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### Silver Midnight

The smell of earth surrounds me, sinking into my skin and filling me with calm. My feet drag through the mossy jungle floor and the almost-setting sun shines down through the trees, lighting my path and glinting off the carapaces of beetles crawling along the understory leaves. My eyes move from tree to tree, scanning the wildlife and taking inventory. Last night before I left, Dyani told me there was an army of frogs a day's walk away that she had noticed behaving strangely. I'm following her instructions to where they tend to be: an hour downward, turn towards the red-tinted trees, stay straight until you reach the stream - that'll bring you to the beginnings of sunset. Just downstream is a good spot to leave your things. They'll be safe tucked under the rocks until the moon sets.

I watch a toucan land in the trees, squawking and shuffling its feathers. It's perched high in the canopy, bright against the underside of the leaves and out of reach of the beasts that might look to eat it. I'll be one tonight. I can already feel my animal instincts bubbling to the surface, ready to engulf me as the pull of the moon grows stronger. Nothing makes me feel more alive than the jungle. It is a breathing thing itself, never asleep and never cold. Even the stone in the ground teems with life, if only you look close enough, and it is my haven.

The sound of water babbling around a bend meets my ears, mirroring the feeling of an oncoming transformation in my core. I push through a thick, wide-leafed bush and the ground slopes down, bare soil, to a clear stream. The peaks of the water are tinted orange by the beginnings of the sunset, dancing along as the scales of tiny fish glint below the surface. I step

down into the stream, the cool water swirling around my ankles and washing away the earth caked on from a day of travel. I turn my eyes downstream and can just see the sharp bend in the stream marked by a large, mossy rock. Starting towards it, my movement startles the fish and they dart away.

When I reach the rock, I pull the woven leather bag from my shoulders and set it down in a moss-padded nook on the side of the rock. I open it and pull the fresh sagaka roots I collected earlier from inside, peeling away their hard exteriors and pulling the fibrous meat from the center. *To prevent pain during the transformation*, my mother's words echo in my head. *And they are wonderfully sweet*. I chew the sagaka, squeezing the juice from them and spitting the tough root to the ground when it has all drained.

By the time I've eaten all my sagaka, the sun has dipped below the trees and the warm golden light of sunset is surrounding me. The moon is close now. I can feel her pull, growing stronger by the moment, and the first prickles of change run up my back. I push my bag deeper into the nook in the rock and begin to unwrap my hides, piling them over the bag.

As I bare my skin and the moon begins to rise, I feel the familiar rippling in my back. The soft speckled fur sprouts from my neck, traveling down my spine, and pushing my tail out. I step back from the rock into the small clearing next to it and grit my teeth as the first moonbeam pushes through the trees, pulling a growl from deep in my chest. My legs grow thick and powerful as the pads of my feet thicken, and I fall forward, landing on my arms as they lengthen and strengthen in the same way. My hair pulls back into my scalp and I feel my face pull out, every sense heightened as my lunar form takes hold.

The moon hangs low in the sky, its gentle light filtering through the canopy overhead and casting the Kajiagi in a soft glow, the ripe okoje fruits hanging heavy in the treetops glistening with condensation. I crouch low, neck sinking between my shoulders as I slink through the soft underbrush, my broad paws sinking into the peaty soil. The heavy spring air wraps me in a warm blanket, the gentle breeze carrying scents of decomposing wood and stirring night life to my acute transformed nose.

The sound of a twig breaking catches my attention. As my ears swivel towards it, I realize how hungry I am. I've been prowling for an hour or so, and I haven't eaten since moonrise - not since before my transformation. My mind turns to hunting, and I pad toward the noise, my mental state clicking in with my physical. I peek through a gap in the elephant leaves to see a wide-eyed monkey chewing on a piece of broken wood. The source, I assume, of the noise, but too small a quarry for the hunger swelling in my lunar body.

I turn my attention elsewhere, my yellow eyes glinting as they sweep the understory. A piece of bark shifts on a tree, and I shift as I realize it isn't just bark. A sloth. That'll do. I move toward it, stalking it as if it could bolt, until I'm a pounce away. I spring up, feeling my claws sink into its back and pulling it down from the tree. With a swift bite, I snap its neck, and begin to tear the flesh from its bones, sending a silent thanks to the trees for the meal.

When I've picked the bones clean and the hunger wanes, I push the skeleton closer to the base of the tree for the fungi to reclaim. These full-moon nights are my regular reminder that the jungle will always return, that if we wrong it it will find its inevitable justice. Sated, I return to the prowl, ears perked up in search of the frogs. I don't know where exactly they are; most months I travel in another direction. This area, not too far from the stream, is certainly boggy

enough for them, so I know I must not be far. My paws carry me through the trees, following the thick scent of moss and earth to the heart of this area.

It isn't long before I begin to hear croaking. I go into high alert, scanning the trunks for the bright red eyes of the frogs. I see two perched on thin branches overhead, and slow my pace so they won't notice me and flee. As I squeeze between the trees, head moving like a pendulum from side to side, a strange glint catches my eye. I peek my head through an elephant-leaf plant and look into a clearing where strange instruments sit. They shine in the moonlight, smooth like a stone that has been tossed in a river, and hold forms like nothing I have seen before.

I can't help but growl at the sight of these unfamiliar objects, wondering if they are the source of the strangeness in the frogs. My nose tells me this should be where the frogs' home is centered, yet a scan of the clearing comes up empty. Something is wrong here. Something alien has come into my jungle, my livelihood.

I push my way into the clearing, staying silent and wary, and approach the strange instruments. I push into them, unsheathing my claws and scraping against them. My claws leave thin lines in the hard surface, a lighter color. I don't know what this material is. It is not from here. A wave of anger moves through me, my innate need to protect this jungle swelling under my skin. I swat at the spindly legs of one of the instruments and it topples over, clattering to the jungle floor and settling on the layer of decomposing leaves.

I have to find the frogs.

I turn away from the silver objects, pouncing back into the trees. I move quietly still, but with an urgency I am not used to feeling when I am out in the jungle. The squeaks of bats and the

whirring of bugs and the distant trickling of the stream remind me that not everything is amiss, but they are not enough to fully comfort me.

I don't know how far I've traveled when the sound of a frog jolts my mind from the panic it had fallen into. I stop in my tracks, looking up and searching for the frog. I see it instantly, stuck to the side of a tree. I pad towards it, careful not to startle it, and watch. It stays still for a moment, then leaps up, toe pads sticking to the bark higher up. It croaks, and somewhere behind me another frog answers. I watch it leap onto a branch, onto a leaf, into another tree. I breathe in relief. The frogs are still here, still living and breathing.

I look up to a thick branch just overhead and step back, then run forward and leap up, claws digging into the wood as I pull myself up into the tree. I tuck my legs under me and cross my front paws, lying my head on them and looking out from a new vantage point. Another frog croaks somewhere, the ever-present sounds of my home lulling me into a half-sleep.

Below me, something crunches. My eyes shoot open and turn downwards. Someone is walking through the clearing under me, someone wholly unfamiliar to me. Her hair is too light, pulled tight at the back of her head, and falls straight down like it should be wet.

I stare for a moment as she moves through the clearing, confused but unconcerned, until I realize she is holding something made of the same silver material as the strange instruments. It casts a yellow light on the ground before her. She must be the reason those things were there.

She stops and bends over a bush, and without thinking, I drop from the branch, landing behind her. The soft ground makes my movement silent, but I am certain she notices anyway. She freezes, and I breathe out. Feeling my breath on her neck, she bolts. Her bare arms are toned, but no matter how strong she is her human legs can't outrun me. I follow, unsure where she'll

lead me, letting her pull ahead. I let myself disappear into the trees, knowing my familiarity with the terrain will help me track her.

She begins to lose steam, and I move back into line behind her, slowing my own pace to match. In the space between two trees, she stops, spinning around. I watch her look around and lunge forward, stumbling over a thick root and falling prone. She reaches out towards a gnarled stick, and I step forward into the small clearing. I cock my head, observing, waiting. All the way up to the sky, there's an opening in the canopy. The moon shines through, standing my fur on end and filling me with an ethereal energy.

She stares me down in turn, her eyes flitting up and down my form, darting off to the sides, analyzing the scene. Her mouth opens, closes. She stirs, moving slow, gathering her legs beneath her. I begin to ask her who she is, forgetting for a moment that my voice will only come across as roars. When I realize my mistake, I shake my head out, eyes closing for a moment.

When they reopen, she is leaping towards me, arm outstretched, the silver object with her trapped piece of sun in it. I duck away, but it connects with my head anyway, shooting pain through my body. I let out a roar in response, and the sound of birds fleeing rustles the leaves above.

Whoever this strange, pale woman is, wherever she came from, she cannot be here to do good. My protective instincts overcome me, giving me something familiar to grab onto. I need to save this jungle. I need to save my home.

I leap back to avoid another blow, and the woman's eyes go wide. She looks at the object in her hand, then steps towards me. I swat at her arm with my paw, and her hand opens, the

device falling from it and hitting a root. The light inside goes out, and the only thing illuminating the clearing is the moonlight shining down from above.

I look to the side, my blood pumping loud, and leap onto the side of a tree, my claws digging into the bark and carrying me up the side. I step off onto a branch, looking down on her, and close my eyes. I do not want to make this decision, but I have a duty. I am the omanyu of my village. I am the only one in a day's travel who can save the Kajiagi from this interloping force. Around me, the trees whisper. I take a moment to reconcile with myself, any lingering hesitation melting away.

Below, she watches me.

I let go of the branch, claws outstretched. My back claws dig into the wood, swinging me forward, until I sheath them and fall forward, knocking the woman back as my paws land on her shoulders and pin her to the ground. She struggles beneath me, the animal inside her springing to life. The moon does not pull it out, but she has it none the less. In a way, everyone does.

Like I always do when I hunt, I do not make her suffer. Even *she* does not deserve to die slowly, no matter what she would do to the jungle. I duck my head and avoid her eyes as I open my maw and sink my teeth into her neck. Her movement ceases in an instant, and I tear myself away. I do not regret it, yet it is strange to see the face of a human in that state. Her eyes are glassy already, her face permanently stuck somewhere between shock, fear, and acceptance.

A frog leaps from the tree, landing a hand's width away from her face. It croaks once, then leaps onto her forehead. A moment later, it hops away.

I stay there for a while, pushing her arms and legs and inspecting the odd material her hides are made of. I paw at her object, too, and find that a dark protrusion on its side can be pressed to illuminate or darken it.

As the moon begins to fall, I estimate I have just enough time to find the stream before I change back. With a last look at the body of the woman who would invade the jungle, I turn away, and start my journey home.