

The Weeds of the Past
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The Great Johamed scabbled under a low bush, digging at the roots until he came up with a large bulb. Shaking the dirt from his prize, he tossed it to Rakoto. Rakoto caught it and placed it in the large bag hanging from his shoulder.

The bag was heavy, but Rakoto still had to carry it because it was his job to carry for the Great Johamed. To fetch for the Great Johamed. To empty the gourd the Great Johamed kept next to his bed. To cook. To clean. To do what he was told.

In exchange, the Great Johamed would give Rakoto knowledge. He would teach Rakoto about the plants and animals, about their spirits and how they could be used to help and heal. He would also learn about poisons, or so he suspected. The Great Johamed never addressed the subject directly and always deflected questions on the matter.

"That is the root of the Tum Tum tree," said the Great Johamed. "It brings sleep to those who have a wounded spirit. It heals the mind and quiets the small demons that harbor in the hearts of those who have been long sad."

Rakoto nodded. He had seen it used on Mama Kodumba when she had lost her husband to a great beast in one of the hunts. Her heart had been wounded by the beast's spirit, or so the Great Johamed had said. She had lost the will to live and was unable to care for her children.

The Great Johamed had given her the last of his dried Tum Tum root, a bit at a time over the course of two months. With the passage of time she had returned to herself, and the spirit of the beast had been driven out. Rakoto had been assigned to the nightly drum rituals to drive out the beast and, after much time, the root and drum had prevailed.

Mama Kodumba was again tending to her children and cooking the wonderful meals for which she had been famous. Rakoto had entertained some concern that the fat those meals had put on Mama Kodumba's husband may have prevented him from escaping the beast that slew him, but he knew better than to speak of such things. The Great Johamed was the one to speak. It was Rakoto's job to listen and learn.

Rakoto didn't remember his parents. They had sent him away to live with his grandmother during an uprising against the French and had promised to join him when the dust settled. They never came. Ever since his parents sent him away, Rakoto had been the home of hatred and malice towards the French, refusing even to be in the same room with the occasional travelers that came to the Great Johamed in search of medical help.

When he was 14, his grandmother had grown ill, and he had been sent to visit a medicine man know as the Great Johamed in order to procure a remedy for her fiery volcano fever and earthquake vomit. Over the next month of treatments, the two men had grown close and shared a bond. When the sickness had finally dragged his grandmother up into the heavens to be with all the other spirits, the Great Johamed had offered Rakoto an opportunity to become his pupil and learn the ways of the medicine men. Naturally, the offer was too good to refuse and as the Great Johamed says, "Plenty sits still; hunger is a wanderer."

Now the Great Johamed was looking at a plant that was unfamiliar to Rakoto. Perhaps it was unfamiliar to the Great Johamed as well. The Great Johamed walked around the plant one way and then the other. He looked it up from root to tip, and down from tip to root. He then sat before the plant and held out his hand.

Rakoto untied the small bag from his belt and handed it to the Great Johamed. The Great Johamed opened the bag and withdrew a pinch of smoke weed. He dug a small hole at the base

of the plant he was studying and buried the bit of weed. Tossing the bag back to Rakoto, the Great Johamed began to chant.

Rakoto sat down next to his master and joined in the chant. As he had been taught, he visualized the plant as a seed, falling from the sky and coming to earth in this place. He imagined it growing, putting forth root and leaf and over time coming to be the plant before them.

The Great Johamed got up and cut several branches of leaves from the plant. He dug at the base of the plant and brought forth some of the roots. All of these he wrapped carefully in his prayer shawl and cradled them as they walked back to the village.

When they arrived, Rakoto went to work preparing all of the things they had collected for drying and storing. When everything was cleaned and arranged on the drying racks, he went in search of his master.

The Great Johamed was sitting by a small fire in front of their hut. He had a clay vessel heating in the coals, and Rakoto could see some of the leaves from the unknown plant soaking in the hot water.

"Sit, Rakoto," said the Great Johamed. "It is time for the next step in your initiation. I understand that your family was destroyed by the French, and you keep a great evil deep inside your heart. But in order to become a fully realized ombiasy, you must understand that you can't influence what happened in the past and must leave it there. Never forget your parents, but accept their death and understand that there is no real justification for bias, just sadness. In reality the Malagasy had a role to play in the fighting as well. Your duty as ombiasy is to provide the village's people with protection from trickery of evil spirits, disease, and to be the bridge between our world and the spirit world. In other words, your job is to give life, which is ineffective if you hate a very important part of it."

Rakoto sat. The Great Johamed used some wooden tongs to remove the hot clay pot from the coals. He poured off a small portion into a little bowl. He held it up, allowing the vapors to enter his nose. He put in a finger and brought one tiny drop to his tongue. This he spit out. He offered the bowl to Rakoto.

Rakoto also let the vapors enter into his nose. He touched the brew with one finger, and touched it to his tongue. He did not spit it out, but let it rest there. He waited, holding the warm bowl in his hands.

The Great Johamed watched and waited with him. Then he took up his rattle and began to shake the rattle first to the left of Rakoto and then to the right. Rakoto drank from the bowl. He waited, watching the fire and listening to the sound of the rattle.

Brighter and brighter grew the light of the fire. The sound of the rattle grew crisp and seemed to take on a strange color. The light of the fire then filled his eyes. The rattle went through his head. There was a sudden pain in his chest, and then there was darkness and silence.

Miora lay half-hidden, cautiously peering out over the top of the burned sand. All around her were bodies, decomposing where they lay. Flies buzzed about the still forms and an occasional spider scurried across them, although mostly the spiders stayed out of sight, mindful of the crows that hopped from body to body, pecking away at the remains.

The sky was a bright blue and the sun was shining, clouds were scattered lethargically in

a haze of dull, dreamy blue. The rich smell of mangos, mixed with the salty taste of the sea, created a peaceful aroma. If it hadn't been for the carnage surrounding her, it could have passed for an ordinary day. Miora had a feeling there wouldn't ever be any more ordinary days.

She shivered a little as a slight breeze stirred across the clearing. Seven days ago she couldn't have imagined any of this. It was spring and emerging everywhere were signs of new life, Little Bittern birds making nests, their puffy-white necks twitching from side-to-side, newborn lemurs peeking cautiously from the top of palm trees just a few hundred yards away from the sandy clearing, and butterflies flitting from flower to flower.

Miora and her friends had been basking in the sun as they weaved water-baskets from kalanchoe leaves, chit-chatting about their husbands, the uprisings, and how everyone's children were doing in school. None of them had an inkling of what was to come.

Only Elder Tojofitiavana had a premonition, warning them to be careful.

Elder Tojofitiavana was a lot older than the rest of them. Miora wasn't sure exactly how old, but he was very old. Miora knew that. Tojofitiavana was also the most pessimistic in the village. He was constantly warning them about disasters lurking just around the corner, saying the French were going to kill everyone.

We were fools, Miora thought bitterly. We should have listened to him. But they hadn't. Tojofitiavana didn't talk a lot and everything he said was negative. "Watch out for this. Be careful of that." But nothing he had warned them about previously had come true, so they became convinced that he wasn't worth listening to; just a crazy old man.

"If it rains out of a clear sky at night," Tojofitiavana had said a few days before the slaughter, "bad things are going to happen."

Miora and the rest of the village had laughed at this because it rained plenty of times during the day when there were no clouds, just blue skies and sunshine. Why would it make any difference if it rained at night? It was pretty obvious that old man Tojofitiavana wasn't right in his head.

Then, seven nights ago, it had rained, out of a clear sky. Miora could see the stars and the moon shining so brightly they looked like you could just reach out and touch them. She felt a little uneasy then, but she wasn't really worried. Everyone knew old man Tojofitiavana was crazy.

When the next morning had arrived, everything was still wet from the night's rain. Miora and her friends were just hanging out, like they always did when the chores were done, children were at school, and the men were off working at the fields. When the attack came, it was so sudden that they were all caught off-guard. A shadow passed over them, and Miora didn't even have time to look up. One moment her fellow wives were there, and the next they were laying crumpled up in the field, dead. Just like that. Miora didn't know how she had survived. Maybe it had something to do with her size. She was smaller than the rest of the well-fed wives. Maybe she hadn't been seen.

It hadn't done Elder Tojofitiavana any good to be suspicious either. Miora could see him laying a short ways away, unmoving and starting to turn a sickly grey as the heat left his body.

As Miora looked around, she could feel the anger welling up in her. Not everybody had been killed, mostly just Miora and her people. There were plenty of French colonists around who hadn't even been touched, still living, not caring what had happened to Miora or the others. She had puzzled over it the past seven days and concluded that it was some cruel, sadistic form of

ethnic cleansing of her people. It seemed as if the French had seen an opportunity to get all the land for themselves, which had probably been their original goal when they first settled on the island that had been thought uninhabited.

Ten or fifteen yards away she could see the bodies piled up. It was the birds that bothered her the most. They hopped all over, pecking at the pile, pulling at the bodies, occasionally lifting a corner so you could see the whitish-green color of the decaying flesh underneath. And that's when the smell hit you too - the smell of death, accelerated by the moisture and growing heat.

Immediately Miora got up and hurried to her small hut. Her husband and child had just arrived, waiting anxiously for her arrival. After the wave of relief had receded, Miora told her husband of the bombing and asked if he knew what and why the act had taken place. He detailed the story of how he overheard his French supervisors talking while he was loading spices onto a cargo ship. It turns out that nearly the entire native Malagasy population in the south were gathering in a massive, last-ditch effort to remove the French colonists from destroying their land and their culture.

The land had originally been given to her ancestors by the spirits who first brought them here. When the French had first arrived and claimed the land and all of its residences as their property, there had been malcontent, but the separate tribes had no means of defeating the massive forces and surrendered. At first the colonists treated everyone as equals...as long as they went to French churches, spoke the French language, followed French customs, and most importantly, paid French taxes.

It only went downhill from there. Children were forced to attend French schools and learn to be more "civilized." People began suffering from the steeply expensive taxes that were collected with the threat of prison or death. In order to pay these fees, nearly all of the men were forced to work as unofficial slaves fishing or working in the exporting of rare plants and animals at below minimum earnings. The degeneration in wealth yielded weak crops and provoked massive starvation for everyone, minus the French. The rivaling tribes, who had been at war for hundreds of years previously were now forced to live in rotting shacks next to each other in divided territories. The people couldn't stand it and many street conflicts broke out, which resulted in an increase of French beatings and cruel laws. Countless numbers of innocent women and children were locked away in prisons, never to be seen again.

Miora's husband came to the decision to send their son, Rakoto, with the rest of the refugees to the northern part of the continent to live with her mother until it was safe. As for her husband, he was adamant on joining the resistance and despite Miora's pleading, left her to join the others, marching towards his death for what he believed was right.

Miora also decided to stay and watch over their hut. Both her mother and herself had grown up in it and she just couldn't stand losing those precious memories, no matter the cost. As the days passed, no new news had come and she'd convinced herself that nothing else bad was going to happen. She was hoping that she and her husband had been spared.

But last night it had rained again. Stars shining, moon out. She hadn't slept at all. She just kept hearing old man Tojofitiavana's voice: "Bad things are going to happen." Miora hunkered down and tried to make herself invisible in her family's now empty hut.

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Chloé Jorgenson stepped gingerly off her porch, holding her gardening basket in one hand and her wide-brimmed hat in the other. She had just finished eating her breakfast: as always, one coconut, one mango, and two bananas.

The pitiful uprisings of late had been annoying to say the least. Why couldn't these people see that we are here to stay? Today the sky was a clear blue, but the ground was still damp from the night's rain. She moved slowly. You couldn't be too careful when you were 63 and a little unsteady. Her friend Louisa had fallen and broken her hip over a year before and was still using a bamboo crutch that a pitiful local medicine man had fashioned for her. Chloé didn't want anything like that to happen to her. No, you couldn't be too careful at her age.

She shuffled along the path towards the garden. The grass on either side of the path was starting to get high. It would need to be cut soon. Chloé didn't like it when things got all wild looking. It was a matter of pride. She liked keeping the old place up. Everybody knew that Chloé Jorgenson was the best gardener on the colony, and she intended to keep it that way.

When she was nearly to the garden, a shadow suddenly passed overhead and she looked up, startled. It was only a cloud passing over the sun, but since her eyesight had started to fail she'd been feeling a lot more vulnerable. I'm getting skittish as an old goat, she thought ruefully, no thanks to those blasted uprisings.

She made a last turn on the path and the garden came into view. She loved the garden. Sometimes she thought if she didn't have it to keep her busy, she would just dry up and blow away. However, the recent bombings have been destroying her beautiful flowers that she'd worked so hard to cultivate and blossom.

As she passed along the rows, she let her hands trail across the corn. She liked the feel of it on her fingers, and she knew her fingers were still strong. Probably from all the work I do out here, she thought. She noted with satisfaction that the yams were growing well, as was the carvasa. Chloé liked a garden with color. Some people didn't believe it, but she thought having color in a garden made everything grow better. She bent and put her garden basket on the ground, put her wide-brimmed hat on, and fastened it under her chin. It was going to be another hot one today.

Another shadow fell over Chloé Jorgenson, but she didn't look up this time. Silly old woman, she thought, smiling to herself. Afraid of clouds.

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A shadow fell over Miora . Terror ran through her body like a hot knife. This was it! She wanted to scream but no sound came out. Her mind screamed at her to run, but she just stood rooted to the spot.

Chloé Jorgenson looked fondly around her garden. She loved all the growing things in it, all the new life. The corn, lettuce, carrots, she loved it all. She looked down and grimaced a little. Well, maybe not everything, she thought as she turned towards her accomplices and pointed towards Miora. The guards behind her proceeded to rush into the house, guns barreling. A plea for mercy and kindness shrieked out of the little shack, followed by silence. Weeds, she didn't like weeds.

Slowly the light came back to Rakoto. Rather than rattles his ears picked up the sound of a small bell occasionally struck. He opened his eyes and could just make out the shape of his

master above him. Rakoto realized he was lying on his sleeping mat, and tried to rise.

The Great Johamed pushed him back down. "Rest. You have been four days in the spirit realm. Fever and sweat and strange words from your tongue. Four days. When you are strong again, you will tell me of your journey."

Rakoto expected his head to hurt, but it felt remarkably clear. His body felt worn, as if he had worked long and hard and then run many miles. As he lay there he began to think again about his decision to bind himself to the Great Johamed.

With the Great Johamed, he had plenty of food. The village provided well for the medicine man, and Rakoto shared in that bounty. He enjoyed the learning and mastering knowledge that was held by only a few.

He would rest. While he rested, he would try to recall the now vanishing memories of his journey to the spirit realm. Right now he only remembered pain and darkness, but he was sure the truth of the journey would come to him as he rested.

The little bell tolled by his ear. "I will name the new plant for you, Rakoto," said the Great Johamed. "You wrestled with demons while the plant held you in darkness. Reach back. Remember. Find the names of the demons, accept that they happened and let them go. You will one day be the Great Rakoto."

Rakoto hovered on the edge of sleep. He could now see the demons in his mind. He could remember the battle. Yes. It would be a mighty tale to tell when he woke again.

Somewhere a bell rang softly in the distance.