

Within the poorly ventilated confines of the Iroko temple, the coppery smell of blood, faint notes of burning buildings - with hints of toasted flesh - and odors of the bodily variety tormented Tola. She sat on the cracked marble floors with her back leaning against the immense tree that stood at the dais. Taking in the sight of the townspeople of Lodun who were different variations of broken and injured strewn amongst the pillars and pews, Tola processed the events of the previous day that had coalesced into the most shambolic disaster that Lodun had ever seen.

It could've been worse. She thought to herself. *It could've been worse.*

She had only moved here last month to start life afresh and to open a third new perfume shop. The last two had been destroyed along with the towns she had lived in prior, but she had only opened this one up for business last week. last week! And now most of that fresh start at life was buried under the ass end of the corpse of a monster she had only heard about from her father's hunting tales. Tola had miraculously sustained no injury but felt the sting of her wounded pride.

Roots give me strength. Tola thought to herself.

Just then, the doors swung open on their one good hinge to let in Gino, arm in arm with his childhood friend and Co-village eviscerator Tyn, who carried with him a bulging travel sack. They wore on their faces smug grins that even managed to shine brighter than their gilded armor. If you asked anyone that hadn't been in Lodun yesterday, they would think that it was the Villagers who fought the monstrous Shigidi themselves while Tyn and Gino took generous naps in between polishing their gaudy armor. Tyn and Gino were known as heroes in the provinces of Gbokoro. Vanquishers of the Villainous, Destroyers of the Devious, Murderers of the Malicious, Tola however knew what they truly were... Fucking twats.

Their armor barely bore any signs of battle, their skin - the color of polished oak, a shade lighter than that of the Average citizen of Gbokoro - bore only superficial bruises and the odd scratch. Silence fell over the room like a blanket, with the moans of the wounded poking the occasional hole in its fabric. All Tola could hear was the grinding of her teeth as she watched the "Heroes" stand in the middle of the temple, appraising the results of their philanthropy. Tension wafted about the Hallowed Hall.

"Well?" Asked Tyn with a smirk on his face

The silence was broken by a clap- lonely and slow. Then another joined in, then another. Before Tola knew it, what was left of the village was clapping, cheering, hooting, and hollering. Even those made recent amputees tried to join in, it was pathetic. The heroes nodded as they basked

in the well-earned praise. Baba Koye - the Chief Iroko priest in Lodun - with skin sunbaked to the consistency of leather and dreadlocks as thick as the roots of the god he worshiped walked up to them and patted them on the back.

"NOOOO!!!!!" Someone screamed, it was until Tola saw all the eyes in the room turn in her direction - puzzled - that she knew that someone was her. She was breathing hard, standing with her fists clenched and her eyes wild till they finally focused on Gino and Tyns disgusted faces. "What is wrong with you people? Didn't you see what they did?" Tola beckoned

"Tola, abeg this is not the time ." Baba Koye pleaded, sounding more tired than annoyed "If you cannot remember, they saved us for Sap's sake."

"Saved us?" Tola asked incredulously before bursting into a fit of uncontrollable laughter eaten through by the rot of disdain. "Saved us? Tell me, how many buildings are still standing? In fact forget that. You can always rebuild buildings. Trust me, I know. But answer me this, how many people died because of their battle yesterday?"

Iya Rolake - a weaver and notorious gossip - burst into tears probably because she remembered that her husband - also a notorious gossip - was now in the afterlife most likely sticking his nose in places where it didn't belong.

"No, don't cry" Tola said sharply. "You don't get to cry, because I warned you this would happen. Didn't I?"

"I don't understand," Tyn said looking confused. "Are you an Oracle?"

"Don't listen to her." Baba Koye said as he tried to appeal to Tyn "She's nothing but a pesky perfume peddler unfamiliar with our ways. She has not even been here for the time a seedling to take root. I doubt she knows that you were both blessed by the Iroko since birth"

"Oh, I know that. Even deaf people in Gbokoro have heard it at this point" Tola interjected "Want to know something about me though? The reason I moved here? Surprise surprise, to anyone who didn't know. It's because **they** destroyed the last three towns I lived in, you bark-faced fuck."

Everyone in the temple took a collective gasp as muttering broke out amongst the crowd.

"I've been saying it for days. Every time those muscle-bound idiots appear in a town it's only a matter of time before it gets flattened. They attract disaster like shit does flies. Tell us, what did you fight yesterday?"

"It was a Shigidi," Gino replied without his usual confidence.

"A Shigidi! A Shigidi!! Those aren't even native to this region. Unless..." Tola climbed down from the dais, eyes focused, and made a mad grab for the bag that Tyn was holding.

"What are you doing?" Tyn asked.

"What's in the bag?" Tola asked knowing fully well what was in it.

"Umm, Weapons," Gino said stepping between Tyn and Tola "Godly weapons that will kill any mortal that dares to touch them"

The townsfolk ouu-ed and ahh-ed at this declaration- Idiots.

"It's okay, I brought gloves," Tola said as she pulled out her trusty enchanted leather gloves from the pouch sewn into her work trousers. These gloves were given to her by her father as a parting gift when she decided to strike out on her own, they still managed to smell the lavender oil she had been working with as of yesterday. She took in a hearty whiff of the remains of her work and consoled herself with the fact that her shop would probably be the best-smelling pile of debris out of the bunch.

Tyn swallowed as he looked to Gino for aid, who just shrugged resignedly.

"G-G-Gloves will do little in the way of saving you from the runes carved w-"

Tola snatched the bag from Tyn, cutting him off, and proceeded to rummage inside it for a while, after a few tense seconds of silence she came up with an egg the size of a head.

"Aha" Tola exclaimed victoriously "This is the Egg of a Shigidi, they stole it and led its mother here. "

The town's people gasped yet again, but this time it didn't seem to annoy Tola so much.

"So you're saying that everywhere you move to, gets destroyed?" Mokun the baker asked.

"Yes, exactly. By them!" Tola replied, "Finally, you guys are getting it."

Tola was beginning to think that maybe she had judged the townspeople a little too harshly. The smallfolk might not be as well-traveled as her or well-read or well-bathed for that matter, but that was no reason to-

"So it's you, you're the cause of all this!" Iya Rolake blurted out with spittle hanging off her lip, a wildness in her cataract-addled eye, and a crooked finger pointing directly at Tola.

"Eh?" Tola couldn't even form words as they came out stilted mostly due to the disbelief. "I-I told you, they stole a Shigidi Egg and -"

"We know it was you." Tola didn't even know where the accusation originated from in the hall. "I knew she smelled too nice not to be a witch" said another voice from the recesses of the room. Instantly, the crowd that was previously stupid and docile was now a more dangerous combination, stupid and angry. Finally, they had a target for the reason of their recent misfortune, and they would probably let her know how unhappy they were with the help of a few sticks, a couple of stones, and the language of excruciating pain spoken fluently by the licking tongues of a raging fire. Gino and Tyn however couldn't be smiling wider even if they split their cheeks open.

Tola stepped back, scared of what might happen. Panic leaked through her every pore, she had only one thought, *Survive!*

Tola raised the Shigidi Egg above her head. "Everyone stop where you are, or I'll break this and every Shigidi this side of Gbokoro will come down on us all."

Tyn and Gino looked like she had just threatened to kill their child. Good. Tola had counted on that, although they were Root forsaken halfwits, they had to be cognizant of the fact that a broken Shigidi egg spelled nothing but disaster. Tola's father had once told her it was the scent of the dead offspring that drove them into a frenzy. The entire pack of them up in the mountains would come down on Lodun, baring; acid saliva dripping from their maws ready to liquefy flesh and bone; Shimmering scales ready to deflect blade and arrow; razor sharp beaks ready to rip and rend; and dangerous looking claws attached to six muscular limbs ready to tear and trample. Killing one Shigidi was a difficult but somewhat possible task but no matter how blessed of the Iroko you might be, fighting a pack of almost certainly meant death. Chalk that up to the power of smell.

"Listen to what she says," Tyn said with his palms outstretched as a sign of surrender. "What do you want ...witch?"

"I just want to leave here unharmed," Tola said, her mouth dry and sweat escaping every pore available.

"Done." said Gino "Just give us the egg."

"No, I'll place it at the entrance to the town," Tola said assertively. "And if anyone follows me," She paused for effect "you know what happens."

Tola made her way out of what little was left of the temple, to what little was left of her house, to pack up what little was left of her belongings. A few fires were still left smoldering as she bobbed and weaved through the debris. Holding her nose, she tried to evade the eye-watering reek of acidic ichor leaking into a gathering pool below the slit belly of the Gargantuan full-grown Female Shigidi which had unfortunately chosen to die on half of her shop. Luckily, that was the unimportant half. Unluckily, Tola still had to wade through steaming tangled guts - each strand with the thickness of a man's thigh - to get to her belongings. She packed her father's sword, a few jars of her favorite fragrances; the charred remains of her recipe books, and a reasonable ration of food for the journey. Avoiding getting crushed by buildings and an involuntary cremation, only to starve in the wilderness, was an abysmal waste of a fifth-second chance at life.

When she got to the town gate, just as she bent down to carefully place the egg on the ash-covered earth, the Egg shook gently in her hands.

Did I imagine that? Tola thought to herself as she inspected the egg.

All of a sudden, a crack appeared in the facade of the shell and spawned others like it. Tap tap tap, something was trying to get out. In an instant a spearlike head with translucent grey flesh and a cluster of five indigo eyes that fanned out like flower petals burst forth from the Egg beak first.

"Shit! " Tola screamed as she dropped the Egg, shattering the rest of it to pieces and freeing the freshly hatched Shigidi. All was frozen for a moment as Tola eyed the strange creature with Skin so translucent that she could see its internal organs. It had a too-big head held up by a lithe neck; sharp-looking claws on its six stringy legs; and frills that lined its back.

Tola had two choices, use her father's sword to decapitate the beast or run without sparing so much as a glance back at Lodun. Both options were enticing in their own way. But as she pondered the Shigidi Cub let out a shrill wail.

"Nonononono" Tola pleaded as she rushed towards it fishing around in her travel sack to hand it a piece of dried beef from her rations as a sort of offering. The Shigidi stopped screaming its head off and began to sniff around her hand as if to ascertain what exactly it was being offered. *Don't eat my hand, don't eat my hand.*

In a flash, the beef was gone, and Tola's hand remained. The Shigidi chewed thankfully, Swallowed, and made a sound that was the cross of a cat's purr and a bird's trill. Tola watched in fascination as the Shigidi put its head to her outstretched palm. What was even crazier was that she was petting the damn thing.

I was going to murder you, you know? Tola thought to herself

The shigidi stopped chewing and looked Tola in the eyes with all five of its own. Tola froze, had she done something wrong?

You no kill me, you nice. The thought that wasn't Tola's echoed through her mind, tiny and cloying. Tola felt her perception of the world widen. Sounds were sharper, smells were stronger, and she could damn near taste the air. She was experiencing the world through the Shigidi Via a soul bond. Her Dad would be laughing up a storm if he could see her now.

More meat. thought the Shigidi

Tola let out a sigh as she dug around for more meat strips, as she considered what a bother severing this soul bond would be. She hoped gaining some distance from the Shigidi would cause the connection would fray and eventually die. So, She put the meat strips next to the Shigidi and started to walk away as it feasted. She wasn't far before it loped after her, tongue lolling.

"No, stay." She commanded.

Yes, no stay! The Shigidi projected back

The animal cocked it's head, playful and cute. It looked like a puppy... that could eat other puppies. Tyn and Gino would probably kill it or it would call down more of its Kin to raze what

was left of the village to the ground. With a soul bond active, that all seemed like it would be rather bleak and unpleasant. She would probably feel its pain, despair, and betrayal up until its final moments. So Tola - like always- made a quick decision. She would take the Shigidi along with her until she could think of a better solution that didn't involve possible needless deaths. *Papa was right, I'm too soft for my own good.* Tola thought in resignation *What's your name?*

Name? What name?

It's like what you are called. Your essence.

Bafiweubgrib.

...

...

I'll just call you Lavender.

Works.

"Come on Lavender, let's go," Tola said reluctantly.

So the girl and her Shigidi made their way back home through the lands of Gbokoro. Putting the coppery smell of blood, faint notes of burning buildings with hints of toasted flesh, and odors of the bodily variety behind them.