

BIENDIEU

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Thunder exploded in a cloudless sky and shook the walls of our tribe's sleep cave. Dirt rained down on the sleepers huddled around the few coals still glowing in the firepit. The very ground seemed to tremble beneath us as if a great *lézard de tonnerre* had come to attack us in our home while we slept.

The other women screamed and their children wailed as the night sky outside burned brighter than midday. Kathé, my precious child, clutched my arm and buried her head between my breasts. I trembled but did not scream. I held Kathé and comforted her as I sniffed the air for the smell of burning leaves. How close was the fire? Would we have to flee from the smoke and flames? I smelled only the heavy damp of night air and the fear of my people.

No fire. There was no fire.

What was this strange thunder and light?

Even as the other women of the tribe looked to me, I looked to the likeness of Biendieu I had painted on the cave wall behind the pallet where Kathé and I slept. Biendieu would save us from whatever lit the sky, as he had saved us many times in the past. Our tribe was worshipful. We wore his symbol on our bodies; the women bore the children of his warriors. We kept his shrine safe from the beasts of this land that would destroy it.

Mautre, the warrior who had last claimed me and put the seed of Kathé in my belly, ran to me, his torch held high. His eyes seemed wild, and this more than the trembling of the ground and the steady rumbling noise frightened me. I had never see Mautre afraid. He is the strongest warrior of our tribe. I have seen him on the hunt, and I have seen him fight over possession of me. He has never shown fear. Until now.

He signaled me to follow him. Kathé cried as I untangled her fingers from the straps of my leather *tunique*. I kissed the top of her head and tried to smile for her.

"Maman will be back soon," I told her. "*Ma fille précieuse.*"

I left her on our sleep pallet for Biendieu to protect.

I had faith in Biendieu. He had chosen me from all our tribe to paint his image and the images of the beasts of the hunt and the fruits of the land. My place among our people was to paint these things so our tribe would prosper. Biendieu would protect his people. Even in the face of Mautre's fear, I believed.

I followed Mautre to the mouth of our sleep cave. Other warriors of the tribe cowered inside the cave's entrance, hiding behind the boulders that narrowed the opening and protected us from the largest of the terrible beasts that hunt us as surely as we hunt their smaller kin. The warriors' fear unmanned them. They looked to Mautre for leadership just as I did.

Mautre took my hand to lead me outside. Strange light danced across the rocky face of the mountain outside the cave, as if all the torches I had ever seen in my life flickered in the sky at one time. Mautre raised his own torch over our heads, and I saw it.

Shiny like the surface of water in the still air of early morning, the thing that turned night into bright day passed across the sky overhead. Fire erupted beneath it, long flames that trailed smoke darker and thicker than any fire that had ever raged through the dense jungle at the base of the mountain where we lived.

As I watched, the thing hovered just over the jagged peak above us, moving slowly toward the jungle in the valley below. Its size was beyond my understanding. It seemed as if a second moon was falling from the sky but was taking great care where it landed. I heard bellows from the jungle, saw the tops of trees bend and sway as the beasts fled from the strange sound and light. Even the mightiest creatures of the land were afraid of this new thing that had come to our world.

"What is it?" Mautre asked me.

I shook my head without looking at him, unable to tear my sight away from the gleaming surface of a moon that wasn't a moon.

"You must know. Biendieu speaks to you." He shook my arm. "Ask him."

Biendieu speaks to me through the images I paint. I am his as much as I am Mautre's. I have tried to ask things of Biendieu. When my boy child burned with fever and would not eat, I begged Biendieu for mercy. Biendieu gave me Kathé after my boy's spirit fled his body, but Biendieu did not speak to me. He has never answered me.

Mautre's need was intense, and for his sake I tried again. Biendieu's voice remained silent. I chose to believe it was because Biendieu knew our tribe had nothing to fear. Surely if this thing came to harm us, Biendieu would send us a way to protect ourselves.

We stood at the mouth of the cave, Mautre and I, watching as the thing dropped lower and lower until it reached the tops of the dark carpet of jungle trees a half-day's walk away. Even at that distance, we could hear it roar as the fires beneath it burned brighter. The trees beneath it caught fire. It dropped down on them, extinguishing the flames as it destroyed any life that remained beneath its massive bulk.

Mautre looked at me, spoke to me with his hand of his intention to go closer to the strange object. "I must know if it threatens us, *chere*," he said. His eyes were still wide with fear, but his gaze also held determination.

I looked at the other warriors huddled like children behind their stone guardians. None would go with Mautre, and he would not make them.

I would go.

I told Mautre this with my hands. He shook his head violently, reminding me of Kathé crouched on our sleep pallet. His hands flashed with the speed of his anger.

"Biendieu will protect me," I said.

"You are a fool."

I turned at the sound of Henré's raspy voice. Bent with age and leaning on his walking stick, Henré raised one hand and pointed with a misshapen finger at the place where the thing had landed. "Biendieu will not protect you if you go there," he said. "Do you not recognize it?"

"Do you know what it is?" Mautre asked Henré much as he had asked me earlier.

I saw Henré's son lurking in the shadows behind him, listening. Just as I am the vessel through whom Biendieu speaks to our tribe, the history of our tribe lives on through Henré's stories. His son will take his place after Henré's spirit leaves his body, just as I hope Biendieu will speak to Kathé after my spirit has left this world.

"It carries invaders from other worlds," Henré said, the strength of conviction in his ancient voice making his body tremble. "They bring evil to our land. They will corrupt us, turn us away from Biendieu and the traditions of our tribe."

Beings from other worlds? Our history tells us that our tribe has not always lived on this world. Biendieu brought us here from another place to live in this land where no others like ourselves had ever been. In Henré's stories, the tribes of Biendieu escaped the old world in order to save their spirits.

"Then Biendieu will protect us from them," I said.

"*Imbécile*," Henré said again. "You do not listen to the histories I tell. Biendieu gave all his scattered tribes this world as our own to keep to his ways. To take only what we need from the land. To live in harmony with all his creatures even if they seek to harm us, for it is their nature to hunt us as it is our nature to hunt them."

Henré's voice became stronger as he spoke. I felt a burning anger start low in my belly. Biendieu spoke through me, not Henré.

"*Naturiste*," Henré said. "That is the name Biendieu gave us. If we forsake his ways, he will turn his back on us."

"Biendieu expects us to live in harmony with all creatures on our world," I said. "This includes creatures that come to this world from other places, does it not?"

Henré glared at me with his old man's eyes. His face was scarred, his white hair and beard long and thin. I hoped Mautre would have as much fire in him when he reached Henré's age. I prayed to Biendieu that Mautre would still want me when my hair was white and my hands too bent and misshapen to paint Biendieu's image. Mautre's seed had planted no more children in my belly after Kathé. Any other warrior would have cast me aside to fend for myself and my child.

"*Créatures mauvaises*," Henré said. With his hand, he spoke of an evil that smiled as it corrupted. "That is what waits in the jungle. That is what has come to our world."

"I am not a man who hides," Mautre said. "I will not cower in darkness. If evil has come to corrupt us, I will fight it."

In that moment I loved Mautre as I had loved no other man.

"Biendieu would not want us to hide," I said. I took Mautre's hand in mine.

Henré shook his head at us "*Imbéciles*."

Henré shuffled back into the cave. His son turned to follow, not before he looked fearfully toward the jungle. Henré had planted the fear of whatever had come to our world in his son's heart. For the first time I wondered if Henré's fear had been passed down to him from his father and his grandfather before him. Had fear clouded the histories Henré told us? Had Biendieu truly wanted his people to fear beings from other worlds? I did not think so.

The same fear Henré felt swept through the tribe. Mautre spoke to his frightened warriors, his gestures wide, *emphatique*, his dark hair wild about his strong face. I heard whispers among the women, caught brief gestures and signals of panic. Children began to cry again, and Kathé ran to me, calling "*Maman! Maman!*" and clutched me tight. I comforted my daughter, held her, told her I would return with stories of all I had seen. I gave her dried fruit to eat and kissed her. I did not cry as I left her. I would see her again.

When Mautre and I began the long climb down the mountain from our sleep cave, only four warriors came with us. The sky was brightening with the coming of day, and we left our torches behind.

Halfway down the mountain, I turned to look at the rock ledge outside the entrance to the cave. Henré's son had come out to watch us. I used my hands to tell him to take care of his father, to take care of the tribe. He nodded at me and raised his hand in a gesture of good luck, then disappeared back inside the cave.

I did not venture into the jungle often, and only then to find the plants and clay I used to paint images on the cave walls. This day with Mautre and his warriors, I went farther into the jungle than I had ever gone in my life.

As we walked, the ground gave way from the rocky soil near the base of our mountain to the soft, sucking mud of a riverbank. Forcing my feet to move through it made my body ache and slowed me, and the warriors slowed their pace. Not once did they suggest I return to the sleep cave.

In the distance, I heard the roars and yowls of striped cats with their long, pointed teeth and claws as sharp as the points of the

warriors' spears, and I heard the death screams of the cats' prey. Birds flew and screeched in the high, leafy branches of the trees over our heads. The constant buzz of insects filled my head with noise, and the putrid odor of a great *lézard*'s long-dead kill filled my nose.

We were far from the safety of the sleep cave. If I did not have such faith in Biendieu, I would have questioned my decision to come with the warriors. I felt exposed in this vast jungle, where I could see nothing but green trees and smell nothing but death and decay around me. I longed to hold Kathé in my arms.

As the day lengthened, the beasts of the jungle became languid with the heat. I strained to hear any sounds of a great *lézard* passing but I heard only the low grunts and calls of the *lézards* who eat jungle plants. Mautre pointed out one such young *lézard* to me as we passed quietly so not to attract the attention of its *maman*. Had Mautre and his warriors been hunting, the *lézard* would have made a good kill. Its meat would have fed the tribe for many days. We left it eating beside a pool of water.

The light had dimmed with the coming night by the time we neared the place where the great thing from the sky had landed. We smelled the stench of charred trees and rotting things long buried beneath the jungle's muddy ground stirred to the surface when the thing fell to the earth. Mautre put up his hand, signaled for us to be still.

That is when I felt it. The trembling of the ground that told us a great *lézard de tonnerre* was near.

I felt fear then. We cannot kill a *lézard de tonnerre*. It stands taller than five of our warriors should they stand on each other's shoulders. It can shred a man with teeth longer than the bones of my legs. It can run on two legs faster than a man, and our warriors' spears are nothing but an annoyance to it. To be caught in the open by a *lézard de tonnerre* means death.

Mautre pushed me behind the thick trunk of a *marais* tree. I saw the other warriors seek shelter. Mautre covered me with his body, his spear held at the ready. The muddy ground beneath my feet trembled again and again, and now I heard the beast's great roar. I closed my eyes and covered my ears lest I cry out my fear.

Trees crashed to the ground as the *lézard de tonnerre* burst into the place where we hid. I opened my eyes in time to see the beast lunge forward and catch one of the warriors in its great mouth.

The man screamed as he was lifted into the air. I watched him spear the *lézard de tonnerre*'s neck, but then the *lézard* bit down and the man was no more.

I screamed.

The beast turned its giant head toward where I crouched in fear. I babbled incoherent prayers to Biendieu, pleading for our safety.

Mautre stepped forward between me and the beast even as the *lézard de tonnerre* opened its mouth and roared. The foul stench of its breath washed over us. I knew I was going to die. My arms ached with the thought that I would never hold Kathé again.

The ground *shook* beneath me then as it never has before. I heard a great crashing of many trees and a sound I have never heard – a *whoosh* and hum that filled my head. Red-tinged lightning speared through the trees and struck the *lézard de tonnerre* in its side. It screamed in pain and turned toward its attacker. More bolts of lightning struck it. It staggered under the onslaught. I smelled its burning flesh.

With one last gasping roar, the *lézard de tonnerre* fell to the ground. Mud and broken trees and rotting leaves splashed us where we hid. We waited, but the *lézard* lay still. It was dead and we still lived.

Biendieu had answered my prayers. He had spoken to me as surely as if his voice had sounded in my head.

I grasped Mautre's hand and he pulled me to my feet. The remaining warriors had approached the *lézard de tonnerre*, poking it with their spears to assure themselves it was truly dead. We froze as the ground shook again and a great shadow fell over us.

The warriors dropped their spears and fell to their knees, their heads bent, hands clasped in supplication. Mautre gripped my hand painfully and pulled me to him as we both looked at the being that had killed the *lézard de tonnerre*.

He towered over us, his shining head squat on broad shoulders that rose above the tallest jungle tree. He had two arms and walked on two legs like a man, but his legs were thick columns of metal that gleamed like the walls of his shrine. His arms did not end in five-fingered hands, but in fists of metal that clutched what I knew to be weapons.

I did not fear this being as the warriors did. I had painted his image on the walls of our cave, engraved his likeness on the skin of the people of our tribe. We have kept his shrine for untold generations, waiting for the day of his return. I have prayed to him. At long last, he has answered my prayers by returning to his people.

Henré was wrong. Biendieu did not want us to remain cowering in our sleep cave. He wanted us to come out and greet him.

I have looked upon my god.

Biendieu has returned.