

The Leopard's Daughter

by Lee Killough

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The wind reeked of carrion. Wrinkling her nose in distaste, Jeneba wondered how Tomo Silla could have chosen such a campsite for Mseluku Karamoke's army, even just overnight. None of her brother and sister warriors appeared to notice the stench however, and Mseluku had even complimented Tomo on the beauty of the lake and its wooded shore, so Jeneba said nothing. She tethered her horse and after leaning her spear, sword, and shield against a tree, joined the small party gathering wood. Seventeen years had taught her it was wiser not to mention her keener-than-human senses of smell and hearing, or anything else which might remind people that Jeneba Karamoke was not a full blooded noble nor pure Dasa.

Bending down for a dried branch, she wondered bitterly again at the perversity of a King's sister disdaining all human suitors to take a leopard-man for a lover. Sia Nyiba Karamoke's failings would not ruin her daughter's life, though, Jeneba vowed. Her soul was Dasa and one day people would see that and accept her as truly one of them, not just tolerate her because she was Mseluku's niece and without a brother who might inherit the King's sword and shield.

She had come close today. Memory rushed back exhilaratingly... the earth warm beneath her bare feet, sun heating her arms and shoulder bared by the wrap of her saffron-colored tsara, her shield heavy on her left arm, but her sword arm working tirelessly as she and her warrior partner Kinetu Kone fought side by side in perfect partnership, cutting through the Qeorou line like field workers harvesting grain. How magnificent they had all looked, tall and lean above the Qeorou, skins dark and richly red-brown, the bright beads strung on the long ropes of their hair clicking together with every movement. She and Kineta had embraced in celebration as the Qeorou withdrew. He called her *sister*.

Behind her, the others in camp sang in celebration of the victory and their pride in being Dasa, led by Mseluku's bard.

Hooooh! Dasa!

We are fierce warriors, lords of the Sahara plains.

The Creator Mala-Lesa smiles down on us,

Both her moon by night,

And his sun by day.

Our buffalo totem, powerful, wise, smiles on us.

We fear nothing.

Not Qeorou or Burdamu,

Not wizards or witches,

Not the demon nogama nor the half-men wachiru,

Not lion-men, leopard-men, hyena-men.

We trade where we will.

We hunt the wild buffalo and sheep.

We fatten our cattle on the sweet Sahara grasses.

We march into battle and emerge victorious.

Hooooh! Dada! Hooooh!

"Hoooh! Dasa!" Jeneba echoed.

A throaty voice spoke from above her. "Greetings, sister."

Startled, she glanced up before she could stop herself, so that by the time she saw the leopard sprawled along the tree limb overhead, there was no way to pretend she had not heard the beast. She could only hope that the sister warrior gathering wood nearby had heard nothing. Jeneba bent to reach for another piece of wood. "I'm not your sister," she hissed.

"Ah?" the leopard said lazily. Jeneba glanced up to find it regarding her with amusement. Its tawny eyes blinked with cat slowness. "But I smell leopard in you, and see that you have leopard-tawny eyes.. You also understand me, which no one fully human can."

Jeneba set her jaw. "I am Dasa and a noble of the city of Kiba, not a leopard's daughter." Turning away, she started back for camp with her wood.

The leopard sighed. "How unfortunate, for if you were my sister, I could warn you about this place."

The smell of carrion seemed suddenly stronger. Jeneba's neck prickled. Whirling back toward the leopard, she cried, "What warning?"

But the leopard had gone.

Something else moved in the woods, however. Jeneba saw nothing, but she heard stealthy steps. Dropping her wood, she raced for camp... for her sword.

Warriors stared in astonishment as she raced past them.

"Swords," she said, and had no time to explain further. As her fingers closed around the hilt of her sword, a gust of wind brought a chorus of whoops madder than those of hyena and a carrion reek in such strength that Jeneba choked and the horses reared snorting against their tethers. She whirled, tossing aside the sheath, and the woods erupted with men who looked as though they had been split lengthwise. Smaller than the Dasa and naked except for loincloths and gray clay painted on their skin, each hopped on one leg and swung a club with his single hand.

Cold rushed through Jeneba. *Wachiru!* No wonder she had seen nothing in the woods. The half-men kept their invisible off-side toward the camp as they approached. All they could not hide was the stench of their man-eating breath.

And yet, wachiru attacking men in a group? Unheard of. She answered their cries with a war yell of her own, however, and hacked at the nearest attacker. He parried the blow with his club then pivoting away, vanished. Jeneba slashed for the spot where he had stood, but her sword passed through without meeting resistance. The wachiru reappeared off to her left, his club already aimed at her head.

Jeneba ducked barely in time. The club caught at her hair in passing, clicking off the beads. Fear burst in her with icy fire. Straightening, she lunged slashing, and this time her blade opened the wachiru's belly. He doubled screaming, bloody loops of gut ballooning between his hands. Jeneba retreated until she stood with her back against a tree, sword ready for another attack from any side.

Around her wachiru clubbed warriors to the ground. Screaming horses snapped their tethers and bolted into the woods. Other wachiru dragged unconscious members of the wood gathering party into camp. Several warriors managed to reach their swords, however, Mseluku among them, and they hacked away at every wachiru they saw. Seeing their opponents was the problem.

Jeneba shouted a warning at Mseluku, who had three half-men closing on him off-side first. She sprang away from her tree to his aid. No monster would eat *her* uncle!

Something moved at the edge of her vision, but before she could dodge the club she sensed coming, pain burst through her. Mala-Lesa recreated the heavens in her skull in a single fiery burst and Jeneba fell into a bottomless black hole... through the earth, through the underworld of recent ancestral shades, through the dimmer kingdom of older shades, and into the lowest depths where the very oldest shades must finally go, a place without light, warmth, feeling, or even memory.

Or did it have sound after all? Shades gibbered shrilly at each other. Then she saw light, a dancing red glow, and felt a lumpy surface beneath her. Her hand finally convinced her that, astonishingly, she remained alive and on earth. It still grasped her sword.

She opened her eyes painfully to find herself at the base of the tree she had used to guard her back. Although drums pounded in her head and great stones seemed to weight it, she could lift it enough to see torches set in the ground and wachiru men, women, and children hopping back and forth across the

campsite

Children, naked, and women, bare to the waist like their men, chattered excitedly as they bound the legs and arms of warriors. The few that they left unbound lay with the slackness of death. That explained why Jeneba still lived. Dead victims must be eaten quickly and the wachiru wanted to save some meat for another day. She shuddered at the thought of herself spitted and roasting.

The wachiru had not reached this end of the camp yet, judging by her still-free hands. Was anyone watching her? Jeneba saw no one. There was only one way to be certain. Taking a deep breath and praying to the buffalo for safety, Jeneba wiggled backward, dragging her sword and head. No one appeared to notice. She kept moving, edging gradually around the tree.

She had almost reached cover when a female voice cried in alarm. Jeneba jumped to her feet, but realized in one sickening instant that she was too dizzy to run. She caught at the tree, her mind racing in panic, searching for an escape.

Tree? She looked up, mind clearing. Wachiru could not climb. Perhaps they would not think of her doing so.

Clamping her sword in her teeth, Jeneba scrambled for the branches.

Mala-Lesa and the buffalo smiled. While she crouched in a fork clutching her sword and the slice-of-horn talisman around her neck, her heart drumming in fear, the wachiru milled around the bottom of the tree sniffing the ground and air... but they never looked up, and after a short search, returned to tying their captives. Finishing that, they started off through the woods, carrying the bound warriors.

Above them, Jeneba counted the casualties through teeth gritted in sorrow and anger. Kinetu hung over a half-woman's shoulder, blood dripping down her back from his smashed skull. Half a dozen other warrior brothers and sisters were dead, too. The side of Jeneba's skull throbbed in reminder of how easily she could be among them. Mseluku lived, however. Jeneba heard him groan as his captors carried him under her.

She bared her teeth. "Mala, guide me to vengeance," she whispered at the silver disc of moon rising over the far shore of the lake. "Buffalo, give me your strength and wiles."

The last half-man passed Jeneba's tree. She waited a while longer, then cautiously slid to the ground, never letting her eyes leave the bobbing light of the torches disappearing into the woods.

"Jeneba!" Her heart leaped at the startled exclamation behind her. She spun, sword in hand and arcing... but turned the blow aside to grin at the familiar figure standing in the campsite clearing with moonlight pouring over him. Her spirit soared in relief. "Tomo Silla! Thank the gods and buffalo someone else escaped, too. Come on; let's go before they're too far ahead."

Tomo sucked in his breath sharply and caught her wrist. "Two of us alone can't rescue Mseluku and the others. Find the horses and we'll ride to Kiba for help."

"Leave our people for two days?" She stared at him in disbelief. "Why aren't two enough? We're Dasa."

"I'm Dasa."

The words pierced like a spear. Jeneba recoiled from Tomo, snapping her wrist free of his grip. "I'm Dasa, too," she hissed, "and I won't leave my uncle or any of our people for the wachiru to eat!"

Tomo frowned. "They'll be safe for a while. The dead will be eaten first."

She might have been reassured if she had not smelled the acid reek of fear on him. The beads in her hair rattled as she flung her head. "Are you sure enough to stand beside me when I face my mother and aunts and grandmother and promise them for me that their son and brother will still be alive when we return here?"

"Do you really want to rescue our people," he said, "or do you only want the glory of the deed? Heroic effort won't prove you're as brave as a true-blooded Dasa or cause the bards to make songs about you. Perhaps you can escape the demons and spirits roaming the night, dark being your father's element, but you can't defeat that many wachiru. You'll only become an object lesson in false pride, the warrior who cost an entire army its life."

An animal snarled in Jeneba. She longed to spring at Tomo with her sword. She fled instead, bolting after the distant sparks of the wachiru torches, horrified and shamed by her savage desire. Bitterly, she

wondered if Tomo were right. Maybe she was acting for self-seeking reasons, and perhaps she must fail. If Tomo Silla, a hero of Kiba who had faced countless Qeorou and Burdamu in single combat, was afraid, there must be good reason. Thinking of the host of demons and spirits that owned the world at night, the skin on her spine ran with fire and cold.

Jeneba welcomed the fear, though. It blunted her anger and hurt. Her mind steadied as nerves pulled taut, stretching awareness into the night around her... to shafts of moonlight pouring through the trees to turn the woods into a great palace hall supported by silver pillars, to wild buffalo and eland drinking at the lake shore, to night birds singing in the trees and lion roaring and hyena whooping out in the grasslands. The carrion odor carried back from the wachiru ahead. And testing the night, Jeneba's thoughts churned. A warrior must fight with honor. It meant more than victory itself. However, would Mseluku and the warriors care why she rescued them, as long as she succeeded? Honor could be debated in the safety of Kiba's walls.

Footsteps ran behind her. Jeneba's heart caught. Was it a nogama, ready to slash her with its clawed palms... or the spirit of some dead ancestor, demanding gifts to sustain its existence? Fearfully, she risked one glance back and let out her breath in relief. Tomo Silla. Then anger replaced relief.

"Have you lost your way to Kiba?"

The whites of his eyes glinted as he glanced toward her in the dark. "You represent warrior-honor poorly, sister, to speak with such disrespect to a hero who has contemplated your words and concluded that you're right: being Dasa, we *can* rescue our people, from the monsters."

Warmth flooded her. Sister. Our people. Despite his fear, he would still run through the night with her and face the wachiru? That was heroism indeed. She instantly regretted her anger.

"Please forgive my words, Tomo. I spoke unfairly, in haste and ignorance."

He grunted acceptance and they fell silent as they ran together behind the wachiru party, watching both the torches and the shadows around them, alert for anything not plant or animal.

Jeneba wished that the carrion smell were less strong, so she could smell any demons approaching. Still, that scent had been useful. Without it, she too might be among the dead or captives. Somewhere in the woods a leopard screamed and the sound brought an unbidden thought: if she had only a human nose, she never have noticed the carrion smell until too late. Mere hearing would not have heard the wachiru footsteps either, and now, night vision helped her find her way and search the shadows for demons. Hastily she looked for something else to think about.

"Tomo, why do you think the wachiru attacked this way? All the stories say that one man meets one half-man who challenges him to wrestle, not a group that attacks with clubs."

"I don't know." Tomo's whisper hesitated. "Things... change. The seers tell us that many things are changing, that the Sahara is drying up and that the grass will disappear one day, that the wild buffalo and sheep and our cattle will die. They say sand will cover not only Kiba but great cities like Yagana and Kouddoun. The wachiru must be changing too."

Ahead, the line of half-men scattered. Jeneba caught her breath. The village! She stopped caring about everything except reaching Mseluku and the warriors. Slipping from shadow to shadow, she and Tomo worked their way to the edge of the village, where they climbed a tree for a better vantage point and sat in a fork with backs pressed against rising branches.

The village consisted of two concentric circles of mud and grass huts protected by no walls or watch dogs. Entering it should be easy, then... except that the captives had been taken to the open center and hung by their wrists or ankles from racks there. She and Tomo would have to walk into the very middle of the village to reach the them.

"We can keep in the shadows," she said, "but do you know any way to tell if a wachiru is watching us with the off-side toward us?"

A leopard screamed off toward the grasslands, answered by a howl neither animal nor human. Tomo's eyes glistened as he glanced over his shoulder, fingering the hilt of his sword. "This is madness. No one would bother saving you if you were hanging from a wachiru meat rack."

Jeneba sucked in her cheeks. Probably, except that she hoped Mseluku would try. Still, in any case she had a duty to them. They were her people. "Wasn't it madness when you rode into combat with the

Burdamu outlaw chief Utsaba Akaha with no spear, sword, or shield, only a hobble rope, to show your contempt for him? These are your people, too, and they *would* try to save you."

He bowed his head. "Of course you're right. We'll wait until the village is asleep, then slip in and cut everyone loose."

She settled back in the tree fork to wait.

Not that it was easy. They had to watch the dead warriors disappear into wachiru maws, eaten raw. Jeneba's fingers bit into the hilt of her sword in her longing to use it on the wachiru. Only self-discipline kept her silent while the half-men finished their hideous meal and disappeared into their huts. Only when the village lay quiet did she and Tomo swing down from their perch and stand at the tree's bottom flexing stiff, numbed limbs until feeling and function returned.

"You have the best night vision," Tomo whispered. "You go first. I'll guard your back."

Jeneba nodded. Sword in one hand, the other gathering her tsara snugly around her hips to keep it from snagging on something that might betray her to the wachiru, she slid from the deep shadows beneath the tree and across a pool of moonlight into shadows again beside a wachiru hut. She had to crouch to keep her head below the level of the roof. The stench of carrion almost overwhelmed her. She listened for sounds of wachiru still awake, but heard nothing and raced forward, across the space to the inner circle of huts. There she paused again and glanced back.

Tomo crouched beside the hut she had just left. He waved his sword at her encouragingly.

Breathing deeply, Jeneba faced the village center. She could reach the nearest warrior in a few strides. Nothing lay between her and the racks but space... space without any cover, faced by every hut in the circle, and flooded with moonlight.

She sucked in her cheeks. "Mala, Creator, please hide your face. I need darkness for safety."

But Mala ignored the whispered prayer. The moon remained full and bright.

Jeneba sighed. So be it. She located Mseluku across the circle from her. He must be freed first, however great the danger in reaching him. Glancing backward toward Tomo one last time, she took a breath, prayed that wachiru slept deeply, and sprinted out through the circle of racks. Her bare feet made no sound in the dust.

"Jeneba!" someone hissed in surprise.

She paused only long enough to press her fingers across her lips before racing on to where Mseluku hung tied, his feet barely touching the ground. Jeneba smelled fresh blood where he had been working his wrists against the bonds holding them to the overhead bar of the rack. His eyes widened at the sight of her, but he said nothing, only strained to give her room to slide her sword between his wrists and the bar.

"When I cut you, loose, run for the woods," she breathed in his ear.

He nodded.

She sawed at a strap. It was tough leather, well-tanned. It gave way with agonizing slowness. One of Mseluku's wrists finally came free, however. She was starting on the other when a whoop of alarm tore through the night air. Jeneba abandoned caution to swing the sword overhead like an axe and chop at the strap around the crossbar. "Follow me, uncle; we'll come back for the others later." She bolted for the space between the nearest huts.

A wachiru leaped into her path. She cut him down with a sweep of her blade and jumped his writhing body. A second half-man appeared out of invisibility and a third, catching her tsara. Slashing their arms, she tore free of those too. Then she was between the second row of huts and into the woods.

She looked back for Mseluku but to her horror, could see him nowhere. A handful of howling wachiru followed her instead, covering the ground in incredibly long hops.

The blood went fiery cold in her veins. Jeneba stretched into the long-strided run the warriors practiced every day along with wrestling and swordsmanship. Her pursuers did not fall behind, though. They gained. When they were far enough from the village that the wachiru could not expect endless reinforcements, she would turn and fight, she decided.

But in the next stride, pain shot up her leg and she crashed forward over a root. Somehow Jeneba kept her wits enough to curl and use her momentum to roll into a somersault that carried her forward

back onto her feet with almost no break in stride. She forgot to hang on to the sword, though. It sailed out of her hand and off into the brush.

"Buffalo, give me your strength and speed," she called. There could be no fighting now. She would have to depend on outrunning her pursuers. If she could. The wachiru were so close now that she could hear the rasp of their breathing.

Movement flashed on the edge of her vision. Jeneba dodged away. The wachiru followed her evasion, however, and a thunderous heartbeat later pain ripped through Jeneba's scalp. The wachiru had caught her by the hair. Shrieking, she jerked upward, off her feet. Worse pain followed. The wachiru turned back toward the village without slowing. Pulled off balance, Jeneba dragged behind him. Pain lanced up her nerves from skinned knees and palms. Still screaming, she clawed at the wrist and fingers wound in the long cords of her hair, but his skin felt as impervious as bridle leather. He appeared unconscious of her nails. His speed made it impossible for her to bring her feet under her, either. Her legs continued to drag, the brush and stones tearing at them, while at every leap, her hair felt as though it were being jerked out by the roots.

Ahead, his brother and sister wachiru whooped and gibbered. Visions of being strung up to await dismemberment, never to see Kiba or the beautiful Sia Nyiba again, filled Jeneba with terror. Her mind raced. There must be some way to break loose from the half-man. There *must* be! If only she could regain her feet!

Feet. The word echoed in her heart. Gritting her teeth against the pain in her scalp, she twisted to take a sight on the muscular leg moving ahead of her. Reaching out, she locked her fingers around the wachiru's ankle.

He crashed full length to the ground. Before he or the others could react, Jeneba tore free from his shock-loosened fingers and fled back into the woods. The wachiru whoops of triumph changed to furious howls and the entire group bounded after Jeneba. But then another cry sounded, an animal scream, answered by wachiru cries of dismay. Jeneba looked back to see a leopard crouched in the path behind her, facing the half-men with bared fangs and lashing tail. The wachiru retreated toward their village.

Jeneba sagged gasping against a tree.

The leopard swung around to face her, blinking slowly. "That's twice I've saved you, sister."

"I'm not-" Jeneba stopped. "Twice?"

"The first time when the wachiru attacked."

"You didn't-" But in all fairness, she had to admit that of course he had... not giving her specifics of the danger, perhaps, but certainly alerting her to its presence. "I thank you, leopard." She gulped air. "Why did you?"

His tail twitched. "Balance. You risk your life to save those who refuse to accept you as fully one of them, so Mala-Lesa asks that I intervene for a sister who does not acknowledge her kinship to me."

"Then I thank Mala-Lesa, too." Jeneba slid down the tree to sit on a root. "I hope Tomo escaped."

"If you were my sister," the leopard said, "I could tell you about Tomo."

A sudden cold washed through Jeneba. He had used that same tone before the wachiru attacked. "What about Tomo?"

The leopard's eyes flared. "But you aren't my sister."

"I-" She almost choked on the words, but she reminded herself that she needed his knowledge, however she had to obtain it. "I am your sister."

The leopard sniffed. "Words. Very well, though. Tomo Silla was never in danger. He remained by the outer ring of huts and when he gave the alarm, imitating a wachiru call, he escaped into the woods before anyone ever saw him."

Jeneba stared, shocked, then scowled in disbelief. "That's impossible!"

The leopard's tail lashed. "As you wish." He turned away.

She scrambled to her feet after him. "Why would Tomo warn the Wachiru?"

The leopard peered back over his shoulder. "He couldn't let you free the warriors. They were the price for his life."

The price-- Remembering her own panicked thought about trying to bargain with the wachiru to

release her, understanding came with the force of a blow in the stomach. "Tomo met a wachiru when he was scouting for the campsite and lost the wrestling match."

"Yes," the leopard said. "But he offered an exchange for his life."

She hissed. Remembering how she felt when the wachiru was dragging her back to the village, she could understand what kind of terror drove him to the bargain, but outrage still boiled up in her. "He gave them us!" No wonder she had smelled fear on him when she insisted on going to the rescue. "Where is he now?"

"Waiting in a tree for morning."

Waiting to set out for Kiba and report how everyone but him had been tragically lost, no doubt. She bared her teeth. As soon as they were home, she would challenge him to combat.

Jeneba retraced the path of her previous flight until she found her sword, then headed for the village again.

The leopard followed. "Do you still believe you can rescue your people?"

"I have to try."

At the edge of village she hesitated, however, sucking in her cheeks in dismay. The half-men now had guards around their captives.

The leopard blinked. "If you were truly my sister, I could tell you how to save them."

She whirled. "How, brother?"

His eyes glowed. "Would you call me that if you didn't need me?"

Guilt spread heat up her face. "Probably not."

The leopard sighed. "You're honest anyway. I give you this much, then. The sword is no use. The warriors must be won as they were lost. You may prevail if you can find that in you which your father gave and use a thing born of Mala-Lesa, who sees wachiru when men cannot."

With a final lash of his tail, he vanished into the darkness, leaving Jeneba staring in dismay. The leopard advised in riddles!

Part of the answer was obvious. Winning the warriors as they had been lost meant by wrestling. She grimaced. Win at wrestling, when Tomo, stronger and more experienced than she, had lost. *That in her that her father had given* must mean her spirit, but how could she find any more of it? What, too, was this thing born of Mala-Lesa? Since the High God had created the entire world, that could be anything. How could she use it in wrestling, anyway?

Shrieks of wachiru glee mixed with human protests jerked her attention back to the village. She instantly forgot the leopard riddles. The half-men had discovered Mseluku's severed bonds and were dragging him toward the place in the center where earlier they had butchered the dead warriors. A wachiru man waited with one of the captured knives.

"Uncle!"

The cry echoed through her head but she was not aware of screaming it, or of moving, until she found herself charging across the common toward the group holding Mseluku. As reason reasserted itself, she stumbled and froze. Around her, shock paralyzed the wachiru, too, but that would not last long. Even now their mouths opened to cry in warning and their hands spread into claws. The half-man with the knife raised it over Mseluku's chest.

The sword was useless, the leopard had said. Jeneba dropped hers, then spoke loudly in Burda, the trade language. "It is the custom for wachiru to challenge men to wrestle. Now a man comes to challenge the wachiru."

"No," Mseluku gasped in their own language, Dase.

Wachiru eyes glittered in the moonlight. "To wrestle?" The speaker's voice rang deep and hollow, as though coming from a cave.

Jeneba locked her knees to keep them from trembling. "Yes.. but I don't care about the healing herbs and plants you normally show to men who win. This time *they* must be the prize." She gestured at Mseluku and the warriors.

A hiss of surprise, human and wachiru, ran around the common. Wachiru heads shook. The deep-voiced one said, "No."

Jeneba lifted her chin and forced her voice louder, despite a drought-dry mouth. "You have no right to them. Tomo Silla dishonorably exchanged them for his own life after you out-wrestled him." She ignored the Dase hisses of disbelief to watch the wachiru spokesman. "Pick your best wrestler to answer my challenge."

The spokesman turned away, vanishing. She heard his voice, though, talking at the other half-men. They gibbered back shrilly.

Between his captors, Mseluku said, "Jeneba, this is madness. You can't win. You'll be eaten like the rest of us."

The cold creeping through her bones agreed with him. She could win, the leopard said, but... what could the answer to the riddle *be*? She sighed hopelessly. She would never guess; there were too few clues!

The wachiru spokesman reappeared. "We accept. I will wrestle you."

Jeneba swallowed. "Shall we meet in the morning?"

His eye gleamed. "We wrestle now."

Now? Her heart lurched. But she had been traveling all day and fighting the last several, with little rest. She needed sleep. "I'm not ready yet. We must wait until morning."

"Now," the half-man repeated.

"Half-bloods," a warrior sister spat.

Mseluku said gently, "Niece, unlike nobles, wachiru aren't compelled by honor to wait until their opponent is prepared before fighting."

She swallowed again. "May I have a few minutes to speak to my gods, half-man?"

The wachiru considered. "Yes."

Her mind raced. If she could not answer the leopard's riddle, then she would have to fight another way, which meant, first, keeping away from the wachiru. She still felt the grip on her hair as that other lifted her off her feet. She looked down at the sword. Perhaps it could be useful in one way.

While the warriors watched aghast, she pulled the blade free and sawed off the long, painstakingly twisted and oiled ropes of her hair until nothing remained on her scalp but fuzz too short for anyone to grab. Next she untied her tsara at the shoulder and waist and unwrapped it, and likewise removed her gold and silver arm bands. She debated over her talisman but finally decided there must be nothing the wachiru might use for a handhold. She folded it up in her tsara along with her sword and armbands. Finally, she rubbed the shorn ropes of hair all over her, covering her skin with the heavy oil dressing.

After drying her palms in the dust, Jeneba straightened. "I'm ready."

The wachiru bared his teeth showing fangs.

The other half men backed toward the racks pulling Mseluku with them leaving the center clear of all but moonlight, Jeneba and her opponent. Crouching Jeneba warily circled the wachiru, moving toward his arm. He side-hopped a few steps, too, but then spun and vanished. Jeneba froze, holding her breath and sending darting glances around her. Where was he? Her hands felt sweaty and it was an effort not to wipe them on her thighs.

"Behind you," Mseluku called.

An arm closed around her throat. The hours of wrestling practice repaid themselves. Jeneba tucked her chin in the crook of the elbow and grabbing the wrist with one hand and the elbow with the other, pushed up on the elbow, slipping out from under the arm. Rather than release him, however, she held on, moving around him dragging the arm with her until it twisted behind him. She was reaching to hook his ankle with her foot when the wachiru suddenly leaped high into the air, whirling free and vanishing again.

Jeneba glanced toward Mseluku, but other wachiru were brandishing clubs at him and the warriors. "Keep silent."

Her stomach plunged. Without help tracking her opponent, she was lost. If only she could answer the leopard's riddle.

Wait. She held her breath. Was that breathing and footfall behind her under the gibbering of wachiru? She spun toward the sound.

The half-man arrowed foot-first out of the moonlight, kicking for her stomach. Jeneba leaped

sideways, not quite in time to avoid the blow entirely. It caught her with enough force to knock her on her back, gasping for air. She landed rolling, however, and the wachiru, diving to pin her, found only dust.

Jeneba scrambled at him, seeking a hold of her own but he rolled away, too... vanishing yet again. Even so she jumped to her feet relieved, listening to the hop of his foot. Could that be the answer, using leopard hearing to track him? She would not even have to become less Dasa. Her ears followed his bounding progress behind her once more. When she turned, however, she realized that that still gave her no indication *how* he would attack. She needed more than hearing.

A shadow flickered over her. Looking up, Jeneba found the wachiru arcing above her, silhouetted against the moon. For a moment, though he was landing on her, she could only stare, lightning flashing in her head. Shadow! Of course! A thing born of Mala-Lesa, Mala the moon and Lesa the sun, for those bodies of light certainly saw wachiru when men could not!

She flung herself sideways barely in time to avoid being knocked flat.

The half-man snarled at missing her a second time, but he landed like a cat and rebounded straight at her. They went down on the ground together, each straining to find a hold on the other. He was like a snake, either sliding away from her or kicking loose with his powerful leg. On the other hand, her oiled skin gave him no grip on her, either.

Jeneba squirmed free and back-flipped onto her feet to wait expectantly, crouching. Sure enough, the wachiru bounded up, turned, and disappeared... except not entirely. A pool of shadow remained. Night sight made the shadow as sharp to Jeneba's eye as though cast by bright sun. She followed the rasp of his breathing, just audible above the noise of her own, and the thump of his foot, but watched the shifting pool where the moonlight did not reach.

He tried circling behind her, time and again. She pivoted, following each of his bounds, evading each tentative move toward her.

The wachiru voices fell silent, except for one which hissed, "Witch!"

Her opponent's voice came out of the air. "Running is not winning."

Jeneba sidestepped another rush. No, it was not. Only pinning won. She might have just one chance at him, though. After that, certain she could see him, he would be prepared for her. Keeping her distance, Jeneba plotted strategy, then took a deep breath and watched the shadow, praying silently to Mala and the buffalo.

The shadow moved, broadening subtly in a way that told Jeneba the half-man was crouching to spin and spring. She moved as he began the turn, leaping forward and catching him around the neck from his off-side. He turned his chin into her elbow as she had done, but before he could grab her arm, she caught his wrist with her other hand and leaned backward.

His spring, already begun, helped her lift him off his feet. The momentum kept them moving. The wachiru cried out, but Jeneba flung them on until her back arched in a reverse bow with her and the wachiru's heads touching the ground behind her.

No sooner had they touched, however, than she rolled toward her arm around his neck and dumped him face-down on the ground. Her arm slid free to join her other hand cranking on his arm. Her knees landed on the nape of his neck and in the middle of his back.

Beyond them wachiru voices shrilled again and Dasa voices shrieked in glee. Jeneba barely heard them. Under her, the half-man bucked with a violence that needed all her concentration to fight. She had his arm twisted up behind him, but the muscles in it bulged and rippled until the clay painting his skin cracked and flaked and with agonizing slowness, the wrist started to slip through her grip. She gritted her teeth, hanging on with all her will.

"Buffalo," she whispered, "if you would have me save my people from the monsters, give me your strength."

The wrist writhed, slipping still more, slowly and inexorably straightening, despite Jeneba twisting hard with both her hands.

Sister, the voice of the leopard whispered in her head.

"Be gone!" Her grip slipped still more. *You must become the leopard's daughter*. The wachiru writhed beneath her. Jeneba gritted her teeth as her fingers began to tremble in fatigue. She could hang

on, she told herself. Leopards dragged full-grown bucks up trees. One half-leopard should be able to control a half-man. Her chest heaved with her effort and sweat streamed down her body, yet the wrist continued to slip through her grip.

Sister. "All right!" She must... not... let... go! She must do anything to hang on, even listen to the leopard. Desperately, she reached inside, searching for whatever made her the leopard's daughter. What had breeding given her... night sight, hearing, a sharp sense of smell? What else? She tried to imagine how it might feel inside a leopard skin, moving on all fours, racing after game, clamping her jaws on warm throats, tasting blood.

And suddenly she felt it *all*. Exultation exploded in her. This was being leopard? She had known moments when her body felt obediently under her command, but... *this!* It was fierce joy, in being alive, pride in pure existence! Was this what Sia Nyiba saw in her lover?

Jeneba felt molten in her grace, sinuous and lithe, body flowing in sustained perfect obedience to her commands. She rode the writhing back with new and confident balance. The wachiru could have broken loose and she could recapture him in a heartbeat, she felt sure.

Grinning, she crooked her fingers. Her nails dug into the halfman's leather-tough hide. The slipping stopped. Jeneba applied new pressure, twisting the arm, forcing it farther and farther, until the shoulder joint grated and popped with the strain.

The wachiru screamed, "I yield!"

Jeneba purred in his ear, "Order your people to cut mine loose."

Minutes later Mseluku and the warriors were all free. They lost no time leaving the wachiru village. Jeneba marched up front with her uncle, settling her tsara around her again, fingering her talisman. She would have to acquire a new one, she decided, something to reflect her tie to the leopard.

A brother and sister warrior edged up behind her. "We salute you, sister. It doesn't matter that you're less than true Dasa; you have a Dasa soul and you're a Dasa hero."

Jeneba jerked around indignantly toward them. *Less* than Dasa? What conceit. She was *more* than Dasa! But she smiled a moment later in amused resignation. "Thank you."

They would never understand, she knew. After all, until the leopard burst free in her, had she not also thought nothing could better being pure noble and Dasa? But let them treat her as Dasa and a hero; it would be a pleasant change. She would secretly enjoy her new pride in being the leopard's daughter, and after they reached Kiba and Tomo Silla had been dealt with, she would tell her mother everything. Sia Nyiba could appreciate it.

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