

**Mwanamke Tembo**  
(The Elephant Woman)  
By  
Milton Davis

For six months of the year Kiswahili, Arab and Indian ships sailed west with the monsoons, their dhows pregnant with goods from East Africa. Six months later they returned, their African bounty exchanged for eastern luxuries and ready to begin the cycle again. Belay played both sides of the coin like most Swahili traders. One particular item whose value spread beyond Africa was ivory. The tusks of the massive tembos were prized throughout the trade lands for its beauty and versatility. It was a common item of trade, its value fluctuating with supply and demand. This particular season ivory was invaluable for it was nowhere to be found.

Changa assisted the other bahari making repairs on Belay's dhows when the messenger boy found him. The boy trembled as he took in the imposing presence that was Changa Diop, former pit fighter now merchant apprentice.

"Bwana Diop," the boy finally stammered. "You must come quickly. Yusef is in trouble."

Changa smirked. "If I know Yusef it's most likely the other way around. Take me to him."

Changa and the boy ran from the docks to the market place. A crowd gathered at the center stalls, their excited voices masking the curses and shouts of the object of their interest. Changa shoved his way through and emerged into a familiar scene. Yusef stood shirtless, his scimitar in his right hand, a gourd of palm wine in his left. Five men surrounded him, each holding a sword and a dagger. There was no telling what the

hulking Yao had done to set the men off, but Changa was sure it involved, palm wine, boasting and insults of height and manhood. Whatever the reason, Changa could not let his friend stand alone. He crept behind the man closest to him and grabbed his shoulders. He spun the man around and punched him across the jaw then caught his sword and dagger as he collapsed. Changa strode through the others before they could react and stood by Yusef.

“Kibwana!” Yusef bellowed. “What brings you here?”

“It seems you need my help,” Changa replied.

“Hah! This is nothing. There were ten of them minutes ago. I was just finishing up the rest.”

Changa was in no mood for a fight. He stepped before Yusef and scanned each of the men with hard eyes.

“If you know who I am then you know how this will end. I suggest you go to your friends and family and forget whatever insults my friend threw at you. It’s not worth your lives.”

The men eyed each other nervously. A silent agreement was apparently struck; they sheathed their weapons and backed away, merging into the disappointed crowd.

Changa tossed his borrowed weapons to the ground and shoved his enormous friend.

“I thought you were a good Muslim,” Changa commented.

“I am faithful to the Prophet in all ways except one,” Yusef declared. “It is a vice I struggle with daily.”

Changa shook his head and grinned. “Let’s get back to the dhow. A day of hard work should sober you up.”

“I have a better way.”

Changa and Yusef turned to the man who spoke the threatening words. The Yemeni stood as tall as Yusef but more powerfully built, his shirt opened to display his massive hair covered chest. His huge hands gripped the sash about his waist, the silken cloth holding two scimitars that glinted in the sunlight. Yusef’s other attackers returned with more sailors.

Changa advanced with his hands raised.

“We have no quarrel with you, bwana.”

“But I have one with you, Mbogo.”

Changa shrugged. The man knew his pit fighter moniker which meant he knew of his reputation. Once again a man hoped to raise his worth by defeating him.

“We can both walk away and live to see another season, Yemeni,” Changa offered.

The Yemeni laughed and his sycophants joined in.

“You may frighten some with your pitiful threat, Swahili, but not me. Fear does not recognize the face of Muhammad Mustafa!”

The Yemeni yanked a scimitar free and sliced at Changa’s neck but the agile Bakongo ducked under the blade. He slammed his fist into Mustafa’s gut as he stole the other scimitar from the Yemeni’s belt. The man staggered back and reached for the blade, his thick fingers bunching among themselves. He glared at the blade in Changa’s hand and grimaced.

Mustafa attacked and Changa reacted. The scimitars sparked as they met, Changa matching the Yemeni's blows with equal speed and strength. Mustafa hacked and hewed with surprising alacrity for his size but Changa parried each blow with ease. Frustration creased Mustafa's brow; his eyes narrowed as he attempted to increase the fury of his assault.

Changa had enough. He sidestepped Mustafa's thrust meant for his gut, dragging his blade across Mustafa's chest. Changa stood behind the man before he knew he was wounded. He raised his sword high and slammed the hilt into Mustafa's temple. Man and blade rattled to the ground together.

Yusef kept the others at bay with wide swings of his blade. Occasionally an attacker slipped by his wide swings only to meet the Kikuyu's iron fist. Mustafa's rattling scimitar warned his companions that their champion was defeated. They fled once again, dragging their battered comrades with them.

No sooner had the attackers dispersed did Belay's messenger boy appear at his side again. "Changa, bwana Belay wishes to see you immediately!"

Changa strode to Yusef, who sat in the street raising his gourd to his lips. Changa slapped the container from his hand.

"Come with me" he ordered.

"Where are we going?" Yusef slurred.

"To see Belay. Pretend you're sober."

They followed the boy to Belay's home. The two story structure testified to his wealth; it was one of the largest in the stone town. They sped through the courtyard,

entering the entrance to the lower level. The old merchant paced the floor, mumbling as he was prone to do when he was agitated.

Changa stepped forward. “Bwana, you sent for me?”

Belay jerked his head toward Changa and smiled.

“Ah, Changa! Come, I have a special task for you.”

Belay’s smile dissipated when he noticed Yusef barely standing.

“Is he drunk?”

“No, bwana,” Yusef slurred.

“Get out!” Belay shouted.

Yusef bowed and almost fell into Belay. Changa caught his big friend and spun him towards the door.

“Wait for me outside,” he whispered.

Belay glared at Yusef until he exited.

“I would toss him into the streets if it wasn’t for you,” he said. “Why do you tolerate him?”

Changa shrugged. “He’s a good man. You won’t find a harder worker or more loyal man in Mombasa.”

“When he’s not in trouble,” Belay added. He waved his hand as he sat at his desk, a sign he was about to change the subject. “I need you to take a safari into the interior.

The Omani merchants want ivory and there is none. The Yao are very late.”

“How soon do I need to leave?”

“As soon as possible,” Belay replied. “If they can’t get ivory from me they’ll sail down the coast.”

“I’ll make arrangements immediately,” Changa said as he stood.

Belay came to him, placing a fatherly hand on his shoulder. “Do not fail me, Changa.”

Changa returned the gesture. “I won’t, bwana.”

Changa was ready to depart within a week. His crew consisted of eighty men, sixty bearers and twenty warriors. Belay had given Changa much responsibility on the safari, more than he’d done in the past. He had the merchant’s permission to trade for the precious material at the hunting camps. It was a test of Changa’s skill and he was eager for the opportunity.

The safari also offered a useful reason for Yusef’s participation. Changa’s looming friend was Yao and knew the way to the tembo hunting camps. It saved them the expense of hiring a guide, which thrilled Belay immensely. The bulky man stood before the group, his fists pressed into his hips, a scowl on his face.

“Come on, dogs!” he shouted. “The sun slips away. We have miles to cover and ivory to claim!”

Changa shook his head. “Calm down, Yusef. These men are porters, not slaves.”

Yusef huffed. “I’ve seen better men buried by vultures.”

“Grab your gear and let’s go,” Changa said. “Like you said, the sun slips away.”

The safari began mid-morning and did not go unnoticed. Any plan by Belay drew the attention of his rivals. Unlike Belay, they were willing to wait for the ivory traders’ arrival. After a brief stop in the country town on the mainland to secure additional supplies, they entered the hinterlands. Years had past since Changa journeyed inland and

he was overwhelmed by the plethora of wildlife inhabiting the savannah. Yusef strode ahead, a huge smile on his face. He turned to Changa with sparkling eyes.

“This is my home, kibwana. This is the land that made me.” He slowed, walking stride for stride with Changa.

“I’m saving my coins to purchase one hundred head of cattle and grain to plant my fields. I’ll build a farm outside my home village. When I become wealthy I will take many wives from the best families who will bear me sons.”

“That’s a bold future coming from a man who loves palm wine as much as you.”

“Make fun of me while you can, kibwana,” Yusef snapped. “I would break your skinny neck if I didn’t have so much respect for you.”

Changa smirked. “Lucky for me. Just keep focused on our task.”

They came across the first village two days later, a cluster of cone shaped abodes with high thatched roofs. The villagers seemed uninterested in them as they followed the main road to the chief’s abode. The chief, Kiambogo, was a short, thick man with bulbous cheeks. He sat before his generous home draped in a worn leopard robe, flanked by his two wives under the shade of two acacias whose canopies reached out to form a natural arch over the home. Kiambogo offered them food and rest, but Changa’s impatience would not allow it.

“We seek the tembo hunters,” Changa said.

The chief nodded. “As do we. In normal years our men would travel to Mombasa with tusks from the hunters. They are not farmers so they trade us for food, milk and meat. But they have not come. The men we sent to contact them have not returned.”

“You have no idea what happened to them?” Changa asked.

Kaimbogo shook his head. "Like I said, we are not hunters. They could have been killed by Maasai or lions. Who knows? Their families mourn and I can do nothing. We will send no more men. The money we make from the tusks is good but not necessary."

"Is there someone that could lead us to the hunters?" Yusef asked.

"Of course," Kiambogo answered. "But they won't. My people are tired of disappearing."

"I will show you."

Changa and the others sought the owner of the female voice that volunteered. She knelt, her head partially bowed as he looked at them. Wide brown eyes scanned them then lingered on Changa. She lifted her head, her pretty face evident to all.

"This is not your place," Kiambogo said to the woman.

"My husband is gone," she countered. "If you will not find him I will."

She strode to Changa. "I am Kenda. I will take you to the tembo hunters."

"No!" Kiambogo protested. "You will bring her wrath on us, too?"

Changa placed a puzzled gaze on the chief. "Her? What is going on here?"

Kiambogo glared at Kenda before responding. "The people call her Mwanamke Tembo, the elephant woman. They say she is the reason the ivory has stopped. Some say she has killed the hunters because they slaughter her children."

Changa frowned skeptically. "And you believe this?"

Kiambogo shrugged. "All I know is the ivory supply has ceased and my men have not returned."

Changa extended his hand to the chief. “Thank you for your hospitality. I hope you don’t mind if we allow Kenda to help us.”

Kiambogo waved his hand. “It’s her fate, not mine. Not that I expect anything to happen to you, bwana Changa.”

Changa chuckled. “Of course you don’t.”

Changa’s caravan left the village, travelling until dusk. By nightfall they gathered around the campfires, preparing meals. Kenda sat at Changa’s fire, her sad eyes gazing into the flames. Yusef plopped down beside her, a gourd of palm wine in his large hands.

“What troubles you, sister?” he asked.

Kenda’s head snapped in his direction. “What do you think? My husband is missing two weeks now. I cannot manage our farm myself. I must find him.”

“Who manages it now?” Yusef asked gruffly. “Your man is gone and you are here. What about your children?”

Kenda slapped the wine gourd from Yusef’s hand. “If I cannot find my husband I can’t keep my farm. My children and I will starve. If Kiambogo won’t find him, I will.”

“Your husband may be dead, Kenda,” Changa said. “We won’t know until we find the tembo hunters.”

“Changa!” Yusef exclaimed.

Changa shrugged. “There’s no need to lie. Kenda knows this. That’s why she’s here.”

Changa looked at the woman. Her wet eyes reflected the firelight as he turned away. Yusef frowned at him.

“We cannot be sure,” he said.

Kenda stood and stalked away from the fire. Changa enjoyed his stew, ignoring Yusef's angry stare.

"You didn't have to say that," Yusef said.

"She knows," Changa answered. "Either we will find him or his body."

The next morning they broke camp and continued their trek. Kenda led them through the scrub forests and open land. By midday the landscape began to rise; by dusk a gathering of steep hills gathered on the horizon.

"The hunters' camp is over the ridge," she said.

"We'll camp here tonight," Changa decided. "We'll need our strength to climb those peaks."

They spent the night at the base of the ridge, the smoke trails of their campfires rising to obscure the otherwise clear night. The next day they scaled the hill, reaching the summit by midday. Below them was the hunters' camp, or what remained of it. The huts were crushed, piles of grass and thatch surrounded by decaying bodies. Kenda let out a painful wail and scrambled down the hill. Changa and his men followed more cautiously. They wandered among the destruction, their weapons at the ready.

"Something definitely happened here," Changa said. "Search the camp. Check the perimeter for tracks. Whoever did this much destruction had to leave a trail."

"Are we going to fight them?" Yusef asked.

"Of course not," Changa said. "I want to know how long ago this took place. Whoever did this might return."

"Bwana, come quickly!" Nafasi, the head porter, waved furiously at him with his right hand and he pointed with his left.

Changa ran to the excited porter. He and three others gestured at a large ruin. Protruding from the pile were the tips of tusks. Changa moved aside the grass, exposing a wealth of ivory.

“It seems we have been blessed,” he announced. “Whoever destroyed the camp didn’t do it for wealth. They would have taken the tusks.”

“It was probably Maasai,” Yusef said. “They care for nothing but cattle.”

“Whatever the reason, there’s more than enough for us to take back. Belay will be very blessed.”

Yusef gestured towards Kenda. She trudged to each body, kneeling before it and inspecting it delicately with her fingers, her lips moving with silent words.

“She won’t find him, Changa said. “Even if he’s here she won’t recognize him. They’ve been dead too long.”

“Maybe she can sense him,” Yusef said. “He was her husband. They say that a woman and her husband have a special bond. “We could help her.”

“You can help her,” Changa suggested. “I came here to find ivory and I have.”

“We would not have found it without her,” Yusef argued.

Changa folded his arms across his chest. “That’s true, but like I said, there is nothing we can do.”

Yusef went to Kenda and stood beside her. She glanced at him then continued her morbid inspection. Changa and the others went into the hills to set up camp. By nightfall they had eaten and retired to their tents. Sleep came quickly to Changa, pleased that he’d completed his first task for Belay so quickly.

Changa awoke suddenly; his hands seeking his sword. A feeling had seeped into his mind, the sense that something was coming, something ominous. Moments later the ground trembled beneath him. He jumped to his feet as the trembling increased. A sound ripped through the night, a sharp trumpeting that gripped his heart and pressed out a hint of fear. He came out of his hut and was greeted by the fearful eyes of his companions. Yusef rambled to him.

“The ground shakes, kibwana,” he said. “It happens here sometimes.”

Changa didn't reply. His attention was drawn to a wavering luminescence rising over the horizon. The trembling grew as the light came closer. The trumpeting increased, a sound heavy with warning.

“Tembo,” one man said. “Something has frightened them.”

“Or angered them,” Changa added.

“Where is Kenda?” Yusef asked.

Changa scanned the camp. The woman was nowhere to be seen. Yusef must have done the same; for no sooner had Changa looked at his friend did he rush down the hill to the hunters' camp. Changa chased after him, followed by the rest of the men. The strange light increased, beams streaking through the trees and illuminating the camp.

Changa emerged from the tree line and stumbled. A ragged vanguard of tembos advanced on the camp. But these beasts were like nothing he'd ever seen. Bleached bones showed through their translucent hides, their trunks ghostly extensions from their heads. They followed the largest tembo, a massive matriarch whose trunk emitted the eerie blasts cutting through the humid night. Astride her was a woman. Tribal patterns laced her face, lines that glowed with the spectral light of the herd. The tembo

rider held a massive shoka in her left hand. She waved the axe while screaming a sound similar to the matriarch.

Kenda stood before the charging herd, her face bunched in anger. She yelled at the herd, her voice drown by their cacophonous stampede. The tembos stopped before her, rising in unison on their hind legs. Yusef reached the woman and lifted her into his arms like an errant child. The tembo rider leaped from the matriarch, the shoka raised high as she dropped like a bird of prey towards Yusef and Kenda. Changa passed the fleeing duo, raising his sword and knife above his head. The rider slammed into the three of them, pitching Yusef and Kenda forward. Changa caught the massive blade between his blades as he fell onto his back. He stared into the malevolent eyes of the tembo woman. Her skin was grey like the ghostly animals she commanded, hanging loosely from her gaunt frame. She pressed the shoka to only inches above his face, exhibiting strength beyond her appearance. Changa had fought many adversaries but never had he experienced such relentless power. He let his arms go limp as he jerked his head aside. The blade bit into the ground inches from his face. He twisted his body, throwing the tembo woman aside. She rolled, sprang to her feet and sprinted back to her shoka before Changa could stand. She snatched the weapon free and attacked him again. Changa rolled and blocked, desperate for a chance to stand. The tembo woman was too fast.

The woman raised her shoka again and Changa heard a familiar yell. Yusef crashed into her and the two tumbled away. Yusef's advantage was temporary. A grey trunk struck him like a serpent, wrapping around his thick waist and tossing him aside like a twig. Yusef's diversion did give Changa time to stand but nothing more. No sooner had he regained his feet did the woman attack again. Her ghostly pachyderms attacked

with her, flailing their trunks at him. Changa withstood the relentless pummeling as he concentrated on avoiding the woman's sinister blade.

A roar split the ominous night and the tembos answered, trumpeting as they fell away. A simba leapt into Changa's sight, a full mane feline larger than any he'd seen. It drove the tembos back, swiping at their legs and trunks with no sign of fear. The woman attacking him ignored the strange beast, continuing her assault on Changa. He raised his dented sword to deflect another shoka swing and was shoved to the ground. He looked up to see a different woman standing over him brandishing two swords.

"Nokofa!" she shouted. "This is not your realm!"

Nokofa, the tembo woman, backed away.

"Shange?" Her eyes narrowed and she snarled.

"So they send the fallen one to do their dirty work. You cannot help them. They would hunt until my children were no more. I will not allow that."

Nokofa raised her head and trumpeted. Her tembos gathered immediately behind her then she leaped backwards, landing on the head of the matriarch. Nokofa trumpeted again and the herd disappeared into darkness.

Changa finally had a moment for the strangeness of the night to settle. The lion strolled up to the woman called Shange, nuzzling against her thigh. She sheathed her swords and embraced the simba, her arms disappearing in his thick mane. She closed her eyes and smiled.

"Thank you," Changa said.

The woman stood suddenly and the simba crouched.

"No, Mijoga!" she ordered. Her eyes narrowed on Changa.

“Leave now,” she said. “Nokofa will return.”

“We came for the tusks,” Changa replied.

“Leave them. Nokofa will kill you if you touch them.”

Changa hesitated, considering his words before answering.

“We can’t,” he finally said. “We came for the tusks and we won’t leave without them.”

“Then she will kill all of you,” Shange said. She turned to walk away but Changa grabbed her shoulder.

“Wait,” he began.

Shange slapped his hand away. Mijoga came towards him, a low rumble seeping from his bared teeth.

“Leave this place,” she warned again. “Never come back.”

Shange and Mijoga strode into the darkness. Changa watched them disappear, his mind a jumble of thoughts until a familiar moan reached his ears.

“Yusef!”

The burly Yao lumbered out the darkness supported by two comrades. Kenda walked beside him, her eyes staring into his.

“Are you okay?” Changa asked.

Yusef nodded then grimaced. “What just happened?”

“I guess we know why the ivory has stopped,” Changa said. “The tembo woman has declared war on the hunters.”

“So we go home empty handed,” Yusef concluded. “Belay will not be happy.”

“Neither am I.” Changa’s face mirrored his disappointment. He would fail at his first task and he was determined not to, spirits or no.

“We’ll rest tonight,” he said. “Tomorrow I’ll decide what we do.”

The strange encounter did nothing to affect the camp’s slumber. Snores, grunts and heavy breathing joined the sounds of night beasts among the dark hills and grassland. There was no such comfort for Changa. He sat at the fire, the glowing embers casting a faint light on his brooding visage. He wished a war had been the reason for the ivory shortage. In war there was always someone more interested in themselves, some person willing to look the other way for the right price. But spirits had no price; they fought for their own reason, motives far beyond the comprehension of men. He would have to find a way to circumvent Nokofa’s anger and Shange’s warning. He had to get those tusks.

Something moved just beyond Changa’s vision. He jumped to his feet, a throwing knife in his hand. Two figures emerged from the darkness, both unconcerned with his stance. Shange and Mijoga had returned.

“There is no way around us,” Shange said. “You should leave.”

“I won’t leave without ivory,” Changa stated. “Why should Nokofa or you care? The tembos are dead. Why should it matter if we take the ivory?”

“Because if you return then other will want more and the hunters will return,” Shange said. She stared at Changa and he shifted. She seemed to be inspecting him, contemplating.

“Since you will not leave, Swahili, maybe you can help me.”

Changa was intrigued. “How?”

“I cannot defeat Nokofa alone. Mijoga is a noble companion but her tembos are too many. You and your friend may help reduce the odds.”

Changa smirked. “Nokofa almost killed me.”

“A lesser warrior would be dead,” Shange replied. “As for your friend, he’s not as skilled as you, but he is durable. He may live long enough for us to succeed.”

Sunlight brushed the eastern horizon. Shange glanced at the dawn and stood. “I will not force you to do this. If you wish the tusks meet me before the hunters’ camp at midday.”

She reached into the edge of her waist and extracted a small bag. She extended to Changa and their hands touched. Shange’s eyes widened, a smile emerging to her face like the rising sun.

“It seems you hold your own secrets,” she said. “The son of a kabaka is no ordinary man. You will make a strong ally.”

Shange’s words distracted Changa, sending him back to memories he’d buried away. There was not time for such distractions; he had to concentrate on the task at hand. He took the bag and open it, revealing a grayish powder emitting a piercing smell.

“What is this?” he asked.

“Boil it and use it to clean your blades. It will help you against the tembo spirits.”

Shange and Mijoga melded into the bush. Moments later the camp stirred. Yusef came to him, the big man rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“Kibwana, did you sleep well?”

“I don’t know,” Changa replied. He looked at his hand; he still held the herb bag, a confirmation that Shange’s visit was not a dream.

“We should go home,” Yusef advised. “The tembo woman will not let us collect the ivory and we are too few to hunt for it ourselves.”

“I won’t go home with nothing,” Changa countered. “Take this bag and boil the contents.”

Changa handed Yusef the bag. Yusef looked at it suspiciously and opened it. His face crinkled and he jerked his head away.

“Just do as I say,” Changa scolded.

While the others went about their day, Changa waited for Shange. He wondered how she knew of his past just by a touch and why it mattered. He was far away from that life, unable to return. Usenge took his father’s life and sent him fleeing, his ruthless tebos hunting him for years. Yes, he was the son of a kabaka, but it had done him no good. He could never stand against Usenge, at least not alone.

Shange and Mijoga emerged from the bush at midday. Yusef and the others rushed to Changa’s side, weapons ready. He waved them down.

Yusef kept his sword raised. “What are they doing here?”

“They are here to help us,” Changa replied. “Nafasi!”

A short muscular man with round cheeks and a serious face stepped forward.

“You’re in charge until we return. Don’t go into the camp.”

“How long shall we wait for you?” Nafasi asked.

“Two weeks.” It was a guess at the most.

Nafasi nodded and went back to his duties. Yusef and Changa ambled down the hill to Shange. The woman looked them over and nodded her approval.

“It will take a week to reach Nokofa’s refuge. I trust you told your people to stay away from the camp?”

“I did.”

“Good, let’s go.” Shange patted Mijoga’s head and they jogged into the bush. Changa and Yusef followed. They ran the remainder of the day, stopping only when they could see no more. Shange built a fire while Changa and Yusef rested, both men exhausted. Mijoga loped off into the darkness, returning later with an antelope between his jaws. He dropped the carcass and waited patiently as Shange cut a section for the three of them. The largest portion she gave back to the simba. They cooked the meat over the fire and ate silently. Changa stared at Shange, wondering if he should ask the questions worrying him. She looked up suddenly and smiled.

“Ask your questions, merchant man,” she said.

“Why is Mwanamke Tembo killing the hunters?”

“Because they kill her spirit-children.”

“Then she is a tembo,” Yusef concluded.

“No, she’s not,” Shange said. “She is the spirit that watches over them. She maintains the balance. The hunters were taking too many so she stopped them.”

“And by doing so upset the balance,” Changa surmised.

Shange nodded. “Which is why I must stop her.”

“Are you a spirit?” Yusef asked.

Shange smirked. “No. I serve those who rule over us all.”

Mijoga appeared. He lay before Shange and licked his paws. Shange massaged his mane and he purred.

“I was once like her,” she said. “Man was my charge and I watched over them dutifully. Like Nokofa I came to care too much. A certain man drew my special attention, the son of a chief whose spirit glowed like my own. One day he looked up into the stars and stared into my eyes as if he knew I watched him. He was so handsome; his body was strong like a baobab. His name was Mijoga.”

Changa’s eyes shifted to the magnificent simba. Mijoga glanced at Shange and licked his paws.

“One day Mijoga looked up into the sky and called for me,” Shange continued. A little smile formed on her face. “I answered. We loved under the stars, exposed to the eyes of my own. No sooner did we touch that I was taken away from him. We were judged and condemned. Mijoga was to be killed; his soul cast into darkness, but my mother, spirit of the lions, intervened. She placed his essence into the body of a simba. I was stripped of my status, cast to the world as mortal. Though Mijoga and I were separated we eventually found each other.”

“So why do you serve those who condemned you and your lover?”

Shange’s expression was mixed. “Because it is all I know. I still hope that I will be forgiven. I may not rise again among the spirits, but they may at least grant Mijoga back his true form and we can be together. That would be enough.”

They ran the next two days in tense silence, Changa barely noticing the change in landscape. Scrub brush and grasses melded into rocky soil and hills pockmarked by shallow lakes. They covered less ground, slowed by the taxing terrain. On the fourth day Shange finally broke the silence over a meal of wildebeest and yams.

“We are close to her,” she announced. “We will attack at dusk. She will be at her weakest then.”

“Why?” Changa asked.

“Nokofa cannot sustain her spells continuously. During the day her tembos sleep. She summons them at dusk.”

Changa nodded as he chewed his yam.

“You and I will confront her directly,” she continued. “Yusef and Mijoga will deal with the tembos.”

Yusef stopped chewing his meal, his mouth dropping open. “You want me to fight a tembo?”

“They are spirits that require Nokofa’s magic to exist. They will be weak at the most. Besides, you’ll have Mijoga with you.”

The simba growled at the mention of its name. It looked at Yusef with assurance in its eyes. Yusef looked back, shaking his head. Changa was concerned as well but he had no choice. They had to trust Shange.

“How will we do this?” he asked. “She is hard to kill.”

“We can’t kill her. She is immortal.”

It was not the answer he wanted to hear. “So what do we do?”

“Nokofa wears a talisman that gives her human form. If we can take it from her she will revert to a spirit. She won’t be able to harm us or them.”

So there was a chance, Changa thought. “What is this talisman?”

“It is the leopard band around her head. It contains the gris-gris anchoring her in this world.”

After another day of travel they arrived in Nokofa's realm. Tall trees grew thick in the ash fed soil, blanketing rugged peaks that once spewed fire. Shange stopped and shaded her eyes. She pointed to a cluster of stooped hill, each identical in height and width.

"There," Shange said. "We'll find Nokofa beyond those hills."

Changa rubbed his chin to hide his unease. He recalled his last encounter with the tembo woman. Yusef looked at him, his eyes worried.

"We should rest," Shange finally said. "We'll need all our strength tonight."

Changa did not sleep and neither did Shange. He watched her pace before the fire, her eyes watching the outline of the hills against the clear sky. Occasionally she would peer at the heavens, her mouth moving but emitting no sound. Changa wasn't sure, but it seemed the stars responded, waxing and waning in a pulsating pattern. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. All he wanted was to bring back the ivory back to Mombasa.

Shange roused them as soon as the sun descended below the hills. They climbed together, tracing a winding path to the hilltops. A pale yellow glow radiated over the mounds, pulsing in time with a rhythmic voice rising over the trees. Dozens of feet below them a bizarre scene played out. Nokofa swayed before a chasm filled with tembo bones, some bleached with age while others ripe with the stench of death. The tembo woman's chants were unintelligible to Changa, but they agitated Shange. Her face bunched, her eyes narrowed.

"You and I will attack Nokofa," she whispered. "Yusef, you and Mijoga must work your way down to the chasm."

Yusef nodded, but his drooping eyes and downturned mouth expressed his misgivings. Changa had no time to reassure him; Shange bolted over the hill and crept down toward Nokofa. Changa hurried up to her and they worked their way through the sparse foliage together.

“Remember, our goal is the talisman,” she whispered.

Changa could see the strip of skin encircling Nokofa’s head glowing with the light of the bone pit.

“Let’s end this,” he said.

“No, Changa!” Shange reached for his hand too late. Changa snatched a throwing knife from his sash, took aim and hurled it at Nokofa’s head. Nokofa spun, batting the knife away with her shoka then leaped toward them. Shange shoved Changa aside and Nokofa landed where they stood, her blade splitting the ground. Shange pounced, both blades flailing. Changa scrambled to his feet, sword in one hand, throwing knife in the other, sure Shange’s furious assault would give him an advantage. He was wrong. Nokofa slapped his blades away then swung the shoka at his scalp. He ducked, the blade passing inches from his head. Shange and Changa’s speed prevented Nokofa from attacking them but neither of them could penetrate her defense.

Something wrapped around Changa’s waist, crushing the breath from him. He rose into the air, the pressure increasing. He looked down at the translucent appendage encircling him then up into the cold eyes of a resurrected tembo. He chopped the nefarious limb with his knife and the tembo screeched, releasing its killing grip on his gut. Changa fell, his dense body smashing into the foliage. He lay stunned, gasping for air when Yusef’s face appeared above him.

“I’m sorry kibwana,” he said. “There were too many of them.”

A cacophony of trumpeting rose from the chasm. Nokofa was managing to raise her minions despite Shange’s relentless attack. Mijoga dashed back and forth along the chasm edge, roaring, biting and slashing at the scores of spectral tembos emerging from the pit. Yusef ran to assist him; Changa climbed to his feet and staggered toward the fighting females. Changa’s return was too late. As he ran to Shange, Nokofa’s shoka slipped by Shange’s sword and sank into her ribcage. Shange’s swords tumbled from her hands as she collapsed. Nokofa straddle her, the bloody shoka raised over her head.

“Why did you do this?” Nokofa shouted. “They condemn you and you serve them?”

Mwanamke Tembo shook her head sadly. “You always lived as a fool, Shange. Now you shall die as one.”

Changa threw his knife. The blade cut through the air with inhuman speed, aided by the concoction Shange supplied. It struck Nokofa’s head, nicking the leopard band as it knocked her off balance. Shange screamed as she jumped to her feet, wrapped her fingers around the band and ripped it off Nokofa’s wounded head. Nokofa’s eyes went wide, her angry yell dying in her throat as she faded away into a luminous smoke. The shoka fell; the essence that was Nokofa ascended into the sky. The ground jolted; Changa turned to see the tembo specters fall back into the chasm, their long dead bones no longer animated by Nokofa’s nyama. Yusef and Mijoga stared into the abyss for a moment, savoring their unexpected reprieve. The lion departed first, loping to Shange. Yusef staggered to Changa.

“Is it over?” he asked.

Changa looked toward Shange and Mijoba. “Wait.”

Shange raised her arms; her hands open to the sky. She chanted in a tongue unfamiliar to Changa’s ears but her tone revealed the meaning. Brightness shifted in the sky then descended over her. Motes of light hovered then disappeared. Shange fell to her knees, cradling her face in her palms.

Changa approached Shange, placing his hand lightly on her shoulder. Shange looked at him, tears trails on her soiled face.

“Go collect your tusks, Changa,” she said. “Mwanamke Tembo will bother you no more.”

“And what of you?” he asked.

Shange looked away. “It seems my price is not paid yet.”

It was not Changa’s way to ponder about the spirits, but he was sure a wrong had been done. There was nothing he could do. The ways of the spirits were beyond his understanding and control.

“Thank you, Shange,” he said. He turned to walk away.

“Wait.” Changa turned to see Shange extending Nokofa’s leopard headband to him.

“Take it. It contains much nyama. It will add to yours.”

“Mine?”

Shange grinned. “You are the son of a kabaka. You were born with great nyama. You just haven’t realized it yet.”

Changa took the band. It seemed to vibrate in his hand for a moment then ceased. Another object to add to his mysterious collection, each one said to possess some power

which added to his own. Changa smirked; this so-called nyama had not helped him so far. It did not help him prevent his father execution, nor did it help him avoid years of slavery. Still, there was something about each talisman that made them worth keeping. Each one represented a significant moment in his life. One day, when he was home again, he would take each one and tell his children the story that brought the object to his hands.

Shange stood, holding her side. The wound, though still bleeding, was beginning to heal.

“Goodbye, Changa,” she said. “May you one day have what you truly desire.” She patted Mijoga’s mane and together they disappeared into the woods.

Yusef walked up to Changa. “Now is it over?”

A roar echoed in the darkness and the stars above seemed to shift in response.

“For us it is,” Changa said. “Come, rafiki. Bwana Belay awaits his wealth”

Together they merged into the foliage under the moonlight, the stars resuming their ancient pose. Changa held Nokofa’s headband in his hand, Shange’s words still clear in his head. Belay would get his tusks, but Changa possessed the true reward.

-End-