THE LOTUS AND THE SPEAR

by Mike Resnick

Once, many eons ago, there was an elephant who climbed the slopes of Kirinyaga, which men now call Mount Kenya, until he reached the very summit, where Ngai ruled the universe from His golden throne.

"Why have you sought me out?" demanded Ngai.

"I have come to ask you to change me into something else," answered the elephant.

"I have made you the most powerful of beasts," said Ngai. "You need fear neither the lion nor the leopard nor the hyena. Wherever you walk, all My other creatures rush to move out of your path. Why do you no longer wish to be an elephant?"

"Because as powerful as I am, there are others of my kind who are more powerful," answered the elephant. "They keep the females to themselves, so that my seed will die within me, and they drive me away from the water holes and the succulent grasses."

"And what do you wish of me?" asked Ngai.

"I am not sure," said the elephant. "I would like to be like the giraffe, for there are so many treetops that no matter where he goes he finds sustenance. Or perhaps the warthog, for nowhere can he travel that there are no roots to be found. And the fish eagle takes one mate for life, and if he is not strong enough to defend her against others of his kind who would take her away from him, his vision is so keen that he can see them approaching from great distances and move her to safety. Change me in any way you wish," he concluded. "I will trust to Your wisdom."

"So be it," pronounced Ngai. "From this day forward, you shall have a trunk, so that the delicacies that grow atop the acacia trees will no longer be beyond your reach. And you shall have tusks, that you may dig in the ground for both roots and water no matter where you travel upon My world. And where the fish eagle has but a single superior sense, his vision, I shall give you two senses, those of smell and hearing, that will be greater than any other animal in My kingdom."

"How can I thank you?" asked the elephant joyously, as Ngai began the transformation.

"You may not wish to," answered Ngai.

"Why not?" asked the elephant.

"Because when all is said and done," said Ngai, "you will still be an elephant."

###

Some days it is easy to be the mundumugu - the witch doctor - on our terraformed world of Kirinyaga. On such days, I bless the scarecrows in the fields, distribute charms and ointments to the ailing, tell stories to the children, offer my opinions to the Council of Elders, and teach my youthful assistant, Ndemi, the lore of the Kikuyu people - for the mundumugu is more than a maker of charms and curses, more even than a voice of reason in the Council of Elders: he is the repository of all the traditions that make the Kikuyu what they are.

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he is the repository of all the traditions that make the Kikuyu what they are.

Some days it is difficult to be the mundumugu. When I must decide disputes, one side will always be unhappy with me. Or when there is an illness that I cannot cure, and I know that soon I will be telling the sufferer's family to leave him out for the hyenas. Or when Ndemi, who will someday be the mundumugu, gives every indication that he will not be ready to assume my duties when my body, already old and wrinkled, reaches the point, not too long off, when it is no longer able to function. And, once in a long while, it is terrible to be the mundumugu, for I am presented with a problem against which all the

accumulated wisdom of the Kikuyu seems like a reed in the wind. Such a day begins like any other. I awake from my slumber and walk out of my hut into my boma with my blanket wrapped around my shoulders, for though it will soon be warm the sun has not yet removed the chill from the air. I light a fire and sit next to it, waiting for Ndemi, who will almost certainly be late. Sometimes I marvel at the facility of his imagination, for never has he given me the same excuse twice. As I grow older, I have taken to chewing a qat leaf in the morning to start the blood flowing through my body. Ndemi disapproves, for he has been taught the uses of qat as a medicine and he knows that it is

addictive. I will explain to him again that without it I would probably be in constant pain until the sun was overhead, that when you are as old as I am your muscles and joints do not always respond to your commands and can fill you with agony, and he will shrug and nod his head and forget again by the following morning.

Eventually he will arrive, my young assistant, and after he explains why he was late today, he will take my gourds down to the river and fill them with water, and then gather firewood and bring it to my boma. Then we will embark upon our daily lesson, in which perhaps I will explain to him how to make an ointment out of the pods of the

acacia tree, and he will sit and try not to squirm and will demonstrate such self-control that he may well listen to me for ten or twelve minutes before asking when I will teach him how to turn an enemy into an insect so that he may stamp on him.

Finally I will take him into my hut, and teach him the rudiments of my computer, for after I am dead it will be Ndemi who will have to contact Maintenance and request the orbital adjustments that will affect the seasons, that will bring rain to the parched plains, that will make the days longer or shorter to give the illusion of seasonal changes.

Then, if it is to be an ordinary day, I will fill my pouch with charms and will

begin walking through the fields, warding off any thahu, or curse, that has been placed on them, and assuring that they will continue to yield the food we need to survive, and if the rains have come and the land is green, perhaps I will slaughter a goat to thank Ngai for His beneficence.

If it is not to be an ordinary day, I usually know at the outset. Perhaps there will be hyena dung in my boma, a sure sign of a thahu, or the wind may come from the west, whereas all good winds blow from the east.

But on the day in question, there was no wind at all, and no hyenas had been in my boma the night before. It began like any other day. Ndemi was late - this

time, he claimed, because there was a black mamba on the path up my hill, and he had to wait until it finally slithered off into the tall grasses - and I had just finished teaching him the prayer for health and long life that he must recite at the birth of a new baby, when Koinnage, the paramount chief of the village, walked up to my boma.

"Jambo, Koinnage," I greeted him, dropping my blanket to the ground, for the sun was now overhead and the air was finally warm.

"Jambo, Koriba," he replied, a worried frown on his face. I looked at him expectantly, for it is very rare for Koinnage to climb my hill and visit me in my boma.

"It has happened again," he announced grimly. "This is the third time since the long rains."

"What has happened?" I asked, confused.

"Ngala is dead," said Koinnage. "He walked out naked and unarmed among the hyenas, and they killed him."

"Naked and unarmed?" I repeated. "Are you certain?"

"I am certain."

I squatted down near my dying fire, lost in thought. Keino was the first young man we had lost. We had thought it was an accident, that he had stumbled and somehow fallen upon his own spear. Then came Njupo, who burned to death when his hut caught fire while he was

inside it. Keino and Njupo lived with the young, unmarried men in a small colony by the edge of the forest, a few kilometers from the main village. Two such deaths might have been coincidence, but now there was a third, and it cast a new light on the first two. It was now obvious that, within the space of a few brief months, three young men of chosen to commit suicide rather then continue their lives on Kirinyaga.

"What are we to do, Koriba?" asked Koinnage. "My own son lives at the edge of the forest. He could be the next one!"

I took a round, polished stone from the pouch about my neck, stood up, and handed it to him.

"Place this beneath your son's

sleeping blanket," I said. "It will protect him from this thahu that is affecting our young men."

"Thank you, Koriba," he said gratefully. "But can you not provide charms for all the young men?"

"No," I replied, still greatly disturbed by what I had heard. "That stone is only for the son of a chief. And just as there are all kinds of charms, there are all kinds of curses. I must determine who has placed this thahu on our young men, and why. Then and only then can I create strong enough magic to combat it." I paused. "Can Ndemi bring you some pombe to drink?"

He shook his head. "I must return to the village. The women are wailing the

death chant, and there is much to be done. We must burn Ngala's hut and purify the ground upon which it rested, and we must post guards to make sure that the hyenas, having feasted so easily, do not come back in search of more human flesh."

He turned and took a few steps toward the village, then stopped.

"Why is this happening, Koriba?" he asked, his eyes filled with puzzlement. "And is the thahu limited just to the young men, or do the rest of us bear it too?"

I had no answer for him, and after a moment he resumed walking down the path that led to the village. I sat down next to my fire and stared silently out

over the fields and savannah until Ndemi finally sat down next to me.

"What kind of thahu would make Ngala and Keino and Njupo all kill themselves, Koriba?" he asked, and I could tell from his tone that he was frightened.

"I am not sure yet," I replied. "Keino was very much in love with Mwala, and he was very unhappy when old Siboki was able to pay the bride price for her before he himself could. If it were just Keino, I would say that he ended his life because he could not have her. But now two more have died, and I must find the reason for it."

"They all live in the village of young men by the edge of the forest," said

Ndemi. "Perhaps it is cursed." I shook my head. "They have not all killed themselves."

"You know," said Ndemi, "when Nboka drowned in the river two rains ago, we all thought it was an accident. But he, too, lived in the village of young men. Perhaps he killed himself as well." I had not thought of Nboka in a long time. I thought of him now, and realized that he could very well have committed suicide. Certainly it made sense, for Nboka was known to be a very strong swimmer.

"I think perhaps you are right," I replied reluctantly.

Ndemi's chest puffed up with pride, for I do not often compliment him.

"What kind of magic will you make, Koriba?" he asked. "If it requires the feathers of the crested crane or the maribou stork, I could get them for you. I have been practicing with my spear."

"I do not know what magic I shall make yet, Ndemi," I told him. "But whatever it is, it will require thought and not spears."

"That is too bad," he said, shielding his eyes from the dust that a sudden warm breeze brought to us. "I thought I had finally found a use for it."

"For what?"

"For my spear," he said. "I no longer herd cattle on my father's shamba, now that I am helping you, so I no longer need it." He shrugged. "I think I shall leave it

at home from now on."

"No, you must always take it with you," I said. "It is customary for all Kikuyu men carry spears." He looked inordinately proud of himself, for I had called him a man, when in truth he was just a kehee, an uncircumcised boy. But then he frowned again.

"Why do we carry spears, Koriba?" he asked.

"To protect us from our enemies."

"But the Maasai and Wakamba and other tribes, and even the Europeans, remain in Kenya," he said.

"What enemies have we here?"

"The hyena and the jackal and the crocodile," I answered, and added silently: And one other enemy, which

must be identified before we lose any more of our young men, for without them there is no future, and ultimately no Kirinyaga.

"It has been a long time since anyone needed a spear against a hyena," continued Ndemi. "They have learned to fear us and avoid us." He pointed to the domestic animals that were grazing in the nearby fields. "They do not even bother the goats and the cattle any more."

"Did they not bother Ngala?" I asked.

"He wanted to be eaten by hyenas," said Ndemi. "That is different."

"Nonetheless, you must carry your spear at all times," I said. "It is part of what makes you a Kikuyu."

"I have an idea!" he said, suddenly

picking up his spear and studying it. "If I must carry a spear, perhaps I should have one with a metal tip, so that it will never warp or break." I shook my head. "Then you would be a Zulu, who live far to the south of Kenya, for it is the Zulus who carry metal-tipped spears, which they call assagais."

Ndemi looked crestfallen. "I thought it was my own idea," he said.

"Do not be disappointed," I said. "An idea can be new to you and old to someone else."

"Really?"

I nodded. "Take these young men who have killed themselves. The idea of suicide is new to them, but they are not the first to think of it. We have all

thought of killing ourselves at one time or another. What I must learn is not why they have finally thought of it, but why they have not rejected the thought, why it has become attractive to them."

"And then you will use your magic to make it unattractive?" asked Ndemi.

"Yes."

"Will you boil poisonous serpents in a pot with the blood a freshly-killed Zebra?" he asked eagerly.

"You are a very bloodthirsty boy," I said.

"A thahu that can kill four young men requires powerful magic," he replied.

"Sometimes just a word or a sentence is all the magic one needs."

"But if you need more..."

I sighed deeply. "If I need more, I will tell you what animals to slay for me." He leaped to his feet, picked up his slender wooden spear, and made stabbing motions in the air. "I will become the most famous hunter ever!" he shouted happily. "My children and grandchildren will sing songs of praise to me, and the animals of the field will tremble at my approach!"

"But before that happy day arrives," I said, "there is still the water to be fetched and the firewood to be gathered."

"Yes, Koriba," he said. He picked up my water gourds and began walking down the hill, and I could tell that in his imagination he was still confronting

charging buffaloes and hurling his spear straight and true to the mark.

###

I gave Ndemi his morning lesson - the prayer for the dead seemed a proper topic - and then went down to the village to comfort Ngala's parents. His mother, Liswa, was inconsolable. He had been her first-born, and it was all but impossible to get her to stop wailing the death chant long enough for me to express my sorrow.

Kibanja, Ngala's father, stood off by himself, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Why would he do such a thing, Koriba?" he asked as I approached him.

"I do not know," I answered.

"He was the boldest of boys," he

continued. "Even you did not frighten him." He stopped suddenly for fear that he had given offense.

"He was very bold," I agreed. "And bright."

"That is true," agreed Kibanja. "Even when the other boys would lie up beneath the shade trees during the heat of the day, my Ngala was always finding new games to play, new things to do." He looked at me through tortured eyes. "And now my only son is dead, and I do not know why."

"I will find out," I told him.

"It is wrong, Koriba," he continued. "It is against the nature of things. I was meant to die first, and then all that I own - my shamba, my cattle, my goats -

everything would have been his." He tried to hold back his tears, for although the Kikuyu are not as arrogant as the Maasai, our men do not like to display such emotions in public. But the tears came anyway, making moist paths down his dusty cheeks before falling onto the dirt. "He did not even live long enough to take a wife and present her with a son. All that he was has died with him. What sin did he commit to merit such a dreadful thahu? Why could it not have struck me down and let him live?"

I remained with him a few more minutes, assured him that I would ask Ngai to welcome Ngala's spirit, and then I began walking to the colony of young men, which was about three kilometers

beyond the village. It backed up to a dense forest, and was bordered to the south by the same river that wound through the village and broadened as it passed my hill.

It was a small colony, composed of no more than twenty young men. As each had undergone the circumcision ritual and passed into manhood, he had moved out from his father's boma and taken up residence here with the other bachelors of the village. It was a transitional dwelling place, for eventually each member would marry and take over part of his family's shamba, to be replaced by the next group of young men.

Most of the residents had gone to the village when they heard the death chants,

but a few of them had remained behind to burn Ngala's hut and destroy the evil spirits within it. They greeted me gravely, as befitted the occasion, and asked me to utter the chant that would purify the ground so that they would not forever be required to avoid stepping on it.

When I was done, I placed a charm at the very center of the ashes, and then the young men began drifting away - all but Murumbi, who had been Ngala's closest friend.

"What can you tell me about this, Murumbi?" I asked when we were finally alone.

"He was a good friend," he replied. "We spent many long days together. I

will miss him."

"Do you know why he killed himself?"

"He did not kill himself," answered Murumbi. "He was killed by hyenas."

"To walk naked and unarmed among the hyenas is to kill oneself," I said. Murumbi continued staring at the ashes. "It was a stupid way to die," he said bitterly. "It solved nothing."

"What problem do you think he was trying to solve?" I asked.

"He was very unhappy," said Murumbi.

"Were Keino and Njupo also unhappy?"

He looked surprised. "You know?"

"Am I not the mundumugu?" I replied.

"But you said nothing when they died."

"What do you think I should have said?" I asked.

Murumbi shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know." He paused. "No, there was nothing you could have said."

"What about you, Murumbi?" I said.

"Me, Koriba?"

"Are you unhappy?"

"As you said, you are the mundumugu. Why ask questions to which you already know the answers?"

"I would like to hear the answer from your own lips," I replied.

"Yes, I am unhappy."

"And the other young men?" I continued. "Are they unhappy too?"

"Most of them are very happy," said Murumbi, and I noticed just the slightest edge of contempt in his tone. "Why should they not be? They are men now. They spend their days in idle talk, and painting their faces and their bodies, and at nights they go to the village and drink pombe and dance. Soon some of them will marry and sire children and start shambas of their own, and some day they will sit in the Council of Elders." He spat on the ground. "Indeed, there is no reason why they should not be happy, is there?"

"None," I agreed.

He stared defiantly at me.

"Perhaps you would like to tell me the reason for your unhappiness?" I

suggested.

"Are you not the mundumugu?" he said caustically.

"Whatever else I am, I am not your enemy."

He sighed deeply, and the tension seemed to drain from his body, to be replace by resignation. "I know you are not, Koriba," he said. "It is just that there are times when I feel like this entire world is my enemy."

"Why should that be?" I asked. "You have food to eat and pombe to drink, you have a hut to keep you warm and dry, there are only Kikuyu here, you have undergone the circumcision ritual and are now a man, you live in a world of plenty...so why should you feel that such

a world is your enemy?" He pointed to a black she-goat that was grazing placidly a few yards away.

"Do you see that goat, Koriba?" he asked. "She accomplishes more with her life than I do with mine."

"Don't be silly," I said.

"I am being serious," he replied. "Every day she provides milk for the village, once a year she produces a kid, and when she dies it will almost certainly be as a sacrifice to Ngai. She has a purpose to her life."

"So have we all."

He shook his head. "That is not so, Koriba."

"You are bored?" I asked.

"If the journey through life can be

likened to a journey down a broad river, then I feel that I am adrift with no land in sight."

"But you have a destination in sight," I said. "You will take a wife, and start a shamba. If you work hard, you will own many cattle and goats. You will raise many sons and daughters. What is wrong with that?"

"Nothing," he said, "if I had anything to do with it. But my wife will raise my children and till my fields, and my sons will herd my animals, and my daughters will weave the fabric for my garments and help their mothers cook my food." He paused. "And I...I will sit around with the other men, and discuss the weather, and drink pombe, and someday,

if I live long enough, I will join the Council of Elders, and the only thing that will change is that I will now talk to my friends in Koinnage's boma instead of my own. And then one day I will die. That is the life I must look forward to, Koriba." He kicked the ground with his foot, sending up little flurries of dust. "I will pretend that my life has more meaning than that of a she-goat," he continued. "I will walk ahead of my wife while she carries the firewood, and I will tell myself that I am doing this to protect her from attack by the Maasai or the Wakamba. I will build my boma taller than a man's head and lay thorns across the top of it, and tell myself that this is to protect my cattle against the

lion and the leopard, and I will try not to remember that there have been never been any lions or leopards on Kirinyaga. I will never be without my spear, though I do nothing but lean on it when the sun is high in the sky, and I will tell myself that without it I could be torn to pieces by man or beast. All these things I will tell myself, Koriba...but I will know that I am lying."

"And Ngala and Keino and Njupo felt the same way?" I said.

"Yes."

"Why did they kill themselves?" I asked. "It is written in our charter that anyone who wishes to leave Kirinyaga may do so. They need only have walked to that area known as Haven, and a

Maintenance ship would have picked them up and taken them anywhere they wished to go."

"You still do not understand, do you?" he said.

"No, I do not," I admitted. "Enlighten me."

"Men have reached the stars, Koriba," he said. "They have medicines and machines and weapons that are beyond our imagining. They live in cities that dwarf our village." He paused again. "But here on Kirinyaga, we live the life that we lived before the Europeans came and brought the forerunners of such things with them. We live as the Kikuyu have always lived, as you say we were meant to live. How, then, can we go

back to Kenya? What could we do? How would we feed and shelter ourselves? The Europeans changed us from Kikuyu into Kenyans once before, but it took many years and many generations. You and the others who created Kirinyaga meant no harm, you only did what you thought was right, but you have seen to it that I can never become a Kenyan. I am too old, and I am starting too far behind."

"What about the other young men of your colony?" I asked. "How do they feel?"

"Most of them are content, as I said. And why shouldn't they be? The hardest work they were ever forced to do was to nurse at their mothers' breasts." He

looked into my eyes. "You have offered them a dream, and they have accepted it."

"And what is your dream, Murumbi?"

He shrugged. "I have ceased to dream."

"I do not believe that," I said. "Every man has a dream. What would it take to make you content?"

"Truly?"

"Truly."

"Let the Maasai come to Kirinyaga, or the Wakamba, or the Luo," he said. "I was trained to be a warrior. Therefore, give me a reason to carry my spear, to walk unfettered ahead of my wife when her back is bent under her burden. Let us raid their shambas and carry off their

women and their cattle, and let them try to do the same for us. Do not give us new land to farm when we are old enough; let us compete for it with the other tribes."

"What you are asking for is war," I said.

"No," replied Murumbi. "What I am asking for is meaning. You mentioned my wife and children. I cannot afford the bride price for a wife, nor will I be able to unless my father dies and leaves me his cattle, or asks me to move back to his shamba." He stared at me with reproachful eyes. "Don't you realize that the only result is to make me wish for his charity or his death? It is better far to steal women from the Maasai."

"That is out of the question," I said. "Kirinyaga was created for the Kikuyu, as was the original Kirinyaga in Kenya."

"I know that is what we believe, just as the Maasai believe that Ngai created Kilimanjaro for them," said Murumbi. "But I have been thinking about it for many days, and do you know what I believe? I believe that the Kikuyu and Maasai were created for each other, for when we lived side by side in Kenya, each of us gave meaning and purpose to the other."

"That is because you are not aware of Kenya's history," I said. "The Maasai came down from the north only a century before the Europeans. They are nomads, wanderers, who follow their herds from

one grazing area to another. The Kikuyu are farmers, who have always lived beside the holy mountain. We lived side by side with the Maasai for only a handful of years."

"Then bring us the Wakamba, or the Luo, or the Europeans!" he said, trying to control his frustration.

"You still don't understand what I am saying. It is not the Maasai I want, it is the challenge!"

"And this is what Keino and Njupu and Nboka wanted?"

"Yes."

"And will you kill yourself, as they did, should a challenge not materialize?"

"I do not know. But I do not want to live a life filled with boredom."

"How many others in the colony of young men feel as you do?"

"Right now?" asked Murumbi. "Only myself." He paused and stared unblinking at me. "But there have been others before; there will be again."

"I do not doubt it," I replied with a heavy sigh. "Now that I understand the nature of the problem, I will return to my boma and think about how best to solve it."

"This problem is beyond your ability to solve, mundumugu," said Murumbi, "for it is part of the society that you have fought so hard to preserve."

"No problem is incapable of solution," I said.

"This one is," answered Murumbi

with absolute conviction.

I left him standing there by the ashes, not totally convinced that he was wrong.

###

For three days I sat alone on my hill. I neither went into the village nor conferred with the Elders. When old Siboki needed more ointment for his pain, I sent Ndemi down the path with it, and when it was time to place new charms on the scarecrows, I instructed Ndemi to tend to the matter, for I was wrestling with a far more serious problem.

In some cultures, I knew, suicide was an honorable way of dealing with certain problems, but the Kikuyu did not belong to such a culture.

Furthermore, we had built a Utopia here, and to admit that suicides would occur from time to time meant that it was not a Utopia for all our people, which in turn meant that it was not a Utopia at all. But we had built our Utopia along the lines of a traditional Kikuyu society, that which existed in Kenya before the advent of the Europeans. It was the Europeans who forcefully introduced change into that society, not the Kikuyu, and therefore I could not allow Murumbi to change the way we lived, either. The most obvious answer was to encourage him - and others like him - to emigrate to Kenya, but this seemed out of the question. I myself had received higher degrees in both England and America,

but the majority of Kikuyu on Kirinyaga had been those (considered fanatics by a Kenyan government that was glad to be rid of them) who had insisted in living in the traditional way prior to coming to Kirinyaga. This meant that not only could they not cope with the technology that permeated every layer of Kenyan society, but also that they did not even possess the tools to learn, for they could neither read nor write. So Murumbi, and those who would surely follow him, could not leave Kirinyaga for Kenya or any other destination. That meant they must remain.

If they remained, there were only three alternatives that I could see, all of them equally unpalatable. First, they

could eventually give up in despair and kill themselves, as four of their young comrades had. This I could not permit.

Second, they could eventually adjust to the life of ease and idleness that was the lot of the Kikuyu male, and come to enjoy and defend it as passionately as did the other men of the village. This I could not foresee.

Third, I could take Murumbi's suggestion and open up the northern plains to the Maasai or the Wakamba, but this would make a mockery of all our efforts to establish Kirinyaga as a world for and of the Kikuyu. This I could not even consider, for I would not allow a war that would destroy our Utopia in order to create his.

For three days and three nights I searched for another alternative. On the morning of the fourth day, I emerged from my hut, my blanket wrapped tightly about me to protect me from the cold morning air, and lit my fire.

Ndemi was late, as usual. When he finally arrived, he was favoring his right foot, and explained that he had twisted it on his way up my hill - but I noticed, without surprise, that he limped on his left foot when he went off to fill my gourds with water.

When he returned, I watched him as he went about his duties, collecting firewood and removing fallen leaves from my boma. I had chosen him to be my assistant, and my eventual successor,

because he was the boldest and brightest of the village children. It was Ndemi who always thought of new games for the others to play, and he himself was always the leader. When I would walk among them, he was the first to demand that I tell them a parable, and the quickest to understand the hidden meaning in it. In short, he was a perfect candidate to commit suicide in a few more years, had I not averted that possibility by encouraging him to become my assistant.

"Sit down, Ndemi," I said as he finished collecting the last of the leaves and throwing them on the dying embers of my fire.

He sat down next to me. "What will

we study today, Koriba?" he asked.

"Today we will just talk," I said. His face fell, and I added, "I have a problem, and I am hoping that you will provide me with an answer to it."

Suddenly he was alert and enthused. "The problem is the young men who killed themselves, isn't it?" he said.

"That is correct," I answered him. "Why do you suppose they did it?" He shrugged his scrawny shoulders. "I do not know, Koriba. Perhaps they were crazy."

"Do you really think so?"

He shrugged again. "No, not really. Probably an enemy has cursed them."

"Perhaps."

"It must be so," he said firmly. "Is not

Kirinyaga a Utopia? Why else would anyone not wish to live here?"

"I want you to think back, Ndemi, to the days before you started coming to my boma every day."

"I can remember," he said. "It was not that long ago."

"Good," I replied. "Now, can you also remember what you wanted to do?" He smiled. "To play. And to hunt."

I shook my head. "I do not mean what you wanted to do then," I said. "Can you remember what you wanted to do when you were a man?"

He frowned. "Take a wife, I suppose, and start a shamba."

"Why do you frown, Ndemi?" I asked.

"Because that is not really what I

wanted," he replied. "But it was all I could think of to answer."

"Think harder," I said. "Take as much time as you wish, for this is very important. I will wait." We sat in silence for a long moment, and then he turned to me.

"I do not know. But I would not have wanted to live as my father and my brothers live."

"What would you have wanted?"

He shrugged helplessly. "Something different."

"Different in what way?"

"I do not know," he said again. "Something more..." - he searched for the word - "more exciting." He consider his answer, then nodded, satisfied.

"Even the impala grazing in the fields lives a more exciting life, for he must ever be wary of the hyena."

"But wouldn't the impala rather that there were no hyenas?" I suggested.

"Of course," said Ndemi, "for then he could not be killed and eaten." He furrowed his brow in thought.

"But if there were no hyenas, he would not need to be fleet of foot, and if he were no longer fleet of foot, he would no longer be an impala."

And with that, I began to see the solution.

"So it is the hyena that makes the impala what he is," I said. "And therefore, even something that seems to be a bad or dangerous thing can be

necessary to the impala."

He stared at me. "I do not understand, Koriba."

"I think that I must become a hyena," I said thoughtfully.

"Right now?" asked Ndemi excitedly. "May I watch?"

I shook my head. "No, not right now. But soon."

For if it was the threat of the hyena that defined the impala, then I had to find a way to define those young men who had ceased to be true Kikuyus and yet could not leave Kirinyaga.

"Will you have spots and legs and a tail?" asked Ndemi eagerly.

"No," I replied. "But I will be a hyena nonetheless."

"I do not understand," said Ndemi.

"I do not expect you to," I said. "But Murumbi will." For I realized that what he needed was a challenge that could be provided by only one person on Kirinyaga.

And that person was myself.

###

I sent Ndemi to the village to tell Koinnage that I wanted to address the Council of Elders. Then, later that day, I put on my ceremonial headdress, painted my face to look its most frightening, and, filling my pouch with various charms, I made my way to the village, where Koinnage had assembled all the Elders in his boma. I waited patiently for him to announce that I had important matters to

discuss with them - for even the mundumugu may not speak before the paramount chief - and then I got to my feet and faced them.

"I have cast the bones," I said. "I have read the entrails of a goat, and I have studied the pattern of the flies on a newly-dead lizard. And now I know why Ngala walked unarmed among the hyenas, and why Keino and Njupo died."

I paused for dramatic effect, and made sure that I had everyone's attention.

"Tell us who caused the thahu," said Koinnage, "that we may destroy him."

"It is not that simple," I answered. "Hear me out. The carrier of the thahu is Murumbi."

"I will kill him!" cried Kibanja, who

had been Ngala's father. "He is the reason my son is dead!"

"No," I said. "You must not kill him, for he is not the source of the thahu. He is merely the carrier."

"If a cow drinks poisoned water, she is not the source of her bad milk, but we must kill her anyway," insisted Kibanja.

"It is not Murumbi's fault," I said firmly. "He is as innocent as your own son, and he must not be killed."

"Then who is responsible for the thahu?" demanded Kibanja. "I will have blood for my son's blood!"

"It is an old thahu, cast upon us by a Maasai back when we still lived in Kenya," I said. "He is dead now, but he was a very clever mundumugu, for his

thahu lives on long after him." I paused. "I have fought him in the spirit world, and most of the time I have won, but once in a while my magic is weak, and on those occasions the thahu is visited upon one of our young men."

"How can we know which of our young men bears the thahu?" asked Koinnage. "Must we wait for them to die before we know they have been cursed?"

"There are ways," I answered. "But they are known only to myself. When I have finished telling you what you must do, I will visit all the other villages and seek out the colonies of young men to see if any of them also bears the thahu."

"Tell us what we must do," said old Siboki, who had come to hear me

despite the pain in his joints.

"You will not kill Murumbi," I repeated, "for it is not his fault that he carries this thahu. But we do not want him passing it to others, so from this day forward he is an outcast. He must be driven from his hut and never allowed back. Should any of you offer him food or shelter, the same thahu will befall you and your families. I want runners sent to all the nearby villages, so that by tomorrow morning they all know that he must be shunned, and I want them in turn to send out still more runners, so that within three days no village on Kirinyaga will welcome him."

"That is a terrible punishment," said Koinnage, for the Kikuyu are a

compassionate people. "If the thahu is not his fault, can we not at least set food out for him at the edge of the village? Perhaps if he comes alone by night, and sees and speaks to no one else, the thahu will remain with him alone." I shook my head. "It must be as I say, or I cannot promise that the thahu will not spread to all of you."

"If we see him in the fields, can we not acknowledge him?" persisted Koinnage.

"If you see him, you must threaten him with your spears and drive him away," I answered. Koinnage sighed deeply. "Then it shall be as you say. We will drive him from his hut today, and we will shun him forever."

"So be it," I said, and left the boma to return to my hill.

All right, Murumbi, I thought. Now you have your challenge. You have been raised to use the spear; now you will eat only what your spear can kill. You have been raised to let your women build your huts; now you will be safe from the elements only in those huts that you yourself build. You have been raised to live a life of ease; now you will live only by your wits and your energies. No one will help you, no one will give you food or shelter, and I will not rescind my order. It is not a perfect solution, but it is the best I can contrive under the circumstances. You needed a challenge and an enemy; now I have provided you

with both.

I visited every village on Kirinyaga during the next month, and spent much time speaking to the young men. I found two more who had to be driven out and forced to live in the wilderness, and now, along with my other duties, such visits have become part of my regular schedule. There have been no more suicides, and no more unexplained deaths among our young men. But from time to time I cannot help wondering what must become of a society, even a Utopia such as Kirinyaga, where our best and our brightest are turned into outcasts, and all that remains are those who are content to eat the fruit of the lotus.

The End