

← PROVENANCE OF GODS AND MEN →

HUTARI



DONOVAN M. NEAL

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Hutari

Provenance of Gods and Men

Book 0

By

Donovan M. Neal

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to those who dare to dream and see it through to completion. May your imagination ever lead you to new realms.

Acknowledgments

To the Lord Jesus Christ, who loves me.

To my children: Candace, Christopher and Alexander—you can do great things!

To the authors, comic books artists and authors, comic books artists, and writers who have come before, and who unknowingly have breathed on the embers of my imagination.

To all my beta readers and friends who shared both critiques and encouragement.

To my wife Nettie, who cheered me on when I had nothing and said, “Wow!” after reading the prologue of my very first novel.

May God truly bless you all.

* * *

M'Msee sat in the storyteller's chair as he had every spring equinox for nearly ten centuries. At this spot within the city's center, he would tell the story of the creation and of the four clans. As has been the custom for many years, the clans would bring their youth to him to initiate their schooling. An education that would begin by hearing the story that underpinned all Bussar culture and thought: the Provenance of Gods and men.

Parents slowly gathered around him and set their children in a semi-circle, and many sat with their young ones to listen as well. And the crowds filled the sitting rocks and trees with people who quieted themselves to hear the eldest of them all speak.

And M'Msee, seeing all had finally gathered, opened his mouth to begin the tale. "Akuma...", he said. "... did not know that his son would one day seek to kill him. For which parent among you... no, which father would ever conceive love lost between himself and his son? But let me not rush to tell of such troubles before the time. Much transpired before Enkai and Hespheus grew at odds with one another. For, there was a time children even before the creation of men, that the Kifu did not roam Tanara and was not always as he is now. Even the walking dead was once loved by another, even loved by the father of all---Akuma. And why would not Akuma love his beloved son?"

The grouping of children sat around their teacher and looked at him with their gazes locked on M'Msee's face. Their attention fixed on his every word, while little ones sat wide-eyed, and some held their mouths open and fidgeting, while a few propped their chins with their hands, waiting for the clan's greatest storyteller to continue.

"But why, Wisdom? Why did the son want to destroy his father?" said a boy.

One child in attendance, near to M'Msee, held his head tucked down and his arms folded across his chest, and muttered, "I would kill my father if I could." And M'Msee heard the boy's murmur and his face became downcast as he overheard the words and spoke.

"What is your name, child?"

The young boy looked up. His eyes bore the hurt of a child withered from a drought of love. And his face gave no hint of a smile

but only a stoic seriousness untoward for a child who could not be over ten years of age.

"I am Kemet, son of Saifet."

"From which clan do you come, my son?" said M'Msee.

"I am from the northern watch, Wisdom."

M'Msee nodded and motioned for the boy to come and sit next to him in the storyteller's chair.

The other children immediately wailed and vocalized their disapproval. "I want to sit next to you!" Some raised their hands and waved them wildly to draw the old man's attention. But M'Msee held his peace and looked at the boy, who reluctantly made his way through several disappointed and envious children to sit next to the elder.

M'Msee placed his hands lovingly on the boy's small cheeks and felt their warmth. He noted the bruising around his neck and spoke. "Did your father do this to you?"

Kemet sheepishly turned his eyes away from M'Msee and replied, "Yes, wisdom."

M'Msee inhaled knowingly and then sighed aloud. "Know that I will see that he will not hit you again and though the bruising will heal. You must be careful to not let your heart become poisoned or Enkai would have you, and that cannot be. Listen to my story, Kemet, and learn. Learn why you cannot allow the heart poison inside of you to take root and fester. Take heed, child, and mark my words."

Kemet said nothing, but looked at the old man sheepishly and gave an affirming nod. M'Msee then turned to all that sat before him and said. "All of you hear me. What is the first lesson all must learn?"

Various children whisked their hands wildly into the air for M'Msee to call on them. The old sage pointed to a young girl. And she stood upon his acknowledgment and spoke. "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting, get understanding."

"That is very good young lady. Well said indeed. Now, all of you; listen to wisdom and get understanding. And hear the tale of creation from the Book of Provenance. For, it is written that in the beginning, when Akuma had finished his making of the sky, and the sky above

the sky. He made one sky dark and set lesser lights to watch us while we slept. He then made the greater light of the day and released it to run its course through the lower sky. But of all that he made, he was most proud of the two children he made. Twin boys to which he would teach his wisdom so that in time they too might make lights and skies above skies. And he named them Hesphus and Enkai.”

Some children hissed when they heard the name Enkai, and M'Msee lifted his hands to quiet them.

“Did Akuma have a mommy and daddy wisdom?” asked one of the seated children.

More adults gathered to hear the four clans' oldest member recall the story of the Book of Provenance. Many took their seat, and the seated crowd grew even larger. M'Msee waited for the new arrivals to be settled, and he continued.

“No, child. Akuma was the first, and it is from him that all things were made. And without him, nothing could be made. But Akuma wanted to share who he was and, in the making of his sons, sought to create a family that would one day fill the night sky and the blue sky. And he charged his two sons to learn, even as you learn now, to sit at his feet and be tutored. To be taught how to handle the most precious of gifts, he could ever give them, and they were to share what they had learned with those that would follow: the gift of everlasting life. But to do this, the boys needed to also understand death. So, making sure that they schooled themselves, Akuma created a book that contained the sum of all his wisdom and gave it to both of them to study.”

“And he left them for a season to prepare them for their lessons that upon his return, each might make his first living thing.”

“But time passed and Akuma did not return right when the boys thought and so alone and without their father; Hesphus determined to continue in his studies as his father had charged them. But Enkai did not do so. He set aside his studies, believing he had learned enough, and took it upon himself to create before the time. Enkai was determined to create a realm and life apart from his father. Enkai then left Hesphus to his studies and walked a distance into the great void and there created land in between light and darkness: a

realm of eternal twilight. And Enkai named the place the Duat. And he placed the realm next to his fathers, and thinking to impress him, he took dust from his skin and from it fashioned a people as countless as the snow in the Whitelands and he breathed into them and gave them his life and he named them the Nephthys.”

“And they were indeed beautiful to behold and powerful beyond the measure of any mortal man, and each was as different to one another as you are to me. And they towered and walked through the Duat and brought a semblance of light to its dimness, and for a time, all was good for Enkai and his newly created children.”

“But Enkai was not skilled in creating life and it was soon revealed that the children lacked food to sustain themselves. And though the light of life within them burned bright, it burned so quickly from within that they became disfigured, and in time, their bodies grew deformed. And some hungered so that they even turned on themselves to consume each other’s flesh. But once filled with new life, they returned to their former beauty and power. But when famished, they were like the beasts of the field and would lose all sense of control. And Enkai did all that he could to keep them fed, but it was beyond even him to satisfy their incessant hunger for life. And they all became mad such that they even turned on him to consume him alive and take the power that the father Akuma had placed within him. Enkai was then forced to fight with his children to stay alive and became trapped in the Duat and he could not leave lest the Nephthys escape and consume his brother.”

“Hesphus, who had continued in his study of wisdom, had finished his lesson and, when checking on his brother’s progress, noted his sibling was nowhere to be found within the celestial realm that Akuma had created. And so he looked into the distance of the Void and he saw that a new plane existed but one not made by his father. Hesphus then called out to Enkai and noted a door to this new realm and as he went to open it, he heard his brother call out to him from within and warn him away and to not open the door. And Hesphus, seeking to save his brother and knowing that his father worked behind the veil of existence, summoned him that he might save his brother from the creatures he had made. And Akuma heard his son’s prayer and returned as bidden and when he had crossed

from one existence to this one, he knew what his son Enkai had done. Akuma then entered the Duat and rescued Enkai from the dark realm and fended off the Nephthys and saved his son alive. And he sealed the Nephthys within the Duat that they could not escape."

M'Msee paused to see if his audience was paying attention. And the crowd of hundreds was silent as many adults and children sat at his feet, while some leaned or sat upon rocks, and others sat in tree branches to get a view, and his story enchanted all.

"Why did Enkai create the Duat, Wisdom?" said a young mother seated with her daughter and son.

"That is a good question, but the books are silent and leave us to our thoughts on the matter. But though he was a Demigod, Enkai seemed to have fallen to the most common of faults that besiege us men: pride. For he thought more highly of himself than he should. And this led to his thinking that he could do what Akuma could do. But tell me... have *you* ever wanted to impress... have *you* ever wanted to make others think more favorably of you?"

One young girl remarked, "One time when the children of my village went to play kicker, I wanted them to pick me so badly that I tried showing them how good I could kick that when I tried to kick the ball, I missed it and ended up falling and breaking my foot."

"Ah, said M'Msee. And did you feel foolish afterward?"

"I did. But mamae told me I do not have to be picked for everything and that I must be careful to be influenced by the good and never to show off."

"Your mamae has taught you well and has passed on to you wisdom from Akuma. For Akuma would not seek for you to impress. No, Akuma would have you be who he made you be. Do you think you can do this, child?"

The girl smiled widely and nodded.

"Good," said M'Msee. The old man then looked down at Kemet to see how he fared and noted that the boy's eyes drew to someone in the distance. And M'Msee followed his gaze to a man who leaned against a tree.

M'Msee whispered to him, "Is that your father?"

Kemet nodded.

M'Msee smiled, "Have no fear, child. For Wisdom will see him soon." Kemet smiled slightly, and he scooted closer to M'Msee.

"Now, where was I?" said M'Msee.

"Akuma rescued Enkai!" said a girl.

"Ah yes! Thank you! Yes, so Akuma rescued Enkai from his creations and sealed the Nephthys in the Duat so that they could not escape. Now, some have, over the years, asked why Akuma did not destroy Enkai's creation. But the past fathers tell us from Ambilikie that Akuma prefers not to destroy. So he devised a plan to heal the creation his son had made in his hubris. Akuma then turned to Hesphus, who had obeyed his father and who completed his father's teachings as instructed and he took his obedient son, and together they crafted the physical realm and our world and Akuma allowed his son Hesphus to name it. And Hesphus named it Tanara."

"Enkai watched his father and brother make Tanara and it was even more beautiful than the realm he had created alone. And Akuma allowed Hesphus to fill Tanara with all manner of birds, fish, plants, and animals. And Akuma was pleased, for Hesphus was wise in how he crafted and he made Tanara thrive with life so that it could sustain all that he created. Thus, Hesphus set all living things in place as his father and his brother watched. And Hesphus fashioned his designs with wisdom so that all things held purpose and the whole of nature was in balance and harmony prevailed. And the magic of Tanara was strong, and it held."

"Akuma, then seeing all that his son had made, took from the ground dirt and with it fashioned a creature he called a man. And with this vessel, Akuma gave life from his own breath and he became a living soul. And no creation of Hesphus or Enkai, save the two brothers, had held the life force of Akuma himself."

"Akuma then assured Enkai that the man he had created held the key to removing the pollution from the realm Enkai had made. And that when men's studies were complete, men would ascend and take their place next to him and his brother, and together they would heal the Nephthys and free them from the Duat that all of creation might be whole and one, and there be no more division between the realms."

"Did Hesphus love Enkai, Wisdom?" said a child.

"Oh yes, yes he did, little one. In fact, it was Hesphus' love for his brother that made him search for him when he realized he was absent from his studies, and it was the love of Akuma that caused Enkai's father to rescue him from the Duat. Hesphus loved Enkai very much. But alas, Enkai did not return his brother's affection. For when Akuma made Tanara and placed the man to live in it; he gave Hesphus dominion over the entire material realm of men and to steward all of Tanara. And for this act, Enkai's eye became evil toward his brother and his father."

"So Akuma, gave Hesphus *the entire world* of Tanara teacher?"

"All of it, child; from the great ocean depths to the flowers that sprinkle the prairie grass. Hesphus was meant to walk among us and to teach us the wisdom of Akuma and the laws of life and death: all that we too might one day create, even as Akuma, Hesphus, and Enkai. You see, little ones...." M'Msee then waved his hand to the entire crowd. "You were destined to create stars."

Faces of many in the audience grew wide with wonder and oohs and aahs ushered from those in earshot.

"But how were men supposed to cleanse the Duat?" said a teenager who was in the group and listened.

"Well, child, the tales and books do not share all things. What we know is that Akuma planned to sleep and allow himself to be seeded in Tanara and to marinate every blade of grass with his life. And that in time, when men were ready, Akuma's power would saturate all of Tanara, and when his power concentrated enough in one man he would ascend, and that man then would one day be able to help lead others so that all might one day ascend to even be like him and to bridge Akuma's home, the Duat, and Tanara. So Akuma shared his plan with his sons and commanded them to watch over their respective realms until his return. Thus, Akuma charged Enkai to watch over the seal Akuma had placed over the Duat lest Enkai's children flood their home and Tanara. Akuma also charged Hesphus to nurture and keep watch over Tanara so that in time, men might ascend without fear of the children of the Duat."

"Thus, Akuma adjured his sons to pledge their loyalty to his plan, as he would be gone much longer than before. And because Hesphus loved his father and wanted to see the Duat people freed of

their hunger for life and desired to see his brother's plan to create life realized. He pledged to continue his studies while his father was away and watch over Tanara and shepherd men to learn of his father's ways and to ascend."

"But Enkai became angered over his father's plan. A plan that would have him wait when he believed that there was another way... a faster way to save his creation. Thinking he knew best, he turned his back on his father and brother and left Akuma and Hesphus to their plans, and broke the seal of the Duat and returned to the home of his children."

"Akuma, realizing what Enkai had done, warned Hesphus that with the seal broken he must leave to seed Tanara immediately, for the Nephthys would not be contained within the Duat, and their unchecked hunger would consume all of existence. Akuma then created a barrier between the celestial realm and the material of Tanara so that bridging the two planes became impassable; save by Hesphus or a work of his hands. He then gave one last command to his son to create a being of Eternal life and to send him to Tanara. This being would be the match to ignite men's power to ascend. He then gave his son a hammer that he might forge such a being from the celestial rock of Aaru: the floor of existence."

"Hesphus did as his father commanded and went to the forge of his father and fashioned a man unlike all others from the mantle of Aaru and anointed his creation's head with spittle from his mouth and breathed into him and the man became a living soul unlike any that came before him. And Hesphus named him Hutari, meaning the eternal one. And he took the man and taught him as much as he could about the history of his father, him and his brother, and of the knowledge of life and death."

"Akuma, meanwhile, prepared himself a chamber to sleep so that he might disperse his essence throughout the material plane. And he set himself within and allowed himself to sleep that his body might dissolve into the world of Tanara. And Hesphus brought his son Hutari to see Akuma before the father of all life departed and fell into his great sleep for a season. Akuma smiled at his son's son, even as he transferred his life force into Tanara and he fell asleep, only to disappear as he smiled at Hutari."

"And while Hespheus and his son hovered over the coffin-like chamber of Akuma. Enkai returned alive from the Duat and it soused him in dark magic, which Hespheus recognized from his studies as the power of Death."

"Now children, Ambilikie recorded the words told to him by the Hutari and he shared what the brothers spoke between them, and Ambilikie wrote all that Hutari told him."

M'Msee then opened a leather pouch that held a long, well-preserved parchment and, upon seeing the ancient book, all bowed their heads in reverence at its opening and even as he read aloud from a scroll. And the words from the scroll were on this wise.

The Book of Provenance

Book One: Scroll of the Beginning

Written by my hand, Ambilikie Armor bearer to his Lord

Hutari

"Father already begins his journey to walk in the lands between. I have come from the NetherRealm of Duat and come with lessons attained outside the schooling of our father. Did I not tell you he held back from us, held back from me? He has lied Hespheus, for there is indeed another way to rescue my children from the plague of hunger that ravishes my house."

"What way would this be, brother? What way would you take other than that which Father leads? Know ye not that departing from wisdom is to embrace foolishness? Be wary, we cannot break the commands of wisdom or wisdom will break us."

Enkai replied, "Nay, brother, I have learned the knowledge of death and life. And have gleaned from the study of my children that there is indeed another way: a way to transfer the life of another. Now join me, and we can take the life of Father even now as he embarks on his sleep and before all of his magic dispels away to the realm of men, and let us transplant it within the Duat and give life evermore to my seed. Then when he is gone, we can rule and create for ourselves heavens and earth beyond measure, and nothing that we imagine shall be restrained from us."

"Enkai then set himself between the coffin of his father and the Hutari who hid behind it, watching and listening. "You are mad Enkai. The abortion of one life does not allow life..."

Enkai then noticed movement from behind his brother and the father's tomb and spoke. "What moves behind you? I sense a presence that emanates the life spark of celestial life... life like us. What have you done? Let me see!" And Enkai went to move past Hesphus, but Hesphus stood against him to bar his path and replied.

"No, brother... even as you have created, so to have I."

Enkai frowned and scowled at the man child that gleamed with light from the eternal life of the forge of Akuma and his face glowered in contempt even as he spoke. "But this creature contains the life given us by our father... how..." And Enkai saw the hammer of his father in Hesphus' hand and knew at that moment that his father had shown his brother the secret of forging eternal life and he became wroth and fueled by jealousy for the love that Akuma showed his brother and covetous to take the newly formed eternal that he might feed him to his children that they might live.

"It does not matter," said Enkai. He lifted his eyes as he watched the golden embers of Akuma's magic float into the Tanaric realm below. "I need but one life to enact my plan. Give this creature to me, this child, you have produced and create another if you must, but give it to me or move aside and I will take the last of Father's virtue."

Hesphus balked and replied. "I will do no such thing. Nor will your plan to take father's life bear fruit. I love you. But will not allow this thing. You have already, by your traffics brought the shadow of death from Duat into the celestial realm. Leave these schemes within the Duat and do not pollute the Aaru further by bringing death here."

Enkai nodded. "Then it is decided... you must die."

Enkai then attacked his brother, and the two fought whilst the Hutari looked on, and Hesphus did all he could to prevent his brother from approaching Akuma and the Hutari. And the titans clashed and Hesphus beat his brother back with the Hammer of Akuma such that the originator of death could not prevail. And when Enkai knew he could not defeat his brother, and as he watched the remnant of Akuma's life force slip away, escaping to seed the world of men. He opened the door to the Duat.

"No!" screamed Hesphus. "Do not do this!"

But Enkai would not heed and replied, "There can only be one realm... my realm."

And he unleashed the Nephthys from the Duat and the scourge of his children flooded the gate into the celestial realm of Aaru like a rushing tide. And the creatures ran to consume Hesphus and the Hutari for they hungered for all life save Enkai's, who was their master.

And Hesphus valiantly battled to keep the flood of the Nephthys at bay. But their numbers were as the sand on the shore and he could not prevail. And seeing his cause lost, he raced to the Hutari before the Nephthys could consume him alive and took the man into the palm of his hand and cast him down into Tanara. And the man fell like lightning into the earth.

"Nooo!" Enkai screamed.

And as the Hutari descended to the earth, and the celestial skies above closed behind him, he watched as his creator and father Hesphus, was swarmed alive by the Nephthys, and the son of Akuma fell to his knees and the hammer of Akuma dropped from his hand and fell to the celestial floor. And the stars slowly concealed his fate from Hutari behind the expanse of night. But not before he bore witness to the ultimate betrayal of Enkai.

Enkai waved his hand and the swarm of Nephthys released him, and the newly titled God of Death stood over this brother who had earlier saved him from his creation and spoke these words.

"Father has robbed me of my children's restoration; you also have robbed me by denying me the life of thy son. But know that I will not rest until I have stolen eternity from his breast and with it give eternal life and rest to my children. But first I will take from you life itself, and though father has sought to confine me and my kind to the realm celestial. Know that his plan will not stop or stymy me. For you, dear brother, will be my key to unlocking the realm of men. You, their creator, will be their scourge, and through you will they know the fear of death and thus, the fear of me."

"And Enkai then took the hammer of Akuma that was dropped by his brother and with it smote him that he died. And the life force of Hesphus seeped from his heart and joined to Enkai's and the power of Hesphus made the demigod even more powerful than Akuma himself had ever planned."

And Enkai's newfound power allowed him to tether the life of Hespheus that the body of Hespheus moved at the thought of Enkai and he controlled it. And with the shell of his brother now empty of life. He took one of the Nephthys and placed it inside the corpse of his brother and then took the body and flung it down into the realm of men. And it was the last thing the Hutari ever saw of the home he escaped before he smote the earth of Tanara.

And because Akuma's magic allowed his son Hespheus to breach the barrier between the celestial and the physical; Hespheus' descending body passed unharmed, shielding the Nephthys within and the leech-like creature entered the world of men and plummeted into the navel of the world. And Enkai animated it from afar and when the demigod's corpse arose from the crater of its descent, the body of Hespheus walked the earth at the command of Enkai; and because the Nephthys lived within; it drained all life around it. And in time men called the corpse of Hespheus the Kifu, meaning walking death. And all bowed to the command of Enkai, who spoke through the Kifu.

And lo in the first age of men Enkai promised men power and life eternal if they worked to bring him the Hutari, and many in their folly also desired the power of death, and the promise of eternal life, and rallied to his cause to find the Hutari for Enkai. And in time, the Kifu marched across Tanara unstopped, dragging behind him a million corpses of beast and men to find the Hutari. It was said that the Kifu could even walk on the ocean floor. Entire kingdoms fell under the darkness of death and were decimated in its wake. And men suffered because Enkai used the Kifu to hunt the Hutari. But Akuma-be-praised, the Hutari son of Hespheus had also survived his fall from the realm of Aaru and he rallied brave men and kings to his side and they met the Kifu and his armies on the field of battle beneath the great mount of Moshek. And the two armies fought and for forty days and nights their battle cleaved the land into great continents such that they pushed away from one another so that they are now established in their bounds.

But alas, on the cusp of victory and for reasons unknown to those that observed the battle; the Hutari did not destroy the Kifu but

sealed him deep within the dark places of the earth away from the living.

And Ambilikie, his armor-bearer, saw the Hutari shutter the Kifu away from men, hoping it would forever remain hidden from the eyes of the curious who might, in their foolishness, ever rouse again such a power and release the dead celestial once more. Many wondered about the defeat of the Kifu and some left Hutari not understanding why he did not destroy the Kifu.

Many have supposed that he could not stand the thought of destroying his father. And that he hoped men would one day ascend and realize Akuma's dream and save even the Kifu from the grip of eternal death. But none know for sure, save the Hutari himself.

The Hutari then left men to themselves with the promise that if the Kifu would rise again, he too would rise to meet the threat. For the power to stop the Kifu drained even him, so he took his leave of armies and kings to recoup and to teach men so that they might one day realize the dream of Akuma and ascend. And men, over time, forgot who the Hutari was and his identity has become lost to the annals of time, and his whereabouts no longer known.

But one man—Ambilikie seeing the Hutari had not destroyed the Kifu and that the capture of Akuma's life force was still possible saw a weakness of the Kifu during the battle between his master and the walking death and wrote the words in a book: the Book of Kings. And though we know he wrote the book, none have ever read it as it has been lost through time. But fear not my children, for Akuma's plan even now has borne fruit, for magic has seeped into the land that some of our kind have done wonders. The marvels of the deep life of Akuma echo throughout the land, and be diligent younglings, for one must study hard to capture it. And who knows if perhaps *you* will help us all one day to ascend and bring Akuma's hope to life!

"For, the voice of Akuma speaks to those with ears to hear and know that the Father Akuma will even give visions to you if you will not harden your heart and seek to hear his voice. And what do we call these men?"

"Seers!" many yelled.

"Yes, Seers. Perhaps you can be a Seer and help preserve the knowledge given by Ambilikie. And one day find the Hutari and

destroy the Kifu or even restore him alive again as our creator. Strive to listen to wisdom children. Listen to your parents and gather knowledge as you would gather wood for a fire or stones to build. Gather knowledge that one day we might ascend and for the Hutari and the Ascendant One to save us all and release men to be what Akuma has desired."

"For it is said that in the third age of humankind, the Kifu will escape and lay waste to the kingdoms of men, but the Hutari and the Ascendant One will stand against him and bring the cycle of cataclysms to an end."

"So as I charge you before all the elders of the center city. Will you seek wisdom, children?"

"Yes, Wisdom!" many yelled in unison.

M'Msee smiled and nodded. "I have found you to be hearers. Now, go from this place and practice to always show that you are quick to hear and slow to speak, that Akuma's word might live in you. Go, and may the grace of Akuma go with you."

The entire seated congregation of children and adults rose from the grass and many parents clapped at the hearing of the tale by the chief elder of the four clans. M'Msee smiled as parents hugged their children, and some came to thank him for taking his time to teach them the histories of their people.

Kemet then also turned to shuffle away when M'Msee grabbed him and stopped him. "You, lad, will take me to meet your father."

Kemet nodded and helped M'Msee down from his seating place and allowed the old man to lean upon him as he balanced himself with his cane, and the two walked slowly towards Kemet's father who eyed that the elder of the four clans was coming with his son towards him. He quickly straightened himself and stood up tall as his son and M'Msee approached him.

"Wisdom," said Saifet. "Thank you for taking the time to teach my son."

M'Msee nodded. "It would seem that I must also teach his father."

Saifet looked flummoxed and appeared unsure of how to respond, but tried nonetheless. "I am sorry, but I do not understand wisdom."

"No," said M'Msee, it is clear you do not. Did you hear the lesson today? "

"I did, teacher. And I have remembered it even from my youth."

"Why then, did you strike your son and not discipline him as to keep him in the way? To strike him as to leave such bruises... this is not the way of someone who has learned the wisdom of this story."

"The boy is stubborn Wisdom. He will not heed..."

"No, Saifet, that is not the way of Akuma to accost the lesser. Have you never considered that perhaps with your actions you have bruised the Ascended One? Has it been lost on you that we are all created from the loving mind of Akuma, even this young one here? Would you dare strike Akuma this way?"

"No, of course not teacher, never!"

"No, Akuma would cause your life to cease." M'Msee then stood up straight as if he had no gait and he took Saifet by the arm and squeezed it so that Saifet winced. "Do not touch the boy in such a manner again. If you do, I will come for you. Do you understand me?"

Saifet nodded, and M'Msee released him. "You will come once a week to see the King and several of the men who have already raised men. There, you will learn the skills needed to deal with the lad's stubbornness... and your own. If you do not appear, I will summon the Ufami to drag you to their court. Do you understand?"

Saifet nodded and replied hesitatingly, "But Wisdom the Ufami do not deal in the affairs of men." M'Msee turned to him and replied. "No, no, they do not. But I am Wisdom and am unlike other men. Therefore, if I call upon them and they come. Would you not be wise to fear and take heed? I ask again. Do you understand?"

Saifet nodded. "Good," said M'Msee. He then turned to Kemet and spoke firmly to him. "Do not think that because wisdom has disciplined your father that he is to be mocked. He is not. He has much to teach you that is good and, with further training, will teach you even more. You will heed his word without disrespect or willfulness. You must one day face the wilderness, and while your father might leave a bruise, the wilderness will take your life. Obey him. Do you understand?"

Kemet nodded. "Good. Now the two of you be off with you, for I am tired, but know Saifet that I will come to visit you in four days' time. I will know if my words have been heeded."

Saifet bowed in acknowledgment and placed his arm around his son, and the two walked quietly away.

M'Msee watched them depart, angry over what the father had done to his son, but angrier at himself that he allowed his ire to reveal his true strength. The old man sighed as he watched many of the townspeople depart. He could not recount how many centuries now he had told that story. How repeatedly, each year, people gathered to hear it, and with each telling it saddened him the more. It was an unpleasant experience to relive. Unpleasant indeed save the children. They always brought a smile to his face, and their innocence was a bright reminder of home.

He missed Aaru.

Missed the words of his father and hated Enkai for robbing him of so much. None alive, nor those that existed before, could ever fully know his grief in living in a world made by his father Hespheus, but the same, having fallen so short of what his father and Akuma intended. M'Msee knew that many of the clan's people thought his tales were just fables to give lessons to children. But such was the way of men to forget the ways of old.

He missed Ambilikie, missed the faithfulness of his servant and their friendship. A mortal man who stood by him even as he fought against Tanara's creator and who never wavered in his loving faithfulness; even when he could not bring himself to smite the final blow that would have ended Hespheus' damnable immortal life: a life puppeteered by Enkai from afar. For, despite the destruction and death that his father's blighted body wrought. He simply could not bring himself to kill him.

Not after he learned the truth.

Thought upon thought plagued him as he replayed his actions all those centuries ago. His mind wearied and tortured with questions on if he had done the right thing to allow the Kifu to live. M'Msee reflected on his ancient past and remembered raising his sword to cut the celestial tether that would kill the Nephthys within the chest of Hespheus and end his father's life only at the end to have Hespheus

speak to him in his voice... not Enkai's, pleading with his son to kill him.

M'Msee heard his father's voice, and he paused from destroying him, for at that moment he was not the walking dead but his beloved father. A father who was still alive despite what he had seen as he plummeted from Aaru. Hespheus was still alive and yet able to wrestle against Enkai's control, somehow battling against the schemes and magics of his brother. And in that moment of revelation, it was then that he lowered his sword and vowed to find a solution to release Hespheus' from the prison of his own body: to rescue his father from the evil curse Enkai had laid upon him and restore the celestial realm of Aaru to the glory it held before the Nephthys. His hope now restored by the hearing of his father's voice, he vowed he would see Akuma's and his father's dreams come true.

But to do so he needed to study, to remove himself from the petty aspirations of men who would have him lead nations or wage war, or covet land and wealth. For such things were meaningless to a being that could live forever and had come from the celestial realm only to be stranded on Tanara. Only wisdom mattered; only wisdom could undo the work of Enkai. All else was dross in comparison.

But men were not meant to live alone. Not even one such as him. So in time, this storyteller chose to love and chose once again engage with men. But he did not foresee the loss of those he loved, and their passing into death affect him so. And the years of seeing those that he loved, age and die, stretched him: stretched him as a thinning parchment ready to tear. For such grief was never in the design of Akuma. And the death of each loved one only hardened his resolve to see death itself undone.

Akuma's plan required patience, but even he grudgingly admitted to himself that the years of waiting for Akuma's plan to reveal itself wore on him... not from physical exhaustion; for he held within his breast the forged immortal heart given by Hespheus. But with each passing year, the Kifu's imprisonment took virtue from him.

He was old beyond the years of men and the power to contain the Kifu siphoned his strength ever so slowly. He was immortal but to keep the Kifu at bay aged him like a normal man. A price he willingly paid for choosing to find a solution other than the complete

annihilation of his father. He didn't mind. Aging allowed him to blend in; allowed men to forget who he was. And before any grew wise to his true nature, they passed the way of all men on the earth: to the grave. But this was a dangerous game, M'Msee realized. For Enkai still hunted him, and he could feel something was changing: something both in him and something in men... even something in the Kifu. M'Msee felt the weight on his shoulders. A burden he bore alone to be the sole celestial, keeping the end of all things at bay. A weight none in the world could know save the Hutari: a name and title he had abandoned lifetimes ago.

M'Msee felt a tug on his robes that broke him from his ruminations and he looked down to see a young girl with bronze skin and ivory-colored teeth smiling up at him with her arms raised high and beckoning him to lift her.

"Mudiwa!" he spoke happily, and he picked the child up into his bosom and hugged her. And he allowed her hair to brush against his aged cheek, and her smell was like jasmine. "You know you are my favorite child, young lady. It is always a pleasure to see you."

She tilted her head and smirked. "M'Msee, you say that every child is your favorite child."

M'Msee thought for a moment about how sharp her wit was for such a girl her age and replied. "Well, that is true, but today, you are my favorite."

She laughed and replied. "M'Msee, you said you would take me to see your butterfly sanctuary. Will you take me now?"

M'Msee set the girl back down and extended his hand. "How could I ever deny such a wonderful smile? It would be my honor, little one. Come, butterflies would be a welcome reprieve from the thoughts of this old man."

M'Msee then leaned upon his staff and the young girl and the aged one men once called the Hutari gingerly walked hand in hand to see the wonders of caterpillars break from their cocoons.

To be continued...

Thank You

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About the Author



A lover of thought, the Bible, the Art of War, and gaming: Donovan works professionally in the Human Services area and has a Master's degree in Nonprofit Management. He has over 20 years of service to the Christian community teaching the Bible as a member of the ordained clergy. Now retired from the clergy, Donovan has taken up his pen to express what has long been the untapped desire to reach people through fiction.

Donovan's heart for ministry has carried into his secular pursuits and he has worked with countless abused and neglected children, adults with developmental disabilities, and women who have been victimized by domestic and sexual abuse. He worked for eight years to feed the hungry and has taught as an adjunct professor for several years. He currently works full-time to eliminate employment barriers employment for women struggling with housing insecurity, returning refugees, and returning citizens. Donovan has three adult children: Candace, Christopher, and Alexander. He currently lives in Michigan with his wife, Lynnette.