become a warrior after all. He turned to his left and there, not ten paces from where he had been sitting blindfolded all night, was...his father!

“Father!” shouted K’el with joy, “have you been there all night?”

“Of course,” replied T’shea, “I had to make sure that no wild beasts would eat you for dinner.” He laughed

“Father,” said K’el, “I was so afraid. I thought I would die, alone in the woods. Never to see you or mother, or anyone else in the village ever again.”

“I know,” T’shea said. “That is one the true tests of the rite of ascension. Whether you are a warrior, or a herder of goats, or even a watcher of cucumbers we all have fears. And those fears must be overcome. The rite is the first step in learning to cope with those fears and understanding that fear is a natural thing. Everyone fears something. Dealing with those fears is where the real courage comes in.”

“The second thing the rite teaches us, is that we all watch over each other. Even as I watched over you this night, each father watched over their child. Just as my father watched over me and his father watch over him. And hopefully as you will watch over your children, some day. That is our tradition.”

T’shea asked his son, “Are you hungry?”

K’el said, “Yes! But we’re a long way from the village.”

“Follow me,” said T’shea pointing with his head.

They walked for about five minutes and came over a small rise and there before them was the village! K’el looked at his father incredulously.

“All the mothers of the village,” said T’shea smiling, “have prepared a great banquet in honor of all the new ascendants. This, too, is one of our traditions!”

K’el looked at his father, gave him a great hug, and then took off, running, to the village to have breakfast with his mother and his fellow ascendants.