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A Little Knowledge

by Mike Resnick
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Science Fiction

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THERE WAS a time when animals could speak.

Lions and zebras, elephants and leopards, birds and men all shared the earth. They labored side by side, they met and spoke of many things, they exchanged visits and gifts.

Then one day Ngai, who rules the universe from His throne atop Kirinyaga, which men now call Mount Kenya, summoned all of His creations to meet with Him.

"I have done everything I can to make life good for all My creatures," said Ngai. The assembled animals and men began to sing His praises, but Ngai held up His hand, and they immediately stopped.

"I have made life too good for you," He continued. "None among you has died for the past year."

"What is wrong with that?" asked the zebra.

"Just as you are constrained by your natures," said Ngai, "just as the elephant cannot fly and the impala cannot climb trees, so I cannot be dishonest. Since no one has died, I cannot feel compassion for you, and without compassion, I cannot water the savannah and the forest with my tears. And without water, the grasses and the trees will shrivel and die."

There was much moaning and wailing from the creatures, but again Ngai silenced them.

"I will tell you a story," He said, "and you must learn from it.

"Once there were two colonies of ants. One colony was very wise, and one colony was very foolish, and they lived next to each other. One day they received word that an aardvark, a creature that eats ants, was coming to their land. The foolish colony went about their business, hoping that the aardvark would ignore them and attack their neighbors. But the wise colony built a mound that could withstand even the efforts of an aardvark, and they gathered sugar and honey, and stockpiled it in the mound.

"When the aardvark reached the kingdom of the ants, he immediately attacked the wise ants, but the mound withstood his greatest efforts, and the ants within survived by eating their sugar and honey. Finally, after many fruitless days, the aardvark wandered over to the kingdom of the foolish ants, and dined well that evening."

Ngai fell silent, and none of His creatures dared ask Him to speak further. Instead, they returned to their homes and discussed His story, and made their preparations for the coming drought.

A year passed, and finally the men decided to sacrifice an innocent goat, and that very day Ngai's tears fell upon the parched and barren land. The next morning Ngai again summoned His creatures to the holy mountain.

"How have you fared during the past year?" He asked each of them.

"Very badly," moaned the elephant, who was very thin and weak. "We did as you instructed us, and built a mound, and gathered sugar and honey -- but we grew hot and uncomfortable within the mound, and there is not enough sugar and honey in all the world to feed a family of elephants."

"We have fared even worse," wailed the lion, who was even thinner, "for lions cannot eat sugar and honey at all, but must have meat."

And so it went, as each animal poured out its misery. Finally Ngai turned to the man and ask him the same question.

"We have fared very well," replied the man. "We built a container for water, and filled it before the drought came, and we stockpiled enough grain to last us to this day."

"I am very proud of you," said Ngai. "Of all my creatures, only you understood my story."

"It is not fair!" protested the other animals. "We built mounds and saved sugar and honey, as you told us to!"

"What I told you was a parable," said Ngai, "and you have mistaken the facts of it for the truth that lay beneath. I gave you the power to think, but since you have not used it, I hereby take it away. And as a further punishment, you will no longer have the ability to speak, for creatures that do not think have nothing to say."

And from that day forth, only man, among all Ngai's creations, has had the power to think and speak, for only man can pierce through the facts to find the truth.

* * * *

You think you know a person when you have worked with him and trained him and guided his thinking since he was a small boy. You think you can foresee his reactions to various situations. You think you know how his mind works.

And if the person in question has been chosen by you, selected from the mass of his companions and groomed for something special, as young Ndemi was selected and groomed by me to be my successor as the mundumugu -- the witch doctor -- to our terraformed world of Kirinyaga, the one thing you think above all else is that you possess his loyalty and his gratitude.

But even a mundumugu can be wrong.

I do not know exactly when or how it began. I had chosen Ndemi to be my assistant when he was still a

kehee -- an uncircumcized child -- and I had worked diligently with him to prepare him for the position he would one day inherit from me. I chose him not for his boldness, though he feared nothing, nor for his enthusiasm, which was boundless, but rather for his intellect, for with the exception of one small girl, long since dead, he was by far the brightest of the children on Kirinyaga. And since we had emigrated to this world to create a Kikuyu paradise, far from the corrupt imitation of Europe that Kenya had become, it was imperative that the mundumugu be the wisest of men, for the mundumugu not only reads omens and casts spells, but is also the repository for the collected wisdom and culture of his tribe.

Day by day I added to Ndemi's limited storehouse of knowledge. I taught him how to make medicine from the bark and pods of the acacia tree, I showed him how to create the ointments that would ease the discomfort of the aged when the weather turned cold and wet, I made him memorize the hundred spells that were used to bless the scarecrows in the field. I told him a thousand parables, for the Kikuyu have a parable for every need and every occasion, and the wise mundumugu is the one who finds the right parable for each situation.

And finally, after he had served me faithfully for six long years, coming up my hill every morning, feeding my chickens and goats, lighting the fire in my boma, and filling my empty water gourds before his daily lessons began. I took him into my hut and showed him how my computer worked.

There are only four computers on all of Kirinyaga. The others belong to Koinnage, the paramount chief of our village, and to two chiefs of distant clans, but their computers can do nothing but send and receive messages. Only mine is tied into the data banks of the Eutopian Council, the ruling body that had given Kirinyaga its charter, for only the mundumugu has the strength and the vision to be exposed to European culture without becoming corrupted by it.

One of the primary purposes of my computer was to plot the orbital adjustments that would bring seasonal changes to Kirinyaga, so that the rains would come on schedule and the crops would flourish and the harvest would be successful. It was perhaps the mundumugu's most important obligation to his people, since it assured their survival. I spent many long days teaching Ndemi all the many intricacies of the computer, until he knew its workings as well as I myself did, and could speak to it with perfect ease.

The morning that I first noticed the change in him began like any other. I awoke, wrapped my blanket around my withered shoulders, and walked painfully out of my hut to sit by my fire until the warming rays of the sun took the chill from the air. And, as always, there was no fire.

Ndemi came up the path to my hill a few minutes later.

"Jambo, Koriba," he said, greeting me with his usual smile.

"Jambo, Ndemi," I said. "How many times have I explained to you that I am an old man, and that I must sit by my fire until the air becomes warmer?"

"I am sorry, Koriba," he said. "But as I was leaving my father's shamba, I saw a hyena stalking one of our goats, and I had to drive it off." He held his spear up, as if that were proof of his statement.

I could not help but admire his ingenuity. It was perhaps the thousandth time he had been late, and never had he given the same excuse twice. Still, the situation was becoming intolerable, and when he finished his chores and the fire had warmed my bones and eased my pain, I told him to sit down opposite me.

"What is our lesson for today?" he asked as he squatted down.

"The lesson will come later," I said, finally letting my blanket fall from my shoulders as the first warm breeze of the day blew a fine cloud of dust past my face. "But first I will tell you a story."

He nodded, and stared intently at me as I began speaking.

"Once there was a Kikuyu chief," I said. "He had many admirable qualities. He was a mighty warrior, and in council his words carried great weight. But along with his many good qualities, he also had a flaw.

"One day he saw a maiden tilling the fields in her father's shamba, and he was smitten with her. He meant to tell her of his love the very next day, but as he set out to see her, his way was blocked by an elephant, and he retreated and waited until the elephant had passed. When he finally arrived at the maiden's boma, he discovered that a young warrior was paying her court. Nevertheless, she smiled at him when their eyes met, and, undiscouraged, he made up his mind to visit her the following day. This time a deadly snake blocked his way, and once again, when he arrived he found the maiden being courted by his rival. Once more she gave him an encouraging smile, and so he decided to come back a third time.

"On the morning of the third day, he lay on his blanket in his hut, and thought about all the many things he wanted to tell her to impress her with his ardor. By the time he had decided upon the best approach to win her favor, the sun was setting. He ran all the way from his boma to that of the maiden, only to find that his rival had just paid her father five cattle and thirty goats for her hand in marriage.

"He managed to get the maiden alone for a moment, and poured forth his litany of love.

"I love you too,' she answered, 'but although I waited for you each day, and hoped that you would come, you were always late.'

"I have excuses to offer,' he said. 'On the first day I encountered an elephant, and on the second day a killer snake was in my path.' He did not dare tell her the real reason he was late a third time, so he said, 'And today a leopard confronted me, and I had to kill it with my spear before I could continue on my way.'

"I am sorry,' said the maiden, 'but I am still promised to another.'

"Do you not believe me?' he demanded.

"It makes no difference whether you are telling the truth or not,' she replied. 'For whether the lion and the snake and the leopard are real or whether they are lies, the result is the same: you have lost your heart's desire because you were late.'"

I stopped and stared at Ndemi. "Do you understand the moral of my story?" I asked.

He nodded. "It does not matter to you whether a hyena was stalking my father's goat or not. All that matters is that I was late."

"That is correct," I said.

This is where such things had always ended, and then we would begin his lessons. But not this day.

"It is a foolish story," he said, looking out across the vast savannah.

"Oh?" I asked. "Why?"

"Because it begins with a lie."

"What lie?"

"The Kikuyu had no chiefs until the British created them," he answered.

"Who told you that?" I asked.

"I learned it from the box that glows with life," he said, finally meeting my gaze.

"My computer?"

He nodded again. "I have had many long discussions about the Kikuyu with it, and I have learned many things." He paused. "We did not even live in villages until the time of the Mau Mau, and then the British made us live together so that we could be more easily watched. And it was the British who created our tribal chiefs, so that they could rule us through them."

"That is true," I acknowledged. "But it is unimportant to my story."

"But your story was untrue with its first line," he said, "so why should the rest of it be true? Why did you not just say, 'Ndemi, if you are late again, I will not care whether your reason is true or false. I will punish you.'"

"Because it is important for you to understand why you must not be late."

"But the story is a lie. Everyone knows that it takes more than three days to court and purchase a wife. So it began with a lie and it ended with a lie."

"You are looking at the surface of things," I said, watching a small insect crawl over my foot and finally flicking it off. "The truth lies beneath."

"The truth is that you do not want me to be late. What has that to do with the elephant and the leopard, which were extinct before we came to Kirinyaga?"

"Listen to me, Ndemi," I said. "When you become the mundumugu, you will have to impart certain values, certain lessons, to your people -- and you must do so in a way that they understand. This is especially true of the children, who are the clay that you will mold into the next generation of Kikuyu."

Ndemi was silent for a long moment. "I think you are wrong, Koriba," he said at last. "Not only will the people understand you if you speak plainly to them, but stories like the one you just told me are filled with lies which they will think are true simply because they come from the mundumugu's lips."

"No!" I said sharply. "We came to Kirinyaga to live as the Kikuyu lived before the Europeans tried to change us into that characterless tribe known as Kenyans. There is a poetry to my stories, a tradition to them. They reach out to our racial memory, of the way things were, and the way we hope to make them again." I paused to consider which path to follow, for never before had Ndemi so bluntly opposed my teachings. "You yourself used to beg me for stories, and of all the children you were the quickest to find the true meaning of them."

"I was younger then," he said.

"You were a Kikuyu then," I said.

"I am still a Kikuyu."

"You are a Kikuyu who has been exposed to European knowledge and European history," I said. "This is unavoidable, if you are to succeed me as the mundumugu, for we hold our charter at the whim of the Europeans, and you must be able to speak to them and work their machine. But your greatest challenge, as a Kikuyu and a mundumugu, is to avoid becoming corrupted by them."

"I do not feel corrupted," he said. "I have learned many things from the computer."

"So you have," I agreed, as a fish eagle circled lazily overhead and the breeze brought the smell of a nearby herd of wildebeest. "And you have forgotten many things."

"What have I forgotten?" he demanded, watching the fish eagle swoop down and grab a fish from the river. "You may test me and see how good my memory is."

"You have forgotten that the true value of a story is that the listener must bring something to it," I said. "I could simply order you not to be late, as you suggest -- but the purpose of the story is to make you use your brain to understand why you should not be late." I paused. "You are also forgetting that the reason we do not try to become like the Europeans is because we tried once before, and became only Kenyans."

He was silent for a long time. Finally he looked up at me.

"May we skip today's lesson?" he asked. "You have given me much to think about."

I nodded my acquiescence. "Come back tomorrow, and we will discuss your thoughts."

He stood up and walked down the long winding path that led from my hill to the village.

But though I waited for him until the sun was high in the sky the next day, he did not come back.

* * * *

Just as it is good for fledgling birds to test their wings, it is good for young people to test their powers by questioning authority. I bore Ndemi no malice, but simply waited until the day that he returned, somewhat humbled, to resume his studies.

But the fact that I now had no assistant did not absolve me of my duties, and so each day I walked down to the village, and blessed the scarecrows, and took my place alongside Koinnaga in the Council of Elders. I brought new ointment for old Siboki's joints, which were causing him discomfort, and I sacrificed a goat so that Ngai would look with favor upon the pending marriage of Maruta with a man of another clan.

As always, when I made my rounds, I was followed everywhere by the village children, who begged me to stop what I was doing and tell them a story. For two days I was too busy, for a mundumugu has many tasks to perform, but on the morning of the third day I had some time to spare, and I gathered them around me in the shade of an acacia tree.

"What kind of story would you like to hear?" I asked.

"Tell us of the old days, when we still lived in Kenya," said a girl.

I smiled. They always asked for stories of Kenya -- not that they knew where Kenya was, or what it meant to the Kikuyu. But when we lived in Kenya the lion and the rhinoceros and the elephant were not yet extinct, and they loved stories in which animals spoke and displayed greater wisdom than men, a wisdom that they themselves assimilated as I repeated the stories.

"Very well," I said. "I will tell you the story of the Foolish Lion."

They all sat or squatted down in a semi-circle, facing me with rapt attention, and I continued: "Once there was a foolish lion who lived on the slopes of Kirinyaga, the holy mountain, and because he was a foolish

lion, he did not believe that Ngai had given the mountain to Gikuyu, the very first man. Then one morning..."

"That is wrong, Koriba," said one of the boys.

I focused my weak eyes on him, and saw that it was Mdotu, the son of Karenja.

"You have interrupted your mundumugu," I noted harshly. "And, even worse, you have contradicted him. Why?"

"Ngai did not give Kirinyaga to Gikuyu," said Mdotu, getting to his feet.

"He most certainly did," I replied. "Kirinyaga belongs to the Kikuyu."

"That cannot be so," he persisted, "for Kirinyaga is not a Kikuyu name, but a Maasai name. Kiri means mountain in the language of Maa, and nyaga means light. Is it not more likely that Ngai gave the mountain to the Maasai, and that our warriors took it away from them?"

"How do you know what these words mean in the language of the Maasai?" I demanded. "That language is not known to anyone on Kirinyaga."

"Ndemi told us," said Mdotu.

"Well, Ndemi is wrong!" I shouted. "The truth has been passed on from Gikuyu through his nine daughters and his nine sons-in-law all the way down to me, and never has it varied. The Kikuyu are Ngai's chosen people. Just as He gave the spear and Kilimanjaro to the Maasai, He gave the digging-stick and Kirinyaga to us. Kirinyaga has always belonged to the Kikuyu, and it always will!"

"No, Koriba, you are wrong," said a soft, high-pitched voice, and I turned to face my new assailant. It was tiny Thimi, the daughter of Njomu, barely seven years old, who rose to contradict me.

"Ndemi told us that many years ago the Kikuyu sold Kirinyaga to a European named John Boyes for six goats, and it was the British government that made him return it to us."

"Who do you believe?" I demanded severely. "A young boy who has lived for only fifteen long rains, or your mundumugu?"

"I do not know," she answered with no sign of fear. "He tells us dates and places, and you speak of wise elephants and foolish lions. It is very hard to decide."

"Then perhaps instead of the story of the Foolish Lion," I said, "I will tell you the story of the Arrogant Boy."

"No, no, the lion!" shouted some of the children.

"Be quiet!" I snapped. "You will hear what I want to tell you!"

Their protests subsided, and Thimi sat down again.

"Once there was a bright young boy," I began.

"Was his name Ndemi?" asked Mdotu with a smile.

"His name was Legion," I answered. "Do not interrupt again, or I shall leave and there will be no more stories until the next rains."

The smile vanished from Mdutu's face, and he lowered his head.

"As I said, this was a very bright boy, and he worked on his father's shamba, herding the goats and cattle. And because he was a bright young boy, he was always thinking, and one day he thought of a way to make his chores easier. So he went to his father and said that he had had a dream, and in this dream they had built a wire enclosure with sharp barbs on the wire, to keep the cattle in and the hyenas out, and he was sure that if he were to build such an enclosure, he would no longer have to herd the cattle but would be free to do other things.

"I am glad to see that you are using your brain,' said the boy's father, 'but that idea has been tried before, by the Europeans. If you wish to free yourself from your duties, you must think of some other way.'

"But why?' said the boy. 'Just because the Europeans thought of it does not make it bad. After all, it must work for them or they would not use it.'

"That is true,' said his father. 'But what works for the Europeans does not necessarily work for the Kikuyu. Now do your chores, and keep thinking, and if you think hard enough I am sure you will come up with a better idea.'

"But along with being bright, the boy was also arrogant, and he refused to listen to his father, even though his father was older and wiser and more experienced. So he spent all his spare time attaching sharp little barbs to the wire, and when he was done he built an enclosure and put his father's cattle into it, sure that they could not get out and the hyenas could not find a way in. And when the enclosure was completed, he went to sleep for the night."

I paused and surveyed my audience. Most of them were staring raptly at me, trying to figure out what came next.

"He awoke to screams of anger from his father and wails of anguish from his mother and sisters, and ran out to see what had happened. He found all of his father's cattle dead. During the night the hyenas, whose jaws can crush a bone, had bitten through the posts to which the wire was attached, and the cattle, in their panic, ran into the wire and were held motionless by the barbs while the hyenas killed and ate them.

"The arrogant boy looked upon the carnage with puzzlement. 'How can this have happened?' he said. 'The Europeans have used this wire, and it never happened to them.'

"There are no hyenas in Europe,' said his father. 'I told you that we are different from the Europeans, and that what works for them will not work for us, but you refused to listen, and now we must live our lives in poverty, for in a single night your arrogance cost me the cattle that it has taken me a lifetime to accumulate.'"

I fell silent and waited for a response.

"Is that all?" asked Mdutu at last.

"That is all."

"What did it mean?" asked another of the boys.

"You tell me," I said.

Nobody answered for a few moments. Then Balimi, Thimi's older sister, stood up.

"It means that only Europeans can use wire with barbs on it."

"No," I said. "You must not only listen, child, but think."

"It means that what works for the Europeans will not work for the Kikuyu," said Mdotu, "and that it is arrogant to believe that it will."

"That is correct," I said.

"That is not correct," said a familiar voice from behind me, and I turned to see Ndemi standing there. "All it means is that the boy was too foolish to cover the posts with the wire."

The children looked at him, and began nodding their heads in agreement.

"No!" I said firmly. "It means that we must reject all things European, including their ideas, for they were not meant for the Kikuyu."

"But why, Koriba?" asked Mdotu. "What is wrong with what Ndemi says?"

"Ndemi tells you only the facts of things," I said. "But because he, too, is an arrogant boy, he fails to see the truth."

"What truth does he fail to see?" persisted Mdotu.

"That if the wire enclosure were to work, then the next day the arrogant boy would borrow another idea from the Europeans, and yet another, until he had no Kikuyu ideas left, and he had turned his shamba into a European farm."

"Europe is an exporter of food," said Ndemi. "Kenya is an importer."

"What does that mean?" asked Thimi.

"It means that Ndemi has a little knowledge, and does not yet know that that is a dangerous thing," I answered.

"It means," responded Ndemi, "that European farms produce more than enough to feed their tribes, and Kenyan farms do not produce enough. And if that is the case, it means that some European ideas may be good for the Kikuyu."

"Perhaps you should wear shoes like the Europeans," I said angrily, "since you have decided to become one."

He shook his head. "I am a Kikuyu, not a European. But I do not wish to be an ignorant Kikuyu. How can we remain true to what we were, when your fables hide what we were from us?"

"No," I said. "They reveal it."

"I am sorry, Koriba," said Ndemi, "for you are a great mundumugu and I respect you above all men, but in this matter you are wrong." He paused and stared at me. "Why did you never tell us that the only time in our history the Kikuyu were united under the leadership of a single king, the king was a white man named John Boyes?"

The children gasped in amazement.

"If we do not know how it happened," continued Ndemi, "how can we prevent it from happening again? You tell us stories of our wars the Maasai, and they are wonderful tales of courage and victory -- but according to the computer, we lost every war we ever fought against them. Shouldn't we know that, so if

the Maasai ever come to Kirinyaga, we are not deluded into fighting them because of the fables we have heard?"

"Koriba, is that true?" asked Mdotu. "Was our only king a European?"

"Did we never defeat the Maasai?" asked another of the children.

"Leave us for a moment," I said, "and then I will answer you."

The children reluctantly got up and walked away until they were out of earshot, then stood and stared at Ndemi and myself.

"Why have you done this?" I said to Ndemi. "You will destroy their pride in being Kikuyu!"

"I am not less proud for knowing the truth," said Ndemi. "Why should they be?"

"The stories I tell them are designed to make them distrust European ways, and to make them happy they are Kikuyu," I explained, trying to control my temper. "You will undermine the confidence they must have if Kirinyaga is to remain our Utopia."

"Most of us have never even seen a European," answered Ndemi. "When I was younger, I used to dream about them, and in my dreams they had claws like a lion and shook the earth like an elephant when they walked. How does that prepare us for the day that we actually meet with them?"

"You will never meet them on Kirinyaga," I said. "And the purpose of my stories is to keep us on Kirinyaga." I paused. "Once before we had never seen Europeans, and we were so taken by their machines and their medicines and their religions that we tried to become Europeans ourselves, and succeeded only in becoming something other than Kikuyu. That must never happen again."

"But isn't it less likely to happen if you tell the children the truth?" persisted Ndemi.

"I do tell them the truth!" I said. "It is you who are confusing them with facts -- facts that you got from European historians and a European computer."

"Are the facts wrong?"

"That is not the issue, Ndemi," I said. "These are children. They must learn as children do -- as you yourself did."

"And after their circumcision rituals, when they become adults, will you tell them the facts then?"

That sentence was as close to rebellion as he had ever come -- indeed, as anyone on Kirinyaga had ever come. Never had I been more fond of a young man than I was of Ndemi -- not even of my own son, who had chosen to remain in Kenya. Ndemi was bright, he was bold, and it was hardly unusual for one of his age to question authority. Therefore, I decided to make another attempt to reason to him, rather than risk a permanent rift in our relationship.

"You are still the brightest young man on Kirinyaga," I said truthfully, "so I will pose you a question, and I will expect an honest answer. You seek after history, and I seek after truth. Which do you suppose is the more important?"

He frowned. "They are the same," he answered. "History is truth."

"No," I replied. "History is a compilation of facts and events, which is subject to constant reinterpretation. It begins with truth, and evolves into fable. My stories begin with fable and evolve into truth."

"If you are right," he said thoughtfully, "then your stories are more important than history."

"Very well, then," I said, hoping that the matter was closed.

"But," he added, "I am not sure that you are right. I will have to think more about it."

"Do that," I said. "You are an intelligent boy. You will come to the right conclusion."

Ndemi turned and began walking off in the direction of his family's shamba. The children rushed back as soon as he was out of sight, and once more squatted in a tight semi-circle.

"Have you an answer to my question, Koriba?" asked Mdotu.

"I cannot recall your question," I said.

"Was our only king a white man?"

"Yes."

"How could that be?"

I considered my response for a long moment.

"I will answer that by telling you the story of the little Kikuyu girl who became, very briefly, the queen of all the elephants," I said.

"What has that to do with the white man who became our king?" persisted Mdotu.

"Listen carefully," I instructed him, "for when I am done, I shall ask you many questions about my story, and before we are through, you will have the answer to your own question."

He leaned forward attentively, and I began reciting my fable.

* * * *

I returned to my boma to take the noon meal. After I had finished it, I decided to take a nap during the heat of the day, for I am an old man and it had been a long, wearing morning. I let my goats and chickens loose on my hillside, secure in the knowledge that no one would take them away since they each carried the mundumugu's mark. I had just spread my sleeping blanket out beneath the branches of my acacia tree when I saw two figures at the foot of my hill.

At first I thought they were two village boys, looking for cattle that had strayed from their pastures, but when the figures began walking up the slopes of my hill I was finally able to focus my eyes on them. The larger figure was Shima, Ndemi's mother, and the smaller was a goat that she led by a rope that she had tied around its neck.

Finally she reached my boma, somewhat out of breath, for the goat was unused to the rope and constantly pulled against it, and opened the gate.

"Jambo, Shima," I said, as she entered the boma. "Why have you brought your goat to my hill? You know that only my own goats may graze here."

"It is a gift for you, Koriba," she replied.

"For me?" I said. "But I have done you no service in exchange for it."

"You can, though. You can take Ndemi back. He is a good boy, Koriba."

"But -- "

"He will never be late again," she promised. "He truly did save our goat from a hyena. He would never lie to his mundumugu. He is young, but he can become a great mundumugu someday. I know he can, if you will just teach him. You are a wise man, Koriba, and you have made a wise choice in Ndemi. I do not know why you have banished him, but if you will just take him back he will never misbehave again. He wants only to become a great mundumugu like yourself. Though of course," she added hastily, "he could never be as great as you."

"Will finally you let me speak?" I asked irritably.

"Certainly, Koriba."

"I did not cast Ndemi out. He left of his own volition."

Her eyes widened. "He left you?"

"He is young, and rebellion is part of youth."

"So is foolishness!" she exclaimed furiously. "He has always been foolish. And late! He was even two weeks late being born when I carried him! He is always thinking, instead of doing his chores. For the longest time I thought we had been cursed, but then you made him your assistant, and I was to become the mother of the mundumugu, and now he has ruined everything!"

She let go of the rope, and the goat wandered around my boma as she began beating her breasts with her fists.

"Why am I so cursed?" she demanded. "Why does Ngai give me a fool for a son, and then stir my hopes by sending him to you, and then curse me doubly by returning him, almost a man and unable to perform any of the chores on our shamba? What will become of him? Who will accept a bride-price from such a fool? He will be late to plant our seed and late to harvest it, he will be late to choose a bride and late to make the payment on her, and he will end up living with the unmarried men at the edge of the forest and begging for food. With my luck he will even be late to die!" She paused for breath, then began wailing again, and finally screamed: "Why does Ngai hate me so?"

"Calm yourself, Shima," I said.

"It is easy for you to say!" she sobbed. "You have not lost all hope for your future."

"My future is of very limited duration," I said. "It is Kirinyaga's future that concerns me."

"See?" she said, wailing and beating her breasts again. "See? I am the mother of the boy who will destroy Kirinyaga!"

"I did not say that."

"What has he done, Koriba?" she said. "Tell me, and I will have his father and brothers beat him until he behaves."

"Beating him is not the solution," I said. "He is young, and he rebels against my authority. It is the way of things. Before long he will realize that he is wrong."

"I will explain to him all that he can lose, and he will know that he should never disagree with you, and he

will come back."

"You might suggest it," I encouraged her. "I am an old man, and I have much left to teach him."

"I will do as you say, Koriba," she promised.

"Good," I said. "Now go back to your shamba and speak to Ndemi, for I have other things to do."

It was not until I awoke from my nap and returned to the village to sit at the Council of Elders that I realized just how many things I had to do.

* * * *

Our daily business is always conducted in late afternoon, when the heat of the day has passed, at the boma of Koinnage, the paramount chief. One by one the Elders place their mats in a semi-circle and sit on them, with my place being at Koinnage's right hand. The boma is cleared of all women, children, and animals, and when the last of us has arrived, Koinnage calls us into session. He announces what problems are to be considered, and then I ask Ngai to guide our judgment and allow us to come to just decisions.

On this particular day, two of the villagers had asked the Council of Elders to determine the ownership of a calf that was born to a cow they jointly owned; Sebana wanted permission to divorce his youngest wife, who had now been barren for three years; and Kijo's three sons were unhappy with the way his estate had been divided among them.

Koinnage consulted with me in low whispers after each petition had been heard, and took my advice, as always. The calf went to the man who had fed the cow during her pregnancy, with the understanding that the other man should own the next calf. Sebana was told that he could divorce his wife, but would not receive the bride price back, and he elected to keep her. Kijo's sons were told that they could accept the division as it was, or if two of them agreed, I would place three colored stones in a gourd, and they could each withdraw a stone and own the shamba that it represented. Since each faced the possibility of ending up with the smallest shamba, only one brother voted for our solution, as I had foreseen, and the petition was dismissed.

At this point, Koinnage's senior wife, Wambu, would usually appear with a large gourd of pombe, and we would drink it and then return to our bomas, but this day Wambu did not come, and Koinnage turned nervously to me.

"There is one thing more, Koriba," he said.

"Oh?"

He nodded, and I could see the muscles in his face tensing as he worked up the courage to confront his mundumugu.

"You have told us that Ngai handed the burning spear to Jomo Kenyatta, that he might create Mau Mau and drive the Europeans from Kenya."

"That is true," I said.

"Is it?" he replied. "I have been told that he himself married a European woman, that Mau Mau did not succeed in driving the Europeans from the holy mountain, and that Jomo Kenyatta was not even his real name -- that he was actually born with the European name Johnstone." He stared at me, half-accusing, half-terrified of arousing my wrath. "What have you to say to this, Koriba?"

I met his gaze and held it for a long time, until he finally dropped his eyes. Then, one by one, I looked coldly at each member of the Council.

"So you prefer to believe a foolish young boy to your own mundumugu?" I demanded.

"We do not believe the boy, but the computer," said Karenja.

"And have you spoken to the computer yourselves?"

"No," said Koinnage. "That is another thing we must discuss. Ndemi tells me that your computer speaks to him and tells him many things, while my computer can do nothing but send messages to the other chiefs."

"It is a mundumugu's tool, not to be used by other men," I replied.

"Why?" asked Karenja. "It knows many things that we do not know. We could learn much from it."

"You have learned much from it," I said. "It speaks to me, and I speak to you."

"But it also speaks to Ndemi," continued Karenja, "and if it can speak to a boy barely past circumcision age, why can it not speak directly to the elders of the village?"

I turned to Karenja and held my two hands in front of me, palms up. "In my left hand is the meat of an impala that I killed today," I said. "In my right is the meat of an impala that I killed five days ago and left to sit in the sun. It is covered with ants, worms crawl through it, and it stinks." I paused. "Which of the two pieces of meat will you eat?"

"The meat in your left hand," he answered.

"But both pieces of meat came from the same herd of impala," I pointed out. "Both animals were equally fat and healthy when they died."

"But the meat in your right hand is rotten," he said.

"That is true," I agreed. "And just as there can be good and bad meat, so there can be good and bad facts. The facts Ndemi has related to you come from books written by the Europeans, and facts can mean different things to them than they mean to us."

I paused while they considered what I had said, and then continued. "A European may look upon the savannah and envision a city, while a Kikuyu may look at the same savannah and see a shamba. A European may look at an elephant and see ivory trinkets, while a Kikuyu may look at the same elephant and see food for his village, or destruction for his crops. And yet they are looking at the same land, and the same animal.

"Now," I said, once again looking at each of them in turn, "I have been to school in Europe, and in America, and only I, of all the men and women on Kirinyaga, have lived among the white man. And I tell you that only I, your mundumugu, am capable of separating the good facts from the bad facts. It was a mistake to allow Ndemi to speak with my computer; I will not allow it again, until I have given him more of my wisdom."

I had thought my statement would put an end to the matter, but as I looked around I saw signs of discomfort, as if they wished to argue with me but lacked the courage. Finally Koinnage leaned forward and, without looking directly at me, said, "Do you not see what you are saying, Koriba? If the mundumugu can make a mistake by allowing a young boy to speak with his computer, can he not also

make a mistake by not allowing the Elders to speak to it?"

I shook my head. "It is a mistake to allow any Kikuyu except the mundumugu to speak to it."

"But there is much that we can learn from it," persisted Koinnage.

"What?" I asked bluntly.

He shrugged helplessly. "If I knew, then I would already have learned it."

"How many times must I repeat this to you: there is nothing to be learned from the Europeans. The more you try to become like them, the less you remain Kikuyu. This is our Utopia, a Kikuyu Utopia. We must fight to preserve it."

"And yet," said Karenja, "even the word Utopia is European, is it not?"

"You heard that from Ndemi, too?" I asked without hiding the annoyance from my voice.

He nodded his head. "Yes."

"Utopia is just a word," I said. "It is the idea that counts."

"If the Kikuyu have no word for it and the Europeans do, perhaps it is a European idea," said Karenja. "And if we have built our world upon a European idea, perhaps there are other European ideas that we can also use."

I looked at their faces, and realized, for perhaps the first time, that most of the original Elders of Kirinyaga had died. Old Siboki remained, and I could tell by his face that he found European ideas even more abhorrent than I myself did, and there were two or three others, but this was a new generation of Elders, men who had come to maturity on Kirinyaga and could not remember the reasons we had fought so hard to come here.

"If you want to become black Europeans, go back to Kenya!" I snapped in disgust. "It is filled with them!"

"We are not black Europeans," said Karenja, refusing to let the matter drop. "We are Kikuyu who think it is possible that not all European ideas are harmful."

"Any idea that changes us is harmful," I said.

"Why?" asked Koinnage, his courage to oppose me growing as he realized that many of the Elders supported him. "Where is it written that a Utopia cannot grow and change? If that were the case, we would have ceased to be a Utopia the day the first baby was born on Kirinyaga."

"There are as many Utopias as there are races," I said. "None among you would argue that a Kikuyu Utopia is the same as a Maasai Utopia or a Samburu Utopia. By the same token, a Kikuyu Utopia cannot be a European Utopia. The closer you come to the one, the farther you move from the other."

They had no answer to that, and I got to my feet.

"I am your mundumugu," I said. "I have never misled you. You have always trusted my judgment in the past. You must trust in it in this instance."

As I began walking out of the boma, I heard Karenja's voice behind me.

"If you were to die tomorrow, Ndemi would become our mundumugu. Are you saying we should trust his judgment as we trust yours?"

I turned to face him. "Ndemi is very young and inexperienced. You, as the elders of the village, would have to use your wisdom to decide whether or not what he says is correct."

"A bird that has been caged all its life cannot fly," said Karenja, "just as a flower that has been kept from the sun will not blossom."

"What is your point?" I asked.

"Shouldn't we begin using our wisdom now, lest we forget how when Ndemi has become the mundumugu?"

This time it was I who had no answer, so I turned on my heel and began the long walk back to my hill.

* * * *

For five days I fetched my own water and made my own fires, and then Ndemi returned, as I had known he would.

I was sitting in my boma, idly watching a herd of gazelles grazing across the river, when he trudged up the path to my hill, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"Jambo, Ndemi," I said. "It is good to see you again."

"Jambo, Koriba," he replied.

"And how was your vacation?" I asked, but there is no Swahili word for vacation so I used the English term and the humor and sarcasm were lost on him.

"My father urged me to come back," he said, bending over to pet one of my goats, and I saw the welts on his back that constituted his "urging."

"I am glad to have you back, Ndemi," I said. "We have become like father and son, and it pains me when we argue, as I am sure it pains you."

"It does pain me," he admitted. "I do not like to disagree with you, Koriba."

"We have both made mistakes," I continued. "You argued with your mundumugu, and I allowed you access to all that information before you were mature enough to know what to do with it. We are both intelligent enough to learn from our mistakes. You are still my chosen successor. It shall be as if it never happened."

"But it did happen, Koriba," he said.

"We shall pretend it did not."

"I do not think I can do that," said Ndemi unhappily, protecting his eyes as a sudden wind blew dust across the boma. "I learned many things when I spoke to the computer. How can I unlearn them?"

"If you cannot unlearn them, then you will have to ignore them until you are older," I said. "I am your teacher. The computer is just a tool. You will use it to bring the rains, and to send an occasional message to Maintenance, and that is all."

A black kite swooped down and made off with a scrap of my morning meal that had fallen beside the embers of my fire. I watched it while I waited for Ndemi to speak.

"You appear troubled," I said, when it became apparent that he would not speak first. "Tell me what bothers you."

"It was you who taught me to think, Koriba," he said as various emotions played across his handsome young face. "Would you have me stop thinking now, just because I think differently than you do?"

"Of course I do not want you to stop thinking, Ndemi," I said, not without sympathy, for I understood the forces at war within him. "What good would a mundumugu be if he could not think? But just as there are right and wrong ways to throw a spear, there are right and wrong ways to think. I wish only to see you take the path of true wisdom."

"It will be greater wisdom if I come upon it myself," he said. "I must learn as many facts as I can, so that I can properly decide which are helpful and which are harmful."

"You are still too young," I said. "You must trust me until you are older, and better able to make those decisions."

"The facts will not change."

"No, but you will."

"But how can I know that change is for the good?" he asked. "What if you are wrong, and by listening to you until I become like you, I will be wrong too?"

"If you think I am wrong, why have you come back?"

"To listen, and decide," he said. "And to speak to the computer again."

"I cannot permit that," I said. "You have already caused great mischief among the tribe. Because of you, they are questioning everything I say."

"There is a reason for that."

"Perhaps you will tell me what it is?" I said, trying to keep the sarcasm from my voice, for I truly loved this boy and wished to win him back to my side.

"I have listened to your stories for many years now, Koriba," he said, "and I believe that I can use your method to show you the reason."

I nodded my head and waited for him to continue.

"This should be called the story of Ndemi," he said, "but because I am pretending to be Koriba, I shall call it the story of the Unborn Lion."

I plucked an insect from my cheek and rolled it between my fingers until the carapace cracked. "I am listening."

"Once there was an unborn lion who was very anxious to see the world," began Ndemi. "He spent much time talking about it to his unborn brothers. 'The world will be a wonderful place,' he assured them. 'The sun will always be shining, and the plains will be filled with fat, lazy impala, and all other animals will bow before us, for there shall be no animal mightier than us.'"

"His brothers urged him to stay where he was. 'Why are you so anxious to be born?' they asked him. 'Here it is warm and safe, and we never hunger. Who knows what awaits us in the world?'

"But the unborn lion would hear none of it, and one night, while his mother and brethren slept, he stole out into the world. He could not see, so he nudged his mother and said, 'Where is the sun?' and she told him that the sun vanishes every evening, leaving the world cold and dark. 'At least when it comes back tomorrow, it will shine on fat lazy impala that we will catch and eat,' he said, trying to console himself.

"But his mother said, 'There are no impala here, for they have migrated with the rains to the far side of the world. All that is left for us to eat is the buffalo. Their flesh is tough and tasteless, and they kill as many of us as we kill of them.'

"If my stomach is empty, at least my spirit will be full,' said the newly-born lion, 'for all other animals will look upon us with fear and envy.'

"You are very foolish, even for a newly-born cub,' said his mother. 'The leopard and the hyena and the eagle look upon you not as an object of envy, but rather as a tasty meal.'

"At least all of them will fear me when I am fully-grown,' said the newly-born lion.

"The rhinoceros will gore you with his horn,' said his mother, 'and the elephant will toss you high into the trees with his trunk. Even the black mamba will not step aside for you, and will kill you if you try to approach it.'

"The mother continued her list of all the animals that would neither fear nor envy the lion when he grew up, and finally he told her to speak no more.

"I have made a terrible mistake by being born,' he said. 'The world is not as I pictured it, and I will rejoin my brothers where they are warm and safe and comfortable.'

"But his mother merely smiled at him. 'Oh, no,' she said, not without compassion. 'Once you are born, whether it is of your own choosing or mine, you cannot ever go back to being an unborn lion. Here you are, and here you shall stay.'"

Ndemi looked at me, his story finished.

"It is a very wise story," I said. "I could not have done better myself. I knew the day I first made you my pupil that you would make a fine mundumugu."

"You still do not understand," he said unhappily.

"I understand the story perfectly," I replied.

"But it is a lie," said Ndemi. "I told it only to show you how easy it is to make up such lies."

"It is not easy at all," I corrected him. "It is an art, mastered only by a few -- and now that I see that you have mastered it, it would be doubly hurtful to lose you."

"Art or not, it is a lie," he repeated. "If a child heard and believed it, he would be sure that lions could speak, and that babies can be born whenever they chose to be." He paused. "It would have been much simpler to tell you that once I have obtained knowledge, whether it was freely given or not, I cannot empty my mind and give it back. Lions have nothing to do with that." He paused for a long moment. "Furthermore, I do not want to give my knowledge back. I want to learn more things, not forget those that I already know."

"You must not say that, Ndemi," I urged him. "Especially now that I see that my teachings have taken root, and that your abilities as a creator of fables will someday surpass my own. You can be a great mundumugu if you will just allow me to guide you."

"I love and respect you as I do my own father, Koriba," he replied. "I have always listened and tried to learn from you, and I will continue to do so for as long as you will permit me. But you are not the only source of knowledge. I also wish to learn what your computer can teach me."

"When I decide you are ready."

"I am ready now."

"You are not."

His face reflected an enormous inner battle, and I could only watch until it was resolved. Finally he took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I am sorry, Koriba, but I cannot continue to tell lies when there are truths to be learned." He laid a hand on my shoulder. "Kwaheri, mwalimu." Good-bye, my teacher.

"What will you do?"

"I cannot work on my father's shamba," he said, "not after all that I have learned. Nor do I wish to live in isolation with the bachelors at the edge of the forest."

"What is left for you?" I asked.

"I shall walk to that area of Kirinyaga called Haven, and await the next Maintenance ship. I will go to Kenya and learn to read and write, and when I am ready, I will study to become an historian. And when I am a good enough historian, I will return to Kirinyaga and teach what I have learned."

"I am powerless to stop you from leaving," I said, "for the right to emigrate is guaranteed to all our citizens by our charter. But if you return, know that despite what we have been to one another, I will oppose you."

"I do not wish to be your enemy, Koriba," he said.

"I do not wish to have you as an enemy," I replied. "The bond between us has been a strong one."

"But the things I have learned are too important to my people."

"They are my people too," I pointed out, "and I have led them to this point by always doing what I think is best for them."

"Perhaps it is time for them to choose what is best."

"They are incapable of making that choice," I said.

"If they are incapable of making that choice, it is only because you have hoarded knowledge to which they have as much right as you do."

"Think very carefully before you do this thing," I said. "Despite my love for you, if you do anything to harm Kirinyaga, I will crush you like an insect."

He smiled sadly. "For six years I have asked you to teach me how to turn my enemies into insects so that

I may crush them. Is this how I am finally to learn?"

I could not help but return his smile. I had an urge to stand up and throw my arms around him and hug him, but such behavior is unacceptable in a mundumugu, so I merely looked at him for a long moment and then said, "Kwaheri, Ndemi. You were the best of them."

"I had the best teacher," he replied.

And with that, he turned and began the long walk toward Haven.

* * * *

The problems caused by Ndemi did not end with his departure.

Njoro dug a borehole near his hut, and when I explained that the Kikuyu did not dig boreholes but carried their water from the river, he replied that surely this borehole must be acceptable, for the idea came not from the Europeans but rather the Tswana people far to the south of Kenya.

I ordered the boreholes to be filled in. When Koinnage argued that there were crocodiles in the river and that he would not risk the lives of our women simply to maintain what he felt was a useless tradition, I had to threaten him with a powerful thahu, or curse -- that of impotency -- before he agreed.

Then there was Kidogo, who has named his firstborn Jomo, after Jomo Kenyatta, the Burning Spear. One day he announced that the boy was henceforth to be known as Johnstone, and I had to threaten him with banishment to another village before he relented. But even as he gave in, Mbura changed his own name to Johnstone and moved to a distant village even before I could order it.

Shima continued to tell anyone who would listen that I had forced Ndemi to leave Kirinyaga because he was occasionally late for his lessons, and Koinnage kept requesting a computer that was the equal of my own.

Finally, young Mdotu created his own version of a barbed-wire enclosure for his father's cattle, using woven grasses and thorns, making sure he wrapped them around the fenceposts. I had it torn down, and thereafter he always walked away when the other children circled around me to hear a story.

I began to feel like the Dutch boy in Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale. As quickly as I put my finger in the dike to staunch the flow of European ideas, they would break through in another place.

And then a strange thing happened. Certain ideas that were not European, that Ndemi could not possibly have transmitted to the members of the village, began cropping up on their own.

Kibo, the youngest of Koinnage's three wives, rendered the fat from a dead warthog and began burning it at night, creating Kirinyaga's first lamp. Ngobe, whose arm was not strong enough to throw a spear with any accuracy, devised a very primitive bow and arrow, the first Kikuyu ever to use such a weapon. Karenja created a wooden plow, so that his ox could drag it through the fields while his wives simply guided it, and soon all the other villagers were improvising plows and strangely-shaped digging tools. Indeed, alien ideas that had been dormant since the creation of Kirinyaga were now springing forth on all fronts. Ndemi's words had opened a Pandora's box, and I did not know how to close it.

I spent many long days sitting alone on my hill, staring down at the village and wondering if a Utopia can evolve and still remain a Utopia.

And the answer was always the same: Yes, but it will not be the same Utopia, and it was my sacred duty to keep Kirinyaga a Kikuyu Utopia.

When I was convinced that Ndemi was not going to return, I began going down to the village each day, trying to decide which of the children was the brightest and most forceful, for it would take both brilliance and force to deflect the alien ideas which were infecting our world and turning it into something it was never meant to be.

I spoke only to the boys, for no female may be a mundumugu. Some, like Mdotu, had already been corrupted by listening to Ndemi -- but those who had not been corrupted by Ndemi were even more hopeless, for a mind cannot open and close at will, and those who were unmoved by what he had to say were not bright enough for the tasks a mundumugu must perform.

I expanded my search to other villages, convinced that somewhere on Kirinyaga I would find the boy I sought, a boy who grasped the difference between facts, which merely informed, and parables, which not only informed but instructed. I needed a Homer, a Jesus, a Shakespeare, someone who could touch men's souls and gently guide them down the path that must be taken.

But the more I searched, the more I came to the realization that a Utopia does not lend itself to such tellers of tales. Kirinyaga seemed divided into two totally separate groups: those who were content with their lives and had no need to think, and those whose every thought led them farther and farther from the society we had labored to build. The unimaginative would never be capable of creating parables, and the imaginative would create their own parables, parables that would not reaffirm a belief in Kirinyaga and a distrust of alien ideas.

After some months I was finally forced to concede that, for whatever reason, there were no potential mundumugus waiting to be found and groomed. I began wondering if Ndemi had been truly unique, or if he would have eventually rejected my teachings even without exposure to the European influence of the computer. Was it possible that a true Utopia could not outlast the generation that founded it, that it was the nature of man to reject the values of the society into which he is born, even when those values are sacred?

Or was it just conceivable that Kirinyaga had never been a Utopia, that somehow we had deluded ourselves into believing that we could go back to a way of life that had forever vanished?

I considered that possibility for a long time, but eventually I rejected it, for if it were true, then the only logical conclusion was that it had vanished because the Europeans' values were more pleasing to Ngai than our own, and this I knew to be false.

No, if there was a truth anywhere in the universe, it was that Kirinyaga was exactly as it was meant to be -- and if Ngai felt obligated to test us by presenting us with these heresies, that would make our ultimate victory over the lies of the Europeans all the more sweet. If minds were worth anything, they were worth fighting for, and when Ndemi returned, armed with his facts and his data and his numbers, he would find me waiting for him.

It would be a lonely battle, I thought as I carried my empty water gourds down to the river, but having given His people a second chance to build their Utopia, Ngai would not allow us to fail. Let Ndemi tempt our people with his history and his passionless statistics. Ngai had His own weapon, the oldest and truest weapon He possessed, the weapon that had created Kirinyaga and kept it pure and intact despite all the many challenges it had encountered.

I looked into the water and studied the weapon critically. It appeared old and frail, but I could also see hidden reservoirs of strength, for although the future appeared bleak, it could not fail as long as it was used in Ngai's service. It stared back at me, bold and unblinking, secure in the rightness of its cause.

It was the face of Koriba, last storyteller among the Kikuyu, who stood ready to battle once again for the

soul of his people.

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