

The Gourd of Mwari

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I am Tsangurai, one of the last remaining here on this land. Upenyu has left my people behind, I suppose to seek fresh spirits of the young to guide through life, souls that wait, like seeds, forpollen from Mwari to make them bloom into being. The village heads say we are old. We bloomed before, having lived here, among the ancestors, since the very first season. Yet we left behind the protection of those who have come before, under the leadership of the village's chief priest, Mabvuure. He tried to save us, but he did not reckon on the forces from beyond, surpassing our control. And so the circle of eternity began to spin away, trying to carry us along. But I didn't think we should stand by and let it happen.

The spirit danced because it was free.

It pulsed rhythmically, an unseen kinetic force masking wild laughter easily mistaken for the clip of a newly fallen leaf or the fierce whisper of a light breeze and just as soon forgotten. A rock, spinning on the brink of chaos, held in place by the divine—a strategic molecular pull—held the spirit, the kernel of it.

Against the billion tiny rock crystals that spread onto forever sat Mabvuure, rigid, his gaunt body covered in lean muscle, his skin reflecting like polished onyx. He sat cross-legged on the sand, bony pointer legs protruding at angles like wild gestures of exclamation. Everyone knew the chief priest was waiting for *upenyu*, the life spirit, to come and lead them from disaster. As the oldest, he was the only one who could summon the life-force at will. Yet even the life spirit was known to breeze through at times, summoned merely by a child's listless tap on a makeshift drum or the hum of a popular washing tune by a woman at the sea.

The white foam atop the water seeped closer with the tide, initially licking Mabvuure's ancient toes, then lathering his ankles. Soon the thin old man would be swept away. Even so, no one urged Mabvuure return to the makeshift homestead on the sand over which he presided. After all, there had been no new food gathered for months, ever since he had led them to the edge of the land, where every day they could see the sun extinguished by the ceaseless water from Mwari's gourd. Their stomachs churned incessantly, tiny lumps of seaweed and salt sitting in their bellies, meat being a reluctantly forgotten luxury.

Tsangurai, of the thick head, ran to Mabvuure as the water reached the ancient leader's chest. The other young men shouted for him to return to their game of play hunting. But Tsangurai felt that if there was no food, what hunt was there to imitate? Why let Mabvuure

be swallowed by the sea? He rested his muscular arm on the elder's shoulder, intending to hoist him on his young, strong back. But Tsangurai was forced to relax his grip; the older one's arm felt like over-baked clay—too brittle. Suddenly feeling the village head slip away, he tried again to pull, stopping when he felt a hard smack against his leg. The young man fell into the foamy water, holding his stinging limb, baring his teeth in an ugly grin. Tsangurai looked around wildly wondering which of his laughing agemates betrayed him, but his eyes popped when he saw the old man's arm, attached to a stick, settling beneath the gentle waves. Mabvuure refused to look at him, only at the unending ocean. Tsangurai knew that he had been given a warning and a reassurance: Mabvuure must talk to the spirit.

We're going on a journey to the edge of the world, Tsangurai.

Why do we want to go there?

Things are changing; when is the last time a trader has come by our homestead to exchange his wares?

Many nights have passed, sekuru Mabvuure.

Something has happened to them. I don't believe traders will be by again. Even the animals are disappearing.

What is at the edge of the world?

The endless gourd of Mwari, filled with all the food we can eat.

No more leaves and dried up meat?

No more.

Why do you look sad, sekuru Mabvuure? We're coming back home, right?

I don't know.

As the sky shifted its place again, the surging waves swept Mabvuure into the sea.

Cries rang out in the air from all the women, who immediately fell to the sand, writhing with grief. The village heads beat the *ngomo*, summoning all those out scouting for food, playing, and gathering water to come in. Slowly, everyone headed to the central compound, frightened. Mabvuure had led them to the sea, now they wondered who would lead them back to land of the ancestors. Young women, their bellies full with children, held their stomachs protectively, wanting the shield of those who have come before. The elders announced they would have council and consult the oracle, letting everyone know what would happen.

Tsangurai, who had been sulking down the coast a little ways, came running up.

"I hope you don't plan to leave Mabvuure in the sea!" Tsangurai said.

There was shocked silence: How could the young man be so brazen?

"We can not leave Mabvuure in the sea!" Tsangurai said.

The men began to turn away, casting solemn eyes upon the boy as they turned their back to him and the rest, heading down the coast.

Several of the boys ran up to Tsangurai and grabbed him, wrestling him to the ground, then dragging him to the sea.

They surrounded him in a semi-circle, making the water Tsangurai's only escape.

Osiri spoke first. "If you want the old man, go join him!"

Tsangurai sat, silently fuming.

"We all know you were the favorite, chosen to learn his magic," said Osiri. "You think you're better than us. But you're not even from this tribe. Mabvuure found you like a rodent, tangled in the bush, and took you in."

The boys stood together, their faces stern, clenched fists waiting to pummel Tsangurai if he should make a move.

Finally, Tsangurai spoke. "So, is this, Osiri my *shamwari* since the earliest footsteps on this world? If I remember, Mabvuure chose you to learn the magic."

It was an obligation; Osiri was the son of Mutembo, one of the most respected men in the village with four wives and many heads of cattle. This was before he was forced to share them with the village when the traders and visitors from neighboring clans stopped coming by. It had taken a while for all the flow of social activity to stop. But one day, when the village of Masembura held its seasonal festival of the new harvest a time to bring out all the pumpkins and kola nuts they had harvested so they could trade with neighbors, no one came, save for a woman, her *zvrukwi* flying about her head like lightening bolts, screaming about ghosts. The women had carried her to Farai's hut, eldest wife of Mutembo, and placed ash on her head. They called Mabvuure, who asked they all leave the hut. When he came out, the woman, later named Farai, had calmed down, but would not let go of Mabvuure's *raffia* skirt. He looked grave, and immediately called the village heads together. Word spread that they should save up all the dried meat, store and put away as much as possible.

And then, as if a wind swept them away, all their neighbors stopped coming by, drying up the trade in jewelry for the women, cloths from the weavers, and the meat as well. They had heard a group of ghosts was heading inland, to take over the ancestral lands and wage war upon the spirits. They sent out scouts, who returned with the news that neighboring Muzengi had been deserted and that further on, they saw smoke rising in the distance, but it was too far to traverse with the supplies they had. In the fifth moon of hunger, Mabvuure had consulted the oracle, announcing that they were going to migrate to the edge of the world, to a place he had seen as a young man. Everyone was nervous, but they were also assured, Mabvuure being the oldest and knowing a lot, giving validity to his claim that Mwari's gourd existed at the edge of the world filled with all the food they could eat. They also hoped to

find what had happened to their neighbors. The whole village had to make the trek, for it was no telling how long until the food would run completely out and how long until new food or people would come again.

Now they had been living by the sea for months, off of seaweed, almost as if they were the last people in the world. This morning Mabvuure woke up, consulted the oracle and offered himself to Mwari on behalf of his people. He had openly embraced Osiri and taught Osiri the secrets of chief priest, but the eldest son of Mutembo always felt jealous over the affection Mabvuure showed for Tsangurai, who was found, abandoned. Osiri would look with envious eyes at the way he would take him off alone and show the latter steps to becoming a man. The elders used to cluck there tongues, worried that Mabvuure was embracing this outsider and causing trouble in the village. But Mabvuure was fiercely protective of Tsangurai, who had become a son to him, as his wife had been unable to bear children. This was a constant source of embarrassment for Mabvuure, as having children was considered a good omen and the spiritual head of the clan traditionally had a large brood.

Mabvuure did all he could to make sure Tsangurai was accepted. The boy was even accorded special treatment by everyone who hoped they could get a favor from Mabvuure. Most generally liked Tsangurai also, for he was fair and helpful, usually trying to help the women in the house instead of playing with the boys. The women would always shoo him away. If Mabvuure came by, he would laugh, teasing the women, "would it not be a good husband that can help you around the cooking pot?"

The women would laugh, exclaiming Mabvuure was too much.

But now, there was no more Mabvuure and as Tsangurai sat, surrounded by his age-mates, he felt extremely cold. He would find Farai, Mabvuure's wife from the village, as she was his only family. He wouldn't count on the people to stand behind him now that Osiri had declared war.

On a different day, beneath the same moon that witnessed Mabvuure's soul surrender to the life spirit, the people witnessed the magic of *upenyu*. Among the flat aroma of stale millet beer and boiled seaweed, came the musty odor of fish. As everyone ceased their activity and stared at the sea, droves of fish washed up along the shore. The pale, translucent sea-life glittered all the colors of the rainbow in the first sunshine since the famine. Ululations from the women, like laughing cascading bells, rang in the air, as everyone—children, their parents, and the parents of those ones—waddled into the water, gathering in the newly found salvation. Ashy gray smoke mixed with the sea spray as the first fires lit up, and the fish continued to come.

After all that could be gathered in one day was collected, the people grouped them-

selves around small fires. Animated discussions, singing and hand plucked melodies from the *mbira*, floated above the crescendo of night's tide. Around one fire pit, the *vanaambuya* told stories to the captivated, round eyes of the young. Young girls danced and sang while serving the others and helping their mothers. All were aware that a slight distance away sat the eldest men, *sekuru*, huddled around a fire, younger fathers encircling them at a respectful distance. Their voices were hushed whispers, unusual for they loved to join in with the old women's stories and often accompanied the singing of the young women in atonal harmony. Bellies were full, but misgiving was in the air.

Baba Moyo, known for his quiet ways, surprised the men by speaking up.

"Ahem!" he said.

"Baba Moyo you wish to address me?" This was Madhlayo, brother to Mabvuure and the eldest in the homestead.

"Yes." He clapped his cupped hands, fingertips touching out of respect.

"Speak, then. Remember that I am we, and the ancestors can hear your heart."

"Yes...I wish to object to what we are doing."

Mumbles rose from the group.

"And what is that?" Madhlayo said.

"Denigrating the spirit of Mabvuure."

Everyone was aware of the village head meeting, but they ate, oblivious. If some bad news was in the offing, they could at least answer their crying bellies for the moment.

Tsangurai queried his peers if it was right they should eat when Mabvuure was not there. Osiri answered that did not his neglected stomach give him the answer? But the young man persisted, and soon the question was circulating the entire homestead.

Arguments arose with much arm flailing and wailing, and the wisdom of the village heads, who decided the village should offer the fish back into the sea in exchange for Mabvuure's spirit, since he was the one who guided them to this spot to silence their talking stomachs, and it was his spirit who had to lead them back. But, Osiri argues, if there was no village left to lead back to the ancestral lands, then what good was a guide? But the elders had consulted the oracle, and there was no turning back now, they had to follow through with the return of the sea treasure.

All the fish were given back to the sea, except one that was tucked into the waist skirt of Osiri. But a girl, Chipso, saw him, and called him out. The shame of being exposed by a girl, made him throw the fish back finally, with disgust. They waited amidst the returned odor of stale beer and seaweed. Nothing.

The famine was worse than ever. Even the seaweed had seemed to take off for better,

unmolested parts. Some wanted to complain, but they were silenced by those who felt even a word against their action would taint it and render it invalid. But one day, Madhlayo, Mabvuure's brother, went to the hut of Tsangurai who had taken Farai for his own wife and asked him to lead them home.

"I'm sorry sekuru Madhlayo, but how?"

"Consult the oracle."

"Isn't that Osiri's place?"

"We have been having him try but to no avail. Do you think you can do it?"

Tsangurai heeded the odd request, standing at the edge of the sand, the waves lapping over his feet. He sat cross-legged, much like Mabvuure many months before. He closed his eyes and tried to remember the lessons of Mabvuure.

We have to be able to change if we are to continue on.

Sekuru?

We must be able to adapt to change or the wheel of eternity will sweep us away.

What can we do?

Fight. Resist.

Against what?

Against the ghosts that will try and take our spirits away.

I'm scared.

When you're scared, consult upenyu. Understanding life will give you peace.

Is this what I will learn when I go off with the others to become a man?

No, this is different. Close your eyes.

My eyes are closed.

Expand your mind until it leaves your head and merges with the wind. Can you see it?

Yes, it's incredible.

Let the light touch your mind and you will see.

It hurts.

That's because you resist it. Let it flow.

But there is a darkness, in the center of the light. I feel drawn towards it.

Let that go. That is our destruction, the forces against our light, our upenyu. You must let your mind traverse across a path that reduces the darkness to the tiniest speck.

Try it.

Okay, here I go.

Tsangurai walked to the homestead. As he passed, everyone began to move more

slowly, staring. The young ones followed after him, running and pointing.

"He's glowing!" they yelled.

Tsangurai walked to Madhlayo's hut and told him what had been revealed to him.

"We have to go," Tsangurai said when he was finished.

"Okay, let's call a meeting of the elders."

"Okay, but we have to hurry. The ghosts are coming our way."

That got the old man moving. He called a meeting, beating the ngomo, and let Tsangurai speak.

"We have two choices," Tsangurai announced to the village gathering. We can stay and fight the ghosts, or we can run but to where, I don't know since you know as I do, that our neighbors Muzengi and Gokwe have been abandoned.

The crowd's mumblings sounded like thunder.

Osiri stood up and spoke: "We have never fought anyone before. Our neighbors have always came to us bearing palm wine. What are these ghosts that we must make war with? I say, Tsangurai is mad, just like his father, who threw himself into the ocean and abandoned us here, far from our ancestors home!"

Many in the crowd rumbled in assent.

Chipo, an elder woman, spoke up: "Since when do children lead us? What are we going to do?"

This last question was directed to the elders, who stood behind Tsangurai.

Madhlayo spoke, "As the eldest now that my brother has passed, I am the closest out of all to the ancestors. Our foreparents have put trust in Tsangurai as he is now the Chief Priest of our clan."

Several shocked cries arose. Osiri pushed his way to the front of the group.

"But I was the principle disciple of Mabvuure! How can he lay claim to what is mine? Do not forget, that I too have power."

The noise was deafening, the people in uproar. Mabvuure's brother tried to calm things down: "Osiri, sometimes we must put aside our pride for the good of all."

Osiri tore away from the crowd, threatening to rise again with magic, then ran, disappearing down the beach.

Tsangurai fought down the urge to chase his old friend, and stood staring into the waves, looking for light.

I tried preparing my people to fight, but how can we conquer the ghosts that have arisen from the sea?

Tsangurai walked around the homestead, supervising groups of men, young and old, who were fastening bows, and bundling bamboo from there houses to carry on top of their

heads. The women were packing the dried fish for the journey and they, too, were armed with metal spears and daggers. No one was nervous; instead, they were determined. Everyone had seen the huge ships heading toward them in the distance. They didn't know what they were, but they knew they were trouble. They had to move.

Once everyone was bundled with what they had to carry, the village began to move forward. Tsangurai walked in front of everyone, but he was nervous. He had tried to consult with *upenyu* for several days now, but all he saw was darkness. He could not figure out what was wrong; he felt he was fulfilling Mabvuure's legacy—to resist at all costs. But his heart was heavy. He felt they were moving too slowly.

"We have to move faster," he said to Madhlayo.

"You forget what a weighted load you have—old men, old women, babies along with the young women, all of our supplies and now these weapons you had us make. It's a wonder no one passes out."

Tsangurai wanted to confess to Madhlayo that he felt it was too late. But then there was no time for that, for in the distance stood a long line of dark faces. The bare chested men were armed, standing with these machines that glinted in the sunlight. Some thought it was mirage. Others in Tsangurai's village thought they were neighbors and let out cries of triumph, as they would finally be seeing new people and faces. But exultation turned to near panic as Tsangurai ordered everyone to stop. He walked toward the long line of back faces and as he did, he saw them split apart at the center, making way for someone, who stood before the naked men, dressed in brightly colored pants and overcoat with sword at his side, his kinky natural hair hidden beneath a tremendous hat with wide brim and a sharp up turn in the front. Tsangurai froze when he made out the man. It was Osiri, who smiled thinly.

Tsangurai stood and tried to summon *upenyu* in all its light. The light obscured his vision, blocking out the ghosts, white men, who stood behind Osiri, bedecked in the same regalia, their ship even further in the distance. On top of the ship there waved a flag which matched the outfits of Osiri and his ghosts, fluttering with the red, white, and blue of the Union Jack.

I am Tsangurai, one of the last of my people. Upenyu has not left us; it has changed. Now I understand what happened to our neighbors. Will these ghosts cover the entire land upon which Mwari casts a glance? Trying to summon upenyu's light, I sit in the largest magical creation I have seen, a hut that allows you to move across the vast waters in the gourd of Mwari, like an enormous ladle. But this frightens me: Into whose mouth are we headed?