

Long ago, the Wasambe people dared to settle in the scorching southern plains of Obermith. Their skin was darkened by the sun, and they grew hard as the stones that hold up the mountains. The great spirits of the southern plains were angered by the presence of men and none more than Lidinus, the king of the Ferralis. He forbade men from coming to the golden fields for he would broker with no rivals, but the Wasambe were forced by desperation to ignore the omens he sent by the wind and dreams.

The Ferralis, like their king, were cruel fay who took the form of lions, the beasts they favored most, but they had the faces of men. Their golden eyes were feline, and forked tongues laid behind razor teeth. Lidinus commanded all the beasts of the fields to leave and reside only in the darkest parts of the forests so they could not be hunted. He cursed the light that fell into rivers and lakes, and the water grew sour driving away the fish and making any man sick who thirsted and dared to drink. At night, he snuck into tents as families slept to whisper dark and terrible secrets into the ears of their children; secrets and truths of the beginning of the world and of the future. Children who heard the secrets of Lidinus had nightmares and walked aimlessly into the fields, never to be seen again. The shamans communed with the spirits to try and make peace, and while some of the kinder fay, tree spirits known as the Aziza, appealed to Lidinus on behalf of the humans, he grew angrier, and his kin relentlessly tormented the people.

Thousands died from starvation and illness. Mothers wept with dead children in their arms, and men hung themselves in despair. The shamans begged the Aziza to help them and stop the cruelty of the Ferralis, but the Aziza would not quarrel with them. Though they disapproved, they were still fay like the Ferralis and were bound by the laws of all spirit-kin.

The shamans pleaded, claiming that men had the right to life as any beast that is born and suffers. Still the Aziza would not confront the Ferralis, but they showed the shamans the secrets of the land. The tribes learned of agriculture so the villages could grow food. Families could pick berries and know which were poisonous and which were good to eat. Hunters learned to go to the rivers and dig small holes in the river banks. The water that filled the holes were no longer a sickly green and fetid, and men could safely drink from them.

Villages grew and prospered. They grew so large that great chieftains rose up and the tribes became powerful. Brave hunters journeyed far beyond the forest lines to hunt for animals like ox to plow fields. They killed lions and elephants for trophies and found other great beasts for food. The Ferralis were furious, and they hunted men for sport. Men quickly learned to never venture out of their villages at night, lest they become prey.

Brave warriors formed war parties and sought out the Ferralis and other evil spirits. The shamans protested the warmongering, afraid it would anger the spirits further, but the chieftains were eager for revenge and did not listen. Many war parties left; none returned.

The chieftains collaborated and continued to send out warriors, but it was in vain. All the parties disappeared in into the bleak forests and their stories were never known.

The Aziza abandoned the tribes for their blasphemous assaults on the Ferralis. The shamans, no longer useful as mediators, withdrew to the forests to live as hermits, and medicine men took up their roles as spiritual advisors and healers to the chieftains. The Ferralis, as well as other evil spirits, continued to plague the tribes, and the tribes were forced to live as victims to monsters. No more war parties were formed. Instead, the tribes built high walls made of spikes and thorns, and they only left the safety of their forts to defend farmers as they reaped the land for food. The people prospered no more, and despair settled over all the tribes.

Among one of the smaller tribes, a young man named Bogani toiled as all the Wasambe did. His family was of the warrior caste, and he was blessed with a beautiful wife and son, and though they had little, they found refuge in each other. Bogani's family dwindled one by one as they fell before evil fay that assaulted the villages until he had only his wife and son. He was a kind man, but his heart hardened as he watched his people cower before the fay. Bogani's wife demanded day and night that he stop fighting, but Bogani relented only when she threatened to leave him, so he abandoned his craft to calm the fears of his family. Instead of a spear, he took to the sickle and became a farmer.

One evening, Bogani was returning from a full-day's harvest to find his hut empty. He called out, but no one answered. He searched in and around the hut, and he found the tracks of a large animal and those of a child walking besides them. They led away from the village to the open fields. He grabbed his sickle and followed the tracks.

He found his wife sitting in a clearing with a small slipper in her hands. She was weeping, and he knew what happened: Lidinus had taken his son. It was common for children to disappear, but Bogani never thought it would happen to him. He came to his wife's side, but she pulled away when he tried to hold her. She refused to speak. He led her back to the hut, but she continued to ignore him and spent almost all her time weeping over their son's bed. No comfort he offered helped, and he had little to give for he was burdened with great pain as well. After several week of being strangers, his wife left him to marry a smith.

Bogani was alone, and in his sorrow he burned his fields until nothing remained but ashes. He poured the ashes over his head and he gathered together a grey mound to bath in. He ate the ash and his mouth became dry, but he did not stop eating. He cursed and screamed. He called up to the sky and proclaimed his hatred of all the spirits, especially the Ferralis. He vowed vengeance, and he promised clemency to any fay that would help him in his revenge, but none answered. When he lost his voice from shouting, he continued to eat until he choked. He stuffed still more ash into his mouth until he dropped among the embers.

Bogani awoke, surprised he still lived, and an old man sat watching him. The man was naked, and he had bird's feathers in his thick matted hair. He told Bogani that he heard his cries and walked for days to help for he knew no others would. Bogani rose to his feet, and

despite being sickly thin, he was strong; very strong. He recognized the old man as a shaman, and he asked if the shaman raised him from the dead, but the old man said it was Bogani's resentment that brought him back.

Knowing that shamans possessed the secrets of the spirits, Bogani demanded that the shaman tell him how to find and kill Lidinus and all the other Ferralis. The shaman did not answer at first, but then he told Bogani that he was the last of all the Wasambe shamans. All the others had died or abandoned their craft, and that soon the old ways would be no more. He knew how to help Bogani in his quest, but he would assist only if Bogani became his apprentice and keep the old traditions alive.

Impatient, Bogani felt a disgust for the shaman boil inside him, so he threatened to kill the old man, but the shaman showed no fear and ignored his threats. Bogani grabbed him by the throat and lifted him from the ground. He was so strong that he raised the shaman easily with one hand. The shaman remained calm. Frustrated and impressed, Bogani set him down and agreed to his terms, but secretly he swore to punish the shaman for delaying his vengeance.

The shaman took Bogani deep into the forest where the shaman's small hut sat in a clearing by a river. The water was not green and tepid, but instead it was clear like the sky. He rushed to the stream and drank deeply. The water burned his mouth and churned his stomach, and he doubled over in pain. He accused the shaman of poisoning him, but the old man said that nothing he did caused Bogani's pain; the dead could not bear the purity of water. He claimed Bogani had given his soul to ash, and it was only ash that would sustain him until he freed himself from his curse.

The shaman renamed Bogani Ashanti for it was offensive for the dead to have a name of the living. Ashanti meant "One Who Sustains Himself on Ash." The shaman opened a small pouch hanging by his side and pulled out a clump of ash. He gave the handful to Ashanti and commanded him to eat.

Confused, Ashanti took the ash and ate it. Instead of parching his mouth, it tasted sweet and settled the pain in his stomach. The shaman turned to walk away and said that the lessons would begin in the morning.

"Sleep if you can 'One Who Sustains Himself on Ash'," said the shaman as he walked into in his hut for the night.

Ashanti fumed being forced to wait. He sat and looked up at the sky, and his mind was troubled. He contemplated many times of strangling the old man in his sleep, but his hatred of Lidinus stayed his hand.

Days and then seasons passed, and the shaman would not tell him the Ferralis' weakness. Instead, he taught him the language of animals and plants, though none would dare speak with Ashanti. Plants would not sway as the wind blew past in Ashanti's presence, and animals never willingly came near him. The shaman taught him to respect life, and how to heal the wounds of beasts and things that grow. Because the shaman would not tolerate an apprentice to harm anything that lives-the shaman only ate a strange-colored honey

produced by swarms of bees that constantly visited him-, Ashanti was forced to eat the ashes from the shaman's fire which was wood from dead trees.

Every day was pain to Ashanti, and only the ash eased his suffering. Unable to vent his anger and satisfy his horrible desires, he would viciously stab at the ground with rocks until they turned to powder. The shaman looked at him with pity sometimes, and this made Ashanti hate him even more.

Sometimes one of the Aziza visited the shaman, and they seemed to converse to each other though no words were ever spoken, and he wondered if they conspired against him. The Aziza looked like a tree that walked and had the vague shape of a small child. Ashanti saw the shaman drink vision sap from the Uderu Tree with the Aziza but he was never allowed to participate. The shaman sent him away when the Aziza came, and he hid to watch from a distance.

The shaman drank the liquids and chanted with the Aziza, and each time they did this, the sick trees in the forest grew healthy. Plants that were dying produced fruit again, and the animal populations flourished. Ashanti watched astounded, and later he demanded that the shaman teach him this magic, but the shaman only shook his head saying that he would never teach Ashanti magic.

Ashanti screamed and threatened the shaman; constantly demanding to know the secrets of the Ferralis. He asked why the old man would accept him as his apprentice if he refused to teach his witchcraft. The shaman looked sad when he asked these questions, as if Ashanti failed to understand something so simple it was tragic. He said that Ashanti must be patient and the answers he needed would come in time. The shaman spoke esoterically like this often. He smiled, but whether the smile was kind or mocking, Ashanti did not know.

Years passed, and Ashanti learned more. He learned how the world was made and the coming of men, yet still he knew nothing of the Ferralis. One day, Ashanti could bear it no more, and he came to the shaman while he was meditating in his hut. He commanded the old man one last time to teach him magic and show him how to kill Lidinus, and the shaman denied him again knowing what his refusal would mean. He said no magic he could teach would help Ashanti. Even if Ashanti killed Lidinus and burned the whole world, his hate would not be quenched. He apologized to Ashanti for his failure to help him and said that he would continue to guide Ashanti even after the shaman's death.

Ashanti grabbed the old man by the neck and ripped his head off, leaving a bloody stump behind. He dragged the shaman's corpse to the river and tainted the water with crimson death. Aziza from a faraway hill watched horrified, and Ashanti flung the shaman's head at them declaring that since they would not help him, he would hold them equally liable for Lidinus' actions. He would hunt and punish all the fay for the wickedness of the Ferralis.

And so Ashanti began his slaughter of all spirit-kin. He hunted in the deepest parts of the forests and fields to destroy any monster he found, and no fay was safe. Many Aziza died, and he burned their flesh to eat them. Even the fay who could outrun him were killed for he burned down the forests and fields where they hid, but he never found the lair of the

Ferralis. Sometimes, Lidinus would show himself to laugh and mock Ashanti's attempts to kill him, and Ashanti chased him for hours, but he never caught the Ferralis king.

Eventually men came and tried to stop Ashanti, for his destruction was devastating the villages. Great warriors came, and Ashanti invited them to join him in his hunt for Lidinus, but none accepted. The warrior's spears pierced Ashanti's flesh, but only ash fell out, and Ashanti killed them with his bare hands. He relished in the warriors' fear as they died.

One day, while Ashanti searched for Lidinus, he came upon a meadow where there was a small pond. A Ferralis laid dying, it was covered in deep wounds, and it was trying to reach the pond. Ashanti watched for a moment, enjoying the Ferralis' agony, and then he came to the Ferralis. Sensing a familiarity with Ashanti, from one monster to another, the fay said it would grant one favor to Ashanti if he would carry him to the pond's edge to drink before it died.

Seizing the opportunity, Ashanti demanded that the Ferralis tell him where to find and how to kill Lidinus. The beast laughed boasting that no weapon devised or wielded by men could kill a Ferralis. Ashanti turned to walk away, but the beast called out to him. Being self-serving and callous like all it's kin it said that though no weapon could kill a Ferralis, its blood could only fall to one of their own, it would tell Ashanti the way to their lair. He told Ashanti of the hidden paths that only shamans and fay know. Once he finished, he bid Ashanti to take him to the pond. Instead, Ashanti called the monster a liar stating that no creature was invincible, and he dragged the beast further away. The Ferralis spat, hissed and pleaded for a single drop of water. He condemned Ashanti for breaking their agreement and tried tempting him with the riches of lost empires, the power to defy the gods and the pleasures of a thousand concubines. Ashanti only grinned as he dragged the fay to edge of a deep ravine and flung the creature down to its doom. The Ferralis' screams were drowned out by Ashanti's gleeful insults.

The next night Ashanti searched for hours for the hidden paths. He followed the moon's crossing of the sky and subdued a crocodile to ride its back across a great lake. He listened to the songs of crickets and sang with them while gently winding through his scorched forests. He tossed special stones at odd intervals till a wide cave appeared in front of him. The cave birthed a vile air, but having no fear, Ashanti entered without hesitation. Inside, he found never-ending piles of human bones and skulls, and as he delved deeper the smell grew more pungent. He found a large cavern with a hundred sleeping Ferralis inside. In the center laid Lidinus. The king was awake and smiling; he was waiting for Ashanti.

He charged, startling the pride and armed with nothing but his fists, but Lidinus only laughed as Ashanti grabbed him and flung him across the floor. Ashanti pounded him with blows that crumbled the stone beneath Lidinus, but the king shrugged them off. Ashanti hurled Lidinus against the walls, but each time the king would stand, completely unruffled. Ashanti tired, but he fought on until he could only crawl. Never once did Lidinus try to defend himself or stop laughing. The other Ferralis chortled and cheered on Ashanti in mockery. Eventually his great wrath faded and despair set in. The king stood over Ashanti and studied him. Lidinus proclaimed to his court that he could remove the curse and kill

Ashanti, but he enjoyed the human much more as he was. He led his kin out of the cave to hunt, and Ashanti was abandoned as the court was no longer entertained by him.

Humiliated, he crawled out of the cave. He tried to hang himself, but he had no need for air. He tore himself to pieces, but his wounds healed never-ending. He tried to stop eating ash, but the hunger won out in the end, and he felt his wrath return. He continued to hunt the fay, good and bad, and he even began to stalk and kill men in his frustration, no longer discerning his kind from the monsters he hunted. Lidinus still showed himself occasionally to watch Ashanti, but he no longer laughed, and Ashanti never tried to chase after him. When Ashanti rested, Lidinus would come and sit close to him; there was a curious change in his demeanor since their encounter in the cave, but the king never revealed his thoughts. He would sometimes sleep, and they spent the nights together. Ashanti wanted nothing more than to destroy the Ferralis king, but he refused to be made a fool again. He never spoke or acknowledged the king's presence, and Lidinus continued as his unwelcomed companion as he hunted the fay and humans, becoming feared by all except the Ferralis.

During the day, warriors came to kill him, and Ashanti invited them to join him in his empty quest to end the Ferralis king, but even when a few said yes, he killed them anyway. This continued for many years, and finally Ashanti had no more fay to kill, for all of them perished under his relentless crusade. He became more feared than the Ferralis, and men trembled at the mere mention of his name until one day an old warrior came.

The warrior had a long grey beard, and despite his venerable age, he deftly avoided Ashanti's strikes. Ashanti never fought such a skilled fighter, and he wonder if the old man was enchanted like him. The warrior cursed, calling Ashanti a hideous tyrant, a coward and a weakling. Many times the warrior successfully struck him with his spear, though they failed to do any damage. He spoke of his hatred for Ashanti, of honor and the senselessness of Ashanti's attempts to kill Lidinus. Ashanti wondered who this great fighter was, but he cared little; he did not trouble himself with the concerns of mortals.

Impressed, Ashanti lessened his strikes to give the warrior time to recover as he grew tired so he could enjoy their duel longer. They fought for several hours, and Ashanti offered the old man many times to join him and each time the warrior refused. When the warrior was completely exhausted, he collapsed to the ground.

Ashanti pinned the man's spear arm with his foot when the warrior tried to strike. Ashanti praised the warrior's ferocity before plunging his hand into the man's chest. As the light faded from his eyes, the warrior called to Lidinus, thanking him for his time among the fay and guiding him back to his father.

Curious at the outburst, Ashanti leaned in, parted the warrior's wild hair and looked closely at his face and recognized the warrior as his son grown old. Having realized what he had done, he clutched desperately at his son's corpse and wailed. Instead of ash, his face dampened with tears that burned his face. He felt his great strength begin to fade, and he wept until he passed out to sleep for the first time since his death.

The shaman appeared to him in a dream and told him to let go of his hate; only

then could he find the peace he sought. Ashanti was happy to see the old man again, and he begged forgiveness for his sins. The shaman smiled like when he was alive and said that Ashanti was to give his people a great gift, and that he would yet redeem himself. He told Ashanti that there are many kinds of magic in the world, and no sorcery the shaman could have taught him was greater than the magic that Ashanti and all men who dared to dream of a better world already possessed in their hearts. The shaman placed his hand on Ashanti's shoulder, and Ashanti trembled with the joy that only those who regain something precious they lost and never hoped to retrieve know.

Ashanti woke, and he did not burn with angry anymore. He stared up at the sky and cherished the beauty of the stars for they were the one treasure he had not spoiled. He buried his son's body and viewed his scorched fields and forests as if for the first time and mourned his betrayal to the world and the man he once was. Then he travelled for many days till he found a tree not torched to the ground. He felt his hunger for ash inside him, but the ache was distant and troubled him little. The tree was a hibiscus tree, and with its flowers and branches he made a beautiful crown.

Then he followed an old path, one he tread a long time ago, and came to a large cave that cut deep into the ground. Down and down he went till he found Lidinus. The king sat very still, waiting to see what Ashanti would do. Ashanti knelt before Lidinus and told the king his story. He spoke of his wife and son, his hatred of the Ferralis, the shaman, the destruction he wrought on the land and his own people and finally of the venerable warrior. At the mention of the death of Ashanti's son Lidinus gasped and moved as if to speak, but he chose not to interrupt. Ashanti thanked his ancient enemy for sparing his son all those years ago and allowing him to see his boy one last time. He kissed the king's paw and declared Lidinus the noblest of all sovereigns.

Stunned by a love given so freely and without reserve by a man who had every right to despise him, the king finally understood why he felt so alone and how barren his life was. His eyes clouded with tears, and he felt a love and admiration for the human well up inside him. He pronounced Ashanti to be now and forever his brother, and the other Ferralis stared at Ashanti with awe and jealousy of the unprecedented favor he received from the king.

Ashanti stood to place the crown upon the king's head. Lidinus accepted the gift and bowed graciously. The Ferralis, perplexed by the king's strange behavior imagined him to be under some enchantment. They coveted the king's crown believing it to possess some powerful magic they could not fathom. With reckless abandon, the entirety of the Ferralis fell upon their king and each other to get his prize. The slaughter continued until only King Lidinus remained standing. Ashanti was killed in the carnage for his unholy power left him, and his eyes were closed in peace.

Lidinus stood above Ashanti, his victory hollow. He picked up the body and carried it to one of the Wasambe villages. There he commanded the chieftain to bring all the other village leaders to him. Once all the chieftains appeared before Lidinus he told them that Ashanti vanquished all the evil spirits including the Ferralis, and the king survived only at great cost. He praised the dead hero as no man was ever praised before, and he laid the

crown gently on Ashanti's head. He told the villagers that men may stay in the southern plains as long as they wished, and Lidinus removed his curses from the land. He directed the animals to reside in the fields and vowed to never trouble humanity again. He even blessed the land so it would be bountiful for the Wasambe people. Lastly, he asked the villages to bury Ashanti's body and erect a great monument in his honor.

The people did as requested, and from that day forward, the Wasambe flourished as never before having no monsters to harm them. They forgot the crimes of Ashanti and remembered only the lasting prosperity he brought them. His tales spread far beyond Wasambe lands, and he was known as the first great hero of mankind. Warriors shouted his name as a battle cry, and children begged their parents to hear his tales.

As the seasons passed, Ashanti and the Ferralis became legend. Lidinus watched humanity from the shadows, and he never ceased to be amazed by the miracles such frail but brave creatures continuously wrought. He became patron and protector to the Wasambe for they were now his kin through Ashanti, and he challenged any wicked fay that dared to enter their lands. He guided children who became lost or separated in the wilderness back to their villages, and he never ceased to find joy and wonder in the great magic of human hearts. He witnessed humanity dream, become great and he smiled.