

solitude!

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Sometimes you have to do a hard thing.

This is what you're told by the earth.

You are twenty five, the age your mother had you, the age her mother before her ran away from home with her twins strapped to her back. You are at the age where you're expected to be able to grind bitter-leaf between your teeth and not flinch.

But you are not your mother or her mother before her. You do not have legs made thick from years of service to *he* who felt as though *he* were above her. You do not have the strong back of someone who has had to bear every load handed to her like yet another light thing. And most importantly you do not have the tongue of someone who knows better than to call something bitter.

This is why when you're told to do a hard thing by the earth, you turn and spit words into its face, muddying its appearance.

If your mother were here, she would have told you this was not wise. She would have stretched out an arm, made a fist, and struck you in the same sunken spot on the back of your head that she had been striking since you were born.

If your mother's mother were here, rest her soul, she would have spat on you and cursed the earth for moulding you in her daughter's womb.

They both knew better than to insult the soil from which they came. The earth, roots, and muddy depths in which they were moulded. The same depths from which the trees that fed you and gave you shelter, sprouted.

But they were not here.

It was you, the earth, and its many children reaching into the sky with curling foliage, sheltering your sins in darkness. Away from the sky. Away from anyone who could see the mangled body at your feet.

The earth spoke again, whipping a soft wind around you.

Sometimes you have to do a hard thing. That won't change. Are you ready to complete the offering?

You drop the small bowl in your hands, look into the shifting soil and sigh, falling slowly to your knees. When your bare skin touches the soil, you're pulled through worlds.

You overlook your mother as she kneels in front of her husband. You watch as she carries you, an infant that still stumbles and mumbles, and places you on her back. Together, you both stalk a house that is not yours, cook food that you're told is a privilege to eat, and bend so many times that the gods get jealous. But in her eyes, you see patience. Patience found in the quiet acceptance of a hard thing. You can see every swallowed word, every averted gaze, every time her fingers tighten on the hilt of a knife when *he* speaks to her. You can also see how her toes dig into the earth, listening for whispers, for comfort.

Suddenly you can see beyond your mother to her mother before her. You watch as she runs away from the village, villagers after her with cow-hide whips, red and raw lines running down her back. You watch as she cradles her twins - the apparent witnesses to her evil, brought forth by her own womb. She anoints them with her tears, and settles under a mango tree, swearing that as long as her children live, they'll forever wreak havoc on the people of that village. You see the earth listen, accepting her bodily offerings of copper and salt. She continues to lament, dedicating both children to the earth, naming them after the long-forgotten names of mysteries that crawl and slither and whisper underneath layers of soil man is yet to dig. The earth responds, and swallows both children whole, leaving the mother alone underneath the mango tree for three weeks. But she does not worry. The earth shows her kindness. It feeds her meals of unripe mango and crushed bitter leaf, teaching her how to swallow a bitter thing and say thank you. It keeps her alive and sheltered, hidden in barks and clothed in leaves such that animals and men alike cannot find her. So even when the earth returns only one child three weeks later, leaving the crying baby girl at her feet, she offers a prayer and dedicates her future bloodline to feeding the earth..

Then you're pulled forward in time, worlds collapsing beneath your feet, until you're floating above yourself. You watch yourself sleep peacefully, tied securely to the small of your mother's back as she drags *his* body into the forest, and collapses to her knees. Tired, yes. Weakened, yes. But, grateful. You watch as she refuses to return to the village, but instead sends you off, rejecting that she has made you an orphan because the earth is your true mother. You float behind yourself, watching the understanding of what it means to be an outcast settle in your bones. You soon grow bored with trying to find community among people that have termed you a devil child. You instead grow fascinated with the earth's willingness to obey. You till and pluck at the earth, coaxing yam vines and ears of corn with ease. Some years, clouds will vanish for months at a time and the sun will scorch the ground, yet the earth stubbornly keeps a generation old promise to your lineage. Your crops grow. Your crops feed the village. You're now the devil farmer, yes, but you're grudgingly needed. It is a perverse form of utility to be valued for only what you can offer and not for who you are. So you till the earth until the day a young man, stocky and ruddy cheeked, comes to the farm and asks if you'd like to take a break to go fishing. You're surprised so you can only nod and follow him to the bank of the river, where you spend two hours listening to him ask questions about what your secret is, and how he thinks everyone in the village is foolish for mocking you, and how he admires anyone who can do such slow, granular work. He has one of those loud voices, the type that fills a room and soaks into the walls so that when he leaves after his third dinner at your house in three days, you can still hear his voice living in the walls. The only thing that proves to be louder is the earth, when it whispers into your sleep three months later that this man, this loud, joyful man, was to be your sacrifice. You see how you considered telling him, considered running, considered ignoring it, but how does one out run or ignore the very ground they walk on? So you did as you were told, a hard thing, a knife in the back, body stuffed in raffia and dragged across the forest floor.

When you return, the blood from the mangled body now spreading to your knees, the earth speaks to you again.

Honour your mother and her mother before her. Honour me. Complete your sacrifice.

It is at this moment you realise that the hard part was not in clubbing your best friend, or in dragging him away from the village and into the forest. It is in listening to the earth gargle his blood, thirstily calling for an ablution before it can feast. It is in the way your shirt clings to your skin and sweat and tears and mucus cause your face to glisten. It is in the complete helplessness of this moment, you doing as was done before you, an inevitable collapse of the past into the present.

But sometimes you must do a hard thing. so, you cover your dead friend in soil and watch as he slowly sinks into the depths of the earth's ravenous belly. Then you pick up your small bowl and whisper.

"I am ready to complete the sacrifice."

The forest plunges into darkness and the trees hold still. You follow the instructions your mother had taught you before handing you over to the earth. You lick your teeth and taste plaque. A few night's worth of build up, roasting in jaw-clenched breath. The earth responds in approval, accepting the start of the ritual.

How does it taste?

"Raw. Stale. Unfortunate."

I see. It should not be so.

You ignore the tone the earth has taken, and instead spit into the bowl, making sure to draw spittle from the back of your throat. You don't stop until your throat is raw and your little bowl is full.

What colour is the spit?

"Milky. Creamy. Disgusting."

When you have filled the bowl, you reach into your pockets and pull out a small bag filled with salt. Then you line the white grains on your tongue with your mouth agape. You feel the way the grains shock and startle, drawing water out of your body into your mouth. Saliva pools beneath your tongue. It would have been easier for you to have had this step earlier, but there are no shortcuts. You must sometimes do a hard thing.

The wind around you picks up, licking your skin dry, as you hold the salt on your tongue until it becomes bitter. You feel your chest tighten and you're tempted to retch, to empty your stomach on the earth. But that would be an insult too big, a mistake too costly. So you let the bile bubble in your stomach in protest,

holding it back with deep breaths so your lungs flatten your diaphragm. Deep breath so you know it's okay. Deep breaths so that when you swallow it all goes down.

Then, you finally take the bowl and raise it above your head. As your mother said, you must pay homage to your Ori. Then you stretch the bowl out in front of you. As her mother once said, you must pay homage to Orun. Then you place the bowl on soil and watch as it slowly sinks. With the ritual complete, flowering vines slowly crawl out of the earth, climbing up trees, a gradual bloom of blood-soaked reds and bruised purples. From the soil, you feel soft gurgling. It is approval.

You slowly stand and walk around where you had placed the bowl. Once. Twice. A third time, only stopping to nod in all four cardinal directions and the sky and the earth. All the directions where all troubles can arise. At the third time, the earth speaks impatiently, its mouth full.

You didn't forget did you?

You shake your head and pull out a small bottle of palm oil from your other pocket. Palm oil. Red, virile, a plant bleeding. Nature's balm or fat or essence. You empty the bottle, and watch it bubble as it makes contact with the earth. It reminds the soil that it once could bleed. It saves you from ever offering yourself.

Sated, the earth quiets and the wind stills. Then it speaks, its voice pouring out of the flower bells hanging off the tree vines.

You've done well. I will honour my promise to your mother and her mother before her. I will ensure continued bountiful harvests. I will fill your pockets with gold. Is there anything else your heart desires? Speak now, so all the ears you've opened can hear why you've awoken them.

You stand frozen in place for a moment, turning your next sentence over in your head. Then you slowly fall to one knee.

"I couldn't possibly ask for much more than what you've given me."

Somewhere far in the forest, a bush baby cackles. Then the earth responds, pleased.

You've served faithfully. It is only proper to ask for what your heart desires. I see you crave company. Would it be wrong to assume that you think providing a family for you is too much for me?

"I would not be foolish to even suggest such a thing."

So then speak. What do you want?

"I think I would want a family. That would be nice. But I fear it just might not be possible."

The wind yawns through the trees, pulling branches towards the earth, blocking out all sunlight.

Out with it. You're beginning to irritate me.

You sigh and bow your head. When you raise it, you're crying. Sometimes you have to say a hard thing.

“Return my love to me. I'll start a family with him.”

There's a deafening silence. Then suddenly, the flowers start to wither and the stalks start to silt, falling on the earth in clumps. The earth is quiet when it speaks again.

Are you mistaken?

You shake your head. The earth slowly starts to rumble.

You are foolish. You have worlds in your hands, power surging under your feet. And you call to me, your Ori and Orun to return what is lost to you? I will tell you for free. Curse and claim as you wish. But do not attempt to resurrect the dead. As something dies, so shall it be. Mourn. Or don't. But don't bore me.

The soil turns dark. In the distance, bat wings flutter. Next to you, a tree branch from overhead crashes into the ground. You've insulted the earth and it is politely asking you to take your leave. So you nod, bow, and retreat to your home. There you sit on the floor and listen to your friend's voice, now fading away from the walls, cooling as his body rots in the belly of the earth.

Sometimes you have to do a hard thing.

It is with this knowledge in mind that you return to the forest that night, under an empty sky, with a flaming torch in one hand and a keg of kerosene in the other.