

**Secrets of Oseuros**

**THE**  
**WHISPERER'S**  
**WARNING**



Danielle Y. C. McClean

CaribbeanReads Publishing

## CHAPTER 4

# The Calling Song



JV was antsy for the rest of that afternoon. The final bell could not come soon enough and when it eventually sounded, he grabbed his binder, stuffed it in his book bag, and walked straight to the school's back fence. He passed the soccer field on the way, hailed some students who had already begun gathering for a game, and approached the gate. Surprisingly, the rusty heavy-duty padlock was still in the latch. The back gate remained locked during school hours but was usually promptly unlocked at dismissal by Hester.

## The Calling Song

Students and teachers referred to Hester as the yard guardian. Her duties were wide-ranging—from maintaining the soccer field, tending to trees and hedges and taking care of burnable trash, to changing broken windows and removing jep nests. Last year she had even replaced three hummingbird eggs that had survived a fall from their home on the upper boughs of a poui tree.

JV's gaze travelled upward. He considered scaling the tall chain-link fence before him, but the shoulder-height and thorny bougainvillea hedges along with the frightful barbed wire at the top were enough of a deterrent.

“Looks like you beat me to it, but today's not the day to try climbing this fence. Murphy. Remember?” Hester walked up to JV and unclipped a thick ring of keys from the front belt loop of her cargo pants. She wore the same thing every day: cargos, a loose-fitting shirt with long sleeves rolled up above the elbows, black sneakers, and a cap over her greying short-cropped hair. Hester flicked past numerous keys, selected a square-headed bronze one, and slipped it into the lock. The shackle released with a click and she removed the padlock, putting it in one of her many pockets. “Goes back on at four o'clock sharp.”

“Thanks, Hester.” JV passed through the gate and instead of turning right toward home, continued straight.

It was not long before he reached the northern side of the cemetery. He pulled himself over the low wall

and threaded a path between the headstones and grave markers. The Alcavere cemetery was overgrown, like many other public spaces outside the village centre, so JV had to proceed slowly, placing his feet with care as he made his way to the gate on the forest side. Many of the graves he passed were neglected, the etchings on their headstones barely visible beneath moss and vines, but a few showed signs of upkeep with scrubbed stones and loose flowers at their base.

JV stepped through the cemetery gate and into Oscuros. While others feared the expansive and mysterious forest, he felt comfortable among its trees and wildlife. He had always felt a pull toward Oscuros, and since Papa Bois had assured him in their last encounter that JV could count on faithful friends in the forest, any apprehensions or concerns he may have had, had disappeared. In those seemingly never-ending hectares of wood where others felt vulnerable, he felt untouchable. Invincible, even. JV believed he had a sixth sense where the forest was concerned.

“Papa Bois!” he shouted as he walked deeper in. He had no idea if simply calling out would work. Papa Bois had been the one to find him in all their prior meetings.

“Papa Bois!” he called again. He thought of how cool it would be to have a beacon he could shine whenever he wanted the Protectors’ help. An idea like that would

## The Calling Song

be worth mentioning to Papa Bois, he mused. A weight landed on his shoulder and was quickly followed by a sharp tug on his right ear. He was accustomed to Curty's drop ins by now and reached up to pet his friend's leg.

“Hey Curty. You wouldn't happen to know where Papa Bois is, would you?” Curty cocked his head, blinked at JV, then picked at the fur under his arm.

“Any tip or clue would help, buddy.” JV kept walking. “How do animals find him when they're in trouble? Is there a favourite spot that he likes or is he always on the move?”

Curty regarded JV with what seemed to be comprehension for a few seconds then jumped to the nearest branch and took off.

“Wait!” JV yelled. “Am I supposed to follow you?” But the tailless capuchin was no longer in sight. JV checked his watch and realised that he could not spend much longer in the forest. Granny B would be waiting to hear all about his first day back at school. He did not want to disappoint Carol, though, and was about to call out for Papa Bois one more time, when he felt a familiar tingle on his arms and the back of his neck. He had neither heard nor seen anything, but instantly knew that he was no longer alone.

“Papa Bois?” He turned in a full circle but saw no one.

“I am here.” The robust voice came from in front of JV. He squinted, but it was not until Papa Bois took a step

forward that JV could distinguish the Protector's shape from the surrounding foliage.

Not for the first time, JV marvelled at Papa Bois's ability to blend seamlessly into the forest despite his peculiar and impressive form. One would think that a six-foot tall two-legged man-beast with horns would be easy enough to spot, but the mossy fur with which he was covered provided the perfect camouflage. Whether by coincidence or not, Curty had reappeared and perched on a branch that was level with the Protector's brow.

“You seek me, Man's child. Why?”

“I wanted to see you again, but I also need your help.” JV paused, remembering Papa Bois's unfavourable opinion of douens. He had referred to them as mischief-makers whose presence in the forest was unwelcome.

“I am listening, Man's child. If it is my will and in my power, I shall assist.”

JV's eyes met the Protector's, and he did his best to emulate Riaz's most successful look of innocence.

“Well, I'd like to get in touch with douens.”

Papa Bois's nostrils flared. The little of his lips that was visible under his heavy facial hair instantly puckered.

“Listen. Wisdom follows,” Papa Bois began, but JV held up his hand.

“I remember,” he said. “They're mischief-makers, and if I know what's good for me, I'll stay away from them.”

## The Calling Song

“Humph!” Papa Bois crossed his arms and tapped a hoof.

“It's important, and I don't need to talk to all of them, just one... and it's really my friend Carol who needs to contact Marie—the douen. I need to talk to her too because what she knows may have to do with me, but I promised Carol that I'd tell her whatever I found out and we'd go see her together.” JV stopped, realizing that he was rambling.

Papa Bois's hoof stopped tapping, but his arms remained crossed over the ram's horn that hung from his neck. JV knew that the horn was how Papa Bois communicated with animals and wondered if it was what he would need to call Marie.

“No, Man's child,” the Protector said, as though reading JV's mind. “The horn is for my charges. Douens are not my charges, and like you, hear nothing when I blow.”

Papa Bois studied JV. When he spoke again, he said, “I have no dealings with the douens, but we know one who does. Follow me.” Curty dropped to his familiar spot on JV's shoulder, and they did as they were told and followed.

\*\*\*

The pond was as JV remembered. Tranquil and picturesque, it was one of his favourite places in Oscuros, yet he had not returned since Adelle's rescue. Now, instead of just being able to appreciate its beauty, he was aware

of the danger that lurked under the waters—waters that appeared so calm and inviting. Below, beyond where he could see, was Mama D'Lo's realm, and given that he had witnessed her dragging one of her enemies to its depths, it was a realm that he never wished to visit.

Having approached the pool's edge, Papa Bois stood with hands on hips, closed his eyes, and from somewhere deep in his throat emitted a sound that was a combination of a growl and a hiss. Curty twitched and jumped to JV's other shoulder, clinging to his neck with one arm. The air seemed to vibrate, raising JV's pores, and the strange rumble repeatedly climbed and fell, as though in song, before reaching an abrupt end. Instinctively, JV looked toward the water.

The ripples that started in the centre of the pool were small at first, but they gradually grew in size and intensity until Mama D'Lo's head and shoulders broke the surface. In two graceful strokes, she swam to the large, flat rock where JV had first glimpsed her three months before, then propped an elbow on the smooth stone and rested her chin in the cup of her palm. Droplets in her braids twinkled and the water undulated gently behind her as she slowly swished her thick serpent tail.

Her gaze rested on Papa Bois, and JV had the impression that the two Protectors could communicate everything they wished to say to each other without



## The Calling Song

words. As if to confirm his thoughts, they looked at him in unison, and not for the first time, he felt the magnetic tug of Mama D'Lo's greenish-gold irises and diamond-shaped pupils. He stepped back.

“You are afraid of me,” she said, “but there is no need, JV. I am not your foe.”

JV knew her words were true, but the memory of Mama D'Lo hypnotizing and then enveloping one of the animal smugglers in her coils before pulling him underwater was an image that he would never forget. He considered stepping forward again as a sign of good faith, but his feet refused to move.

Mama D'Lo's gaze slid to Papa Bois. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Papa?”

“A good day to you, Mama. The youngling requires your help,” Papa Bois replied, signalling JV with a thrust of his chin and flowing beard.

“Does he?” she responded, her own chin and voice raised in interest.

“He does. It is business with which I shall not meddle, so I will leave him to you.”

A small sound of protest escaped JV's lips. Papa Bois turned to him.

“Is there something else, Man's child?”

JV stole a furtive glance at the pond. “I wanted to ask: How do I find you? In case I need your help again.”

“You cannot find me, Man's child. I am not one to be found. You will look but will not see me if it is not my wish. Call, and if I am able, I will come. I trust that you will use sound judgment before doing so.”

JV nodded and made a mental note: Emergencies only. “Is there a code word I should use so you'll know it's me?”

The corner of Papa Bois's mouth twitched with the hint of a smile. “Your voice is sufficient. I know you.” He turned to leave, paused and said, “Listen, Man's child. Wisdom follows. There is mischief afoot in this wood. You must take care beneath these trees.”

“Mischief? What—” A loud snap, like the crack of a gun, interrupted JV. Papa Bois stiffened at his side and JV ducked, expecting to feel the waft of air from a passing bullet. Curty's grip tightened around his neck.

“What was that?” JV asked.

Papa Bois regarded him with raised brows. “That, Man's child,” he said slowly, “was a trap.”

JV straightened and scanned the ground. There were leaves, twigs, and toadstools, but he saw no trap.

“A trap,” Papa Bois continued, “that has gone off on the other end of the forest.”

“How...?” JV examined Papa Bois's expression for any hint of trickery, but he detected nothing beyond the Protector's usual stern countenance. “On the other end of the forest?” he asked.

## The Calling Song

Papa Bois nodded.

“But...,” JV began, then his stomach clenched. Pa Gregory had said that Stewards’ senses were sharper. More acute. What had just happened, this display of supersonic hearing, was the proof he had been waiting for. It laid to rest any lingering doubts he had about his well-hidden secret identity—an identity so well hidden that even he had not known about it.

On one hand, he was relieved that his Steward powers were beginning to manifest themselves, but on the other, he was filled with an alarming uncertainty. How could he, a twelve-year-old who only recently learned about the unnatural world, fulfil a Steward’s duties, whatever those were? He'd have to let Pa Gregory know about this development. From what Pa Gregory had begun telling him, there was a lot he had to learn.

“I must go,” Papa Bois said, his voice bringing JV back to the present. “Be alert, Man's child, and call again if you need me.” He nodded at Mama D'Lo and bounded away in two leaps.

JV looked after him for a few moments then took three tentative steps closer to the pond. Mama D'Lo had not changed position. Her eyes were on JV, and she was making circular patterns in the water with her tail. He was not sure how to begin to ask for what he wanted.

“Papa Bois stays clear of matters regarding douens,” she finally said.

“Yes,” JV said. “My friend, Carol, and I have to speak with one of them. Her name is Marie. She—”

Mama D'Lo held up her hand.

“You need not convince me of your reason, JV. No explanation is owed. Yes, I can help you, but know that to call one douen is to potentially call them all.”

JV had not considered that, and the thought of being among a group of douens brought shivers up his spine. It was not something to worry about now, though. He and Carol could strategise about that when the time came.

“I have found that there is magic in music,” Mama D'Lo continued. “It has the power to soothe, daze, excite, and inflame, and I use it more often than not.”

JV was acquainted with the effects of Mama D'Lo's musical prowess, having witnessed, on two occasions, her songs' ability to heal and hypnotise. He swallowed nervously.

“It is a simple enough song,” she went on, “and they will recognise it as mine. Listen:

‘Though your face was lost and life forgot  
I still remember you;  
Your years though short were not for naught  
I still remember you;

## The Calling Song

I call you here to lend an ear  
Be it mine or yours today;  
I'd like to chat, to spend some time  
There will be things to say.”

Mama D'Lo's voice was as sweet as JV remembered, and with great effort he dismissed its beauty and focused on the lyrics and melody. She sang a second time and he hummed along, remembering a few of the words here and there. By the sixth round, he was confident that he knew the song by heart.

“Yes, that's it. You have a pleasant enough sound,” she said, and JV felt the tip of his ears go warm from her praise. “There is no guarantee,” she cautioned, “that it will draw who you wish, or any of the douens at all. It is an invitation that can be accepted or declined. I do ask one thing of you, however. Be careful with whom you share this gift. I would not want to hear of it being used with evil intent.”

“Yes, Mama D'Lo. I will be,” JV promised, gravely.  
“Thank you.”

By now, it was past the time that he had intended to leave the forest. Backing away, he waved good-bye to Mama D'Lo who was now basking on the rock, face up, with eyes half closed. An arm raised in dismissal was the

last that JV saw of Mama D'Lo before he turned and left the glade.

Humming the song to himself as he walked, JV was careful not to let the words escape his lips. Before he realised that it had happened, however, he was humming something quite different—the tune to that year's Road March calypso. He stopped walking and humming. Something was not right. Closing his eyes, he concentrated and forced both tunes out of his head. He listened and waited. *Yes.* Someone was whistling the Road March tune right there in Oscuros.

Curious, JV began to walk in the direction from which he thought the whistling was coming, and then he saw the mist. It was suspended, as mist usually is, and was about a soccer field away but gathering rapidly and creeping toward him. His temples started to throb. Curty screeched and pulled at JV's hair before jumping to the nearest branch and disappearing among the leaves. Not wanting to see what had given Curty such a fright, JV started to run.