

A Father's Skin
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Amanti was not yet old enough to be initiated, but he knew that it was his father wearing the cloak of furs made from the skins of his ancestors. He had seen the musty old collection of wolf-furs at home, bound and sewn together, a dozen empty heads laying flat against the mud wall and with the shadows through the holes of their eyes, and he knew that his father wore them when the spirits were free to roam, when the ancestors stole back to life. Amanti knew it, once he had come close to the hut near to the ancestor-time and even watched his father tie the cloak to himself.

Amanti knew, but he saw the ancestors. He *knew*, but one by one the twelve empty faces were pulled low and dark, knowing shadows filled them. Voices screamed in the night, wild howls of spirits. They prowled at the edges of what could be seen beyond the firelight, vague shapes in the shadows, hiding in the scrub. The thornbrush shook and clattered, a thousand wooden needles clicking against each other. The ancestors turned and wailed, their tails shaking and flying, prancing forward and drawing back, they lunged out at the dark, leered and growled with dozens of voices. Amanti could hear his father among them, but still he was afraid when the ancestors whirled, their ragged fur all on end.

It was only his father, in the old skins that were always up against the hut wall. That was all. The empty eyes, the way the ancestors pulled on one face and then another, all trickery. Amanti clung to his mother's skirts alongside his baby brother even so, because his eyes showed that he did not know the truth. That his father, and his father's father, and all his father's fathers stood before the women and children.

The ancestors leapt off into the dark, whooping and howling, and the night bled out a thousand voices until another set of ancestors, another of the tribe's families, clambered into the light and yowled back at the dark, helped to make it safe for the living.

It was a poor omen when Mageti killed the little one-horned gazelle. Amanti had not yet taken a wife, and Mageti - his brother - was too young to consider it. The day was hot and the grass underfoot was dry. Mageti had been worried, he had lost the stone tip of his spear in the wound. Amanti had taken it out for him, pushing his muzzle against the thin little wound and tearing open a flap with his teeth. He'd been careful, and although he ended out covered in blood, eventually he had been able to pull the stone point free for his brother.

Afterward he'd held the limp gazelle's head in his bloody hands, marking the beast's fur. Put his thumb over the stub where one of its horns had broken away. It was not even a very large buck, not very large at all for such a bad omen. Mageti did not understand, and Amanti knew that the buck had simply broken it in the mating time, when the beast-antelope gathered and butted heads to see which of them would take a wife. Amanti knew that, but he saw the unbroken horn and the flaking stump. He *saw*.

The sun touched the horizon, and Amanti came home. The dust clung to his legs, clogged his fur. It stuck in the blood. He and Mageti had eaten their fill, and though his stomach was full of meat there were still the buck's haunches over Mageti's shoulders. They had thrown the head away. Mageti was proud of the kill, grinning happily beneath his layering of blood, bright against the initiation burns. He had carried it home all by himself, even though he was still young. Proud, even though it was not a very big buck.

Any wolf would be proud of the smell of blood, but Amanti washed first. His youngest sisters obediently brought him water, and he scrubbed until the blood and dust were gone. Only then did he step out into the coming dark and stare at the hunters who had returned. The proper hunters, the men of the tribe who went out to kill the big game. Big buck, buffalo, zebra. But none of them were blooded, even though they carried a kill between them.

A kill that did not smell of buck or buffalo, but wolf.

"Papa?"

Mageti stood with his ears low, his tail between his legs, even though the blood was still sticky on his fur. Even though father would be proud of him, for making a kill.

Mageti was still young, but he had taken his initiation burns. He could not go to stand with the women and children, could not go to mother. Could not cry. Amanti took his brother's shoulder and pulled him aside before either of them could really be sure.

He went to the hut, sent his sisters and mother outside and sat with Mageti, biting at the fur of his hands.

Perhaps he was wrong, perhaps-

Eeiii! came the cry of their mother, *Eeiii!*

And Amanti knew.

"We must help."

"It is alright. The flaying is hard. You and your brother can prepare the skin, afterward."

Amanti turned his head away from Uncle Kibati, tried to show displeasure, but he was relieved. The thought of taking a knife to his father's belly... He should have been proud to do it, proud to cut his father's hide away from the flesh.

Mama would make the good beer, Amanti thought. The good beer, and they would leave it for papa. He sat in the dark and listened to the soft sounds of butchery in the hut behind him. The wet thudding of the knife against flesh where it was thick, the pop of joints being broken to ease them from the skin while making the smallest cuts.

Soon Amanti ran away, though he told himself he was merely doing the duty of a son, as he went to Sisabi's hut. His wife greeted him politely, her head bowed, ears splayed wide, but Amanti was rude, only telling her to fetch her husband, saying nothing kind... but still she turned a kind eye on him before disappearing inside. Sisabi came outside, hunched at the shoulders to seem not so tall as young, grieving Amanti. Head low, to show respect.

"My brother?" Sisabi wasn't really Amanti's brother, they were barely cousins, Sisabi had come to the tribe when the last drought ended, and when game

became scarce he would take his wife and children somewhere there were fewer wolves hunting the game.

But right now, he offered himself as brother, and Amanti clung to him and wept. "What happened, Sisabi? What happened to my papa?"

Sisabi crushed Amanti to his chest and hesitated. "Your papa and Kibati were chasing part of the herd we split. One of the big bucks, with the twisted horns. Kibati had thrown his spear into its flank, but your papa was close by. It twisted, plunged its horn into his gut. It broke off, the buck fled."

Amanti dug his fingers into Sisabi's fur and wept, for he now knew how his father had died.

Later, after Amanti had scraped knives across the back of his father's skin and collected the scraps of flesh, he and Uncle Kibati went out in the night and scraped back the earth and put his flesh and bones underneath. They did not wait long before putting the soil back and they walked with his father's still wet skin until dawn, all around, so no one could follow the scent to the body and eat it.

Amanti had worked many skins before in his life, Mageti, few. So it fell to Amanti to spend days with his father's skin and furs, carefully drying the skin, working it back and forth and folding it gently so that no one part of it became too hard, so that all of it was soft. He sat with it in his father's hut, mother and sisters living in the huts of cousins while this thing was done. While the ancestors on the wall watched, waited for their son to join them.

The empty holes of eyes in the furs of his ancestors, the musty smell of dry skins. And somewhere beneath it, the scent of the forefathers. Amanti had seen his father dancing in them, had seen them become alive once more. Every son could only dream of bearing his forefathers so well.

"Amanti?"

Every son.

Mageti bit his lip, looked up warily, ears splayed.

Amanti looked away and pulled his father's fur closer. "What?"

"We must split father's skin, and the ancestors. One day I will be married, and then my children must have ancestors to protect them also..." Mageti dragged his toe in the dirt uncertainly.

Amanti looked up at the ancestors on the wall. Pressed his thumb against the back of his father's fur. Soft, dry. No longer tacky. "The skin is not yet ready," Amanti said, pulling the folds of fur close to himself. "You must wait, Mageti."

Mageti bowed his head. "I thought it must be ready by now, my brother."

"It is not," Amanti snapped. "And besides. You are far too young, why must you already think of marriage? What if you never have any sons, what then?"

Mageti's voice lowered. "I will have sons..."

"You are too young to think of it, Mageti!" Amanti set aside his father's fur carefully. He planted a hand on his knee and pushed himself to his feet. "Not even a month ago you told the girls giggling over you to go and lick the sand!"

"That was a month ago."

Amanti glared at his brother's throat. "*Mageti!*"

"No, I am sorry, Amanti. You are right." Mageti backed to the door, his tail held low, quivering. *Far* too polite. "It was presumptuous of me. It is too soon to

think of dividing father's pelt."

Amanti had not realized that he had bared his teeth. He shut his mouth. Let his shoulders fall. Let out the half breath making his chest large. This was crazy. Mageti was too young to think of these things. "Who has put you up to this?"

Mageti hesitated. Shook his head. "No one." He hung his head low, and stepped back from the hut slowly.

No one.

But Amanti smoothed out his father's fur again, and fingered the two sides of the throat, and saw how the two sides did not match. As if someone had cut a piece away. The hole in the belly, too narrow for the broad horn of the big buck, thin, like a spear. With a torn flap.

And Amanti wondered.

Amanti wore his father on his back, and his father's father, and his father's father's father back to the first wolf who stood upon two legs and ceased to be a beast. No one had shown him what to do, but Amanti had looked at the ancestors bound together and saw where they had been cut apart, where one of the ancestors was missing a piece or halved, so that all of their worthy sons could have a part of their ancestors. From that Amanti had learned where to place small holes to bind his father's skin into the cloak of his ancestors, and he wore his father close to the skin, holding the loose thongs that tied his ancestors together.

There were great mysteries in the world. When he had been a child, one of the greatest was what the initiated men did when the ancestor-time came. He had taken his burns, become a man and found out how they gathered and made pacts in blood, made offerings to the ancestors. And then there had been the greater secret, how the heads of the families gathered and drew on the ancestor cloaks - and Amanti had thought he knew, for he had spied on his father when he was small.

But now he sat behind the thornbrush, and waited for Sisabi to finish dancing before the women, yowling out at the night, clad in the cloak of his ancestors and showing that he was a good son, that he was strong because of them and that he would protect the women, the children, from the spirits in the dark.

And Amanti, waiting his turn, like all the other men, grasped the thornbrush and shook it hard, so that the clatterings of a thousand fingers rose into the sky, and he screamed into the night with terrifying yowls so Sisabi could howl back and put the night at bay. He had not thought this would be the answer to any mysteries.

Amanti let go of the thornbrush, but the cloak of ancestors had snagged. The furs dragged and pulled at him, even as he struggled to get away. He could hear screams and wails of spirits behind him, but he knew that there was no one behind him, the other men were in a circle around the fire the women and children huddled around.

Amanti turned to look, ducking his head out from under the dry furs. He saw darkness, and heard screams, but he knew there could be no one there.

Shyaaa! at his side, Amanti leapt in fright but the furs held him tight. Held him tight, and then not at all as some unseen thread snapped. The furs shook in the thornbrush, back and forth.

Then the ancestors turned to face the sound and Amanti's father's voice snarled at the dark. No, a trick of the light? The furs just shook in the dark, all the men shouted and wailed.

The wind caught the furs and lifted them off the thornbrush, the tails curling in the air and then dragged out flat, standing tense and straight and angry, the fur of his ancestors rising and curling on the wind, bristling all on end. The furs flew, empty faces of his ancestors lifting and howling with the wind as they sailed through the air, and Amanti chased after them, stumbled in the dark. The furs lifted beside the fire, and Amanti leapt to catch them. The women, the children stared, and the furs dropped low, and Amanti dived after them. The blowing wind pushed the cloak to one side, back, forth, in some tangled crazy dance Amanti chased after, trying to catch the cloak again. His ancestors screamed at the dark, and Amanti screamed with them!

Sisabi had not yet left the light, and the furs fell upon him, and Amanti into the furs, and for a moment the dry face of his father slipped down over his own and Amanti was staring through his father's eyes.

So Amanti saw the lie that Sisabi had told, because Sisabi was not strong enough to say the truth. It took long for a man to die, skewered in the gut. Long. He would be alive, as they dragged him home. Still alive. And the buck, the buck used their horns on each other, butting heads when searching for a wife. They did not spear their enemies, they *kicked*. Amanti's ancestors lifted their arms, tangled knots of fur and skin and claws, and together they struck Sisabi's face, but the wind had caught the furs again and Amanti chased them because he knew what else had happened.

But Amanti was not quick enough, not fast enough to follow the furs of his ancestors into the dark where Uncle Kibati waited. Uncle Kibati who helped to cut the skin from the body, who had bound the body and helped to bury it so that no son might see the wounds and understand. Kibati who trimmed the fur of the throat away. Kibati who had wanted all the ancestors to himself and so shown Mageti that greed.

The furs fell upon Kibati, waiting in the thorn brush. It was dark, but Amanti could hear the growls, the screams, the yelps, he could smell the blood. Amanti could *taste* the blood. In the dark it almost seemed as though the furs still had a body inside them. But he was still chasing the furs, chasing his ancestors as they growled and sought revenge, ripping at Kibati's throat in the dark.

But Sisabi came, and Mkaji, and together they pulled the furs away from Kibati, and Amanti saw himself sitting in them. He saw the empty shadow-eyes of his father, glaring up at them. And slowly, slowly his ancestors lifted their hand and held out a thumb, as if a spear, and jabbed it at the hole in his father's fur. Then, like the tip of a spear breaking off in his gut, the thumb-tip twitched.

All at once Sisabi and Mkaji were shaking Amanti back and forth, pulling him away, but Amanti curled up, frightened as they kicked at him. There was sickness inside, pain, and he crawled over the ground, retching, retching, until the hot, sharp pain in his throat lifted, to his mouth. Blinding agony followed it, blood, more blood and pain and he heard the click of tooth and stone and Amanti had to spit, to vomit.

There it was. Glittering in the firelight, in the midst of the blood and Amanti's

vomit. Small and perfect. Amanti knew it could not be there. He *knew*. But still, Amanti saw the stone spear tip laying in the vomit, wet with his father's blood. He *saw*.