

Captive Beauty

A Changa Tale

By Milton Davis



The eager spectators crowded the sides of the *Sada*, filling the merchant dhow from stern to bow. Those that couldn't find room on the deck hung from ropes and sat on the bulwark. Their eyes focused on two bare-chested men circling each other, their brown skin glistening with sweat. The taller man lumbered from side to side, his huge arms swaying as he tried to keep pace with his shorter opponent. He possessed a wide chest and a wider stomach sitting on legs that resembled thick tree trunks. His short curled hair atop his head contrasted with the voluminous beard grazing his chest with each frustrating turn of his head.

The other man moved with martial grace, his body a chiseled muscular form. His smooth face and bald head told of his youth, but his deep brown eyes revealed experience beyond his years. He observed his opponent with the skill of a man used to such encounters, a man whose battles in his past usually ended in death. Luckily for the big man, this was not such an encounter.

“Stand still, Changa!” the big man bellowed. “How do you expect me to give you a hug if you keep flittering like a moth?”

The spectators laughed and Changa grinned. “I’m no fool, Yusef. Those arms were meant to hug elephants, not men, and certainly not women.”

Yusef lunged at Changa. Changa dodged to his left, slapping Yusef across the forehead with an open right hand. The big man stopped himself just short of plowing into the crowd of terrified bahari.

“Damn you, *kibwana!*” Yusef yelled. “Stand still! From Mogadishu to Mombasa they call you Mbogo, The Bull. All I see is a skittish little fish.”

Changa laughed at the insult. He planted his feet, resting his hands at his waist.

“Okay, Yusef. Let me show you why they call me The Bull.”

The two inched towards each other, their arms extended. Their fingers touched then intertwined as they began a test of strength as old as time.

“Hah!” Yusef shouted. He immediately pressed down on Changa, tightening his massive hands around Changa’s. A normal man would have crumbled under the massive man’s weight; a strong man would have buckled in seconds. Changa stood still, the only indication of exertion the rippling muscles under his taunt black skin. Yusef pressed harder and Changa remained unmoved. The giant lost his humor; he clenched his teeth as he pressed harder, his arms shaking with effort. Changa remained unmoved. Every man on the dhow fell silent to the amazing test of strength playing out before them. None doubted Changa’s strength, but this display went beyond their imagining.

While Yusef and the others interpreted Changa’s silence as an unbelievable show of poise, the opposite was true. Changa concentrated with every pound of his muscle, fighting back Yusef’s onslaught. He was lapping at the brink of his endurance, waiting the right moment. He looked into his opponent’s face and determined the time was right.

Changa collapsed. A triumphant grin emerged through Yusef’s beard until he realized Changa wasn’t falling; he was rolling. He was too committed to pull back. Pain

shot from his belly to his back as Changa drove his feet into Yusef. The big man was airborne, Changa's face replaced by sails, seagulls and sky, He brief flight ended amidst a crowd of hands, feet and groans as he crash landed among the unfortunate *baharia* on the deck.

"Mbogo!" the uninjured spectators cheered. Changa rolled to his feet then sauntered to Yusef and the pile of hapless victims beneath him.

"You were right," Changa said as he massaged his sore arms and shoulders "You are stronger than me."

"Are you done playing, Changa?" Kasim, the dhow captain walked between the two. The Sada sailors scurried to their chores at the sight of their captain, the others dispersing to their duties at the docks.

Changa looked down at Yusef, extending his hand. "Are we done, Yusef?"

Yusef took Changa's hand and Changa pulled him up to a sitting position.

"Yes, we are done...Mbogo," he conceded, a defeated tone in his voice.

Kasim nodded. "Good. Belay wants to see you right away."

Changa's mood shifted from victorious to serious. He hurried below and washed himself, donned his cotton shirt and proceeded to the warehouse containing Belay's office. The merchant sat hunched over his desk as always, studying his counting books.

"Bwana, you sent for me?" Changa asked.

Belay looked up, greeting Changa with a broad grin.

"Yes, Changa. Please, sit down."

Belay leaned back in his chair and massaged his forehead.

“I don’t understand why Allah punishes me. I pray, I am a fair and honest man and I give alms to the poor. Instead of blessing me he brings me troubles.”

“It is never more than you can handle,” Changa said.

“So you say,” Belay sighed. “Do you know Mustafa the goat herder?”

“Barely.”

“I’m sure you know of his daughter, Yasmine.”

Changa answered with a smile. In a city known for its beautiful women Yasmine stood out like a diamond among stones. There wasn’t a single man in Mombassa, Changa included, that wouldn’t hesitate to accumulate a generous lobola if he knew she favored him.

Changa’s expression answered Belay’s question. “Mustafa barges in my office this morning demanding to see me. Being the Muslim that I am, I allowed him an audience despite his rudeness. He sat where you sit now and stated that Yasmine was missing and Narigisi was to blame.”

A frown appeared on Changa’s face and he shifted in his seat. Narigisi was Belay’s eldest son, as different from his father as oil and water. He was a vain, selfish and evil man with the spirit of Shaitan.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Belay said. “You think Mustafa is right. I think so, too, but I could not say so in front of him. I told him I would look into the matter and you know what he did? He jumped to his feet and slammed his fist on my desk! He demanded that I either return his daughter or pay him twice the lobola offered by her suitors.”

Changa's mind focused on Yasmine, a familiar, uncomfortable feeling rising in his chest.

"I have seen Naragisi courting Yasmine," he said. "She did not seem pleased with his attention."

"I'm not surprised." Belay stood. "We will visit my son tomorrow and get to the bottom of this."

Changa stood as well. "If we go to see Naragisi we'll need more men."

Belay rubbed his forehead again. "Yes, that's true. Will you see to it?"

"Of course, bwana."

Changa returned to the dhow burdened with concern. The men gathered about him as soon as he boarded.

"Bashiri, Zakwani and Tayari, get your weapons," he announced. "We are to escort Bwana Belay to his son's house."

The chosen men hurried below deck with huge grins on their faces. Escort duty was extra pay. Going with Changa meant they had a good chance of returning. Changa noticed Yusef sulking across the ship, still smarting from his recent defeat.

"Yusef," he called out. "Get your gear. You're coming, too."

The big man smiled like a child. "Of course, Changa, of course!"

The men met Belay at the warehouse. Belay climbed on his wagon and they set out for the mainland. Naragisi's difference from his father went beyond personalities. Unlike most Swahili Naragisi despised the city, preferring life in the hinterlands. An expansive *shamba* filled with hundreds of Zebu cattle surrounded his elaborate home, the estate protected by Samburu warriors. Instead of the normal thorn bush palisade Naragisi

had constructed a stone wall six feet high. Four stone gates allowed entrance, one at each point of the compass, each protected by a Samburu village. Changa and the others met no opposition until they reached the gate. Four Samburu guarded the gate, tall lean men with iron tipped spears and swords that flared out like fans at the tip. A red cloak fell from one shoulder, covering their bodies to the knees. A black beaded belt gathered the cloak about their waists and held the wooden scabbards for their swords and daggers. Each warrior held a broad leaf shield of cowhide, the pattern of Naragisi painted on each one.

The guards shifted as Changa approached them.

“Habare,” Changa said.

“Umzuri,” the guards replied.

“Bwana Belay wishes to see his son.”

“That is not possible,” the warrior replied. “Bwana Naragisi is not to be disturbed.”

Suspicion emerged in Changa’s thoughts, confirmed by the look in Belay’s eyes.

“Must I remind you where your master’s wealth originates?” Belay said.

The Samburu guards shifted their stances. “Our master’s wealth resides within his walls,” the warrior sneered. “Golden metal has no value here.”

Changa’s sword sprang from its sheath before the guards could react, its tip pressed into the warrior’s chin.

“Is your master’s wealth worth your life?”

The warrior opened the gate and stepped aside. The Mombassans crossed the wide expanse to the door of Naragisi’s home. A servant girl dressed in a colorful kanga and beaded braids met them at the entrance.

“Welcome, father,” she said respectfully. “Your son is grateful you have come to visit him. Please follow me to the veranda.”

The girl led them to a huge courtyard, the stone floor covered by an enormous and expensive Persian rug. An elaborate table was set before them. Belay sat at the table; Changa, Yusef and the others remained standing behind him.

Naragisi entered accompanied by a dozen Samburu warriors. He smiled at his father as he cut a glance at Changa.

“Father, welcome!” he said. “I am so glad you came to visit me so unexpectedly.”

“I have no time for your deception, Naragisi,” Belay retorted. “Mustafa the goat herder came to my warehouse today, claiming you had something to do with his daughter’s disappearance. Do you?”

Naragisi sat at the table, taking time to prepare a cup of chai.

“He is Yasmine’s father, is he not?”

Belay’s small hands clenched. “Yes he is.”

“Hmm.” Naragisi sipped his tea. “Yes and no.”

“What do you mean yes and no?”

“Yes, father, I am responsible for Yasmine’s disappearance, but not in the way you suspect.”

Changa’s hand went to his sword and Naragisi’s guards responded by stepping forward, their spears lowered.

Belay raised his hand. “I didn’t come here for violence. I came here for answers.”

“It’s no secret I wanted Yasmine,” Naragisi admitted. “I waited for her to arrive at the market every day and gave her gifts and kind words. It was more than any woman of her station deserved no matter how beautiful she is.”

Naragisi paused to sip his tea again. A frown marred his face.

“I finally explained to her my intentions and she laughed. She laughed at me! I wanted to strike her down and I would have if I didn’t cherish her beauty so much. I decided to show her what being my wife meant. I arranged to have her brought here.”

“You had her kidnapped,” Changa said.

“No one gave you permission to speak, *mtwana*,” Naragisi growled.

“Keep your insults!” Belay barked. “Who did you hire?”

Naragisi leaned back on his cushion and raised his teacup, staring at Changa.

“Wal Wasaki.”

Belay sighed, closed his eyes and hung his head. Changa fought a surge of anger as he struggled to keep his hand from his sword.

“I really thought Wal would bring her to me,” Naragisi continued. “We have conducted business before.”

“Wasaki deals with the highest bidder,” Changa said. “He must have received a better offer.”

“You keep speaking as if it matters,” Naragisi commented.

“And you keep speaking as if I won’t kill you where you sit.”

“Enough!” Belay stood. “I’ll deal with you latter, Naragisi.”

Changa and the others headed back to Mombassa. Changa watched Belay with disappointment. Belay would do nothing to Naragisi. His sons were worthless but the old

merchant loved them too much to punish them. He would ignore the crime and attempt to ease Mustafa's suffering with payment and favors. When they reached Belay's home Changa was the first to speak.

"Bwana, let me deal with Wal," he said.

"That won't be necessary, Changa. Wal is a criminal, but he is also a businessman. I'll pay him whatever he asks."

"What if he doesn't have her?"

Belay sighed. "Then there is nothing more I can do."

"I will deliver your offer," Changa said. "If he does not have Yasmine I will find out where she is."

"And how will you accomplish this?" Belay inquired.

"I can be very persuasive," Changa smiled.

Belay returned his smile. "Take good men with you, Changa. Don't do anything...foolish."

"I will be careful, bwana."

Wal Wasaki's compound was only a few miles from Belay's warehouse in the center of Low Town. Though the distance between the two sections was small, the contrast was jarring. Entering Low Town was like walking into a tempest. The thick grey walls surrounding the district were remnants from a time when Low Town served as Mombasa's prison. There was order within the barricades, a chaotic system that changed with the whims of its master, Wal Wasaki, a man who was as brilliant as he was mad. Changa thought on this as he and his cohorts approached the western gate.

“This is the nearest entrance to Wal’s main compound,” he told the others. “We must be swift if we expect to confront him.”

“I thought we were supposed to offer him payment,” Yusef said.

Changa grinned at the big man. “We will, but we’ll add a little incentive.” He patted his knife bag.

Yusef grinned back. “I like you, *kibwana*.”

Changa and his cohorts entered Wal’s realm purposely, their countenances revealing their intent. It was obvious they were looking for someone. The reaction of the onlookers varied; some ran, some fell to their knees in prayer while others slipped silently into the refuge of nearby buildings. Then there were those that stood defiantly, their hands gripping daggers or swords, ready to face the danger the armed interlopers presented.

Wal’s compound occupied the center of his district. Thick stone walls topped by jagged metal spikes encased the elaborate buildings inside. Two heavily armed guards flanked the iron gate, watching Changa and his men with little interest. Changa continued past them, waiting until Yusef was before them. He turned, throwing his knife at the guard closest to him. The knife struck the man in the head and he crumpled where he stood. The second guard threw up his shield, deflecting Changa’s second knife. Yusef pounced, knocking away the shield with his left fist as he drove his sword into the man’s gut. Changa sprinted past the dying man, leading the attack into Wal’s compound.

Changa kicked the gate open and charged into the compound. He ran directly to the largest home surrounded by more guards. They looked stunned until they realized Changa’s intent. They surged towards the Bakongo just as his companions joined him.

Changa stepped back, looking for Wal. He spotted the bandit slipping out the rear of his home, accompanied by two guards. He sprinted after them, a throwing knife in each hand. He drew his arm back and threw both knives, striking both guards in the back. Wal spun about, his sword drawn.

“This is a foolish thing you do, Changa,” he said.

Changa ignored Wal’s threat. He dodged the bandit’s weak thrust and punched him across the jaw, knocking him senseless. He grabbed the bandit by the collar of his shirt and dragged him back into the house.

Yusef and the others met him inside. The house was a miniature palace, decorated with items from throughout Swahililand and the world. A huge Persian rug covered the entire tile floor. Aromatic incenses burned in lamps in every corner. Large silk pillows rested at the center of the rug, surrounding a group of women clutching each other and whimpering. Bowls of food were overturned, a sign of Wal’s hasty exit.

Changa’s men rushed the women from the room while he towed Wal to the center. He shoved the man to the floor and dropped his foot on his chest, his sword tip to his throat.

“Wal Wasaki, I come on behalf of Belay. He wishes to know the whereabouts of Yasmine, daughter of Mustafa. He has authorized me to pay for this information.”

“You’re a fool, Changa, a fool!” Wal spat.

Changa stepped away from Wal and signaled Yusef. The big Swahili snatched Wal from the rug, raised the man over his head and threw him across the room. Wal slammed into the wall and crashed to the floor.

“Yusef!” Changa yelled.

The big man held out his hands and shrugged. Changa glared at him as he ran to Wal. The bandit was still alive.

“Where is Yasmine?” he asked.

Wal stirred. “Sheik Abdul,” he whispered.

Changa bent closer, refusing to acknowledge what he heard. “What did you say?”

Wal winced as he rolled onto his back. “I sold her to Sheik Abdul of Zanzibar.”

Changa closed his eyes, a curse slipping from his lips. It was worse that he imagined.

“She is lost then,” he said.

Wal managed to laugh. “Do you think Abdul would come to me for a common slave? He could get that from any of a hundred slavers working the coast. Yasmine was special. Her life with Abdul will be better that she deserves, much better than living with Naragisi surrounded by savages and cow shit.”

Changa wanted to drive his sword between Wal’s shoulders but he didn’t come to kill the man. He dropped the bag of gold by Wal’s face.

“Your payment.” Changa stepped away, signaling Yusef and the others. They emerged into an eerie silence, their exit much quieter than their entrance. Yusef found his way to Changa’s side.

“That was good, kibwana. Belay will be happy.”

Changa nodded.

Yusef scratched his beard. “I don’t understand why you paid him.”

“The payment will allow Wal to save face,” Changa answered. “It will also keep us alive. Wal wouldn’t allow us to live if word spread of what we did. He wouldn’t touch

Belay for that would risk vendetta. But we're nothing to him. He'd keep sending assassins until we were all dead."

Changa and his companions relaxed once they emerged from Wal's district. They headed directly to Belay's warehouse with their news.

Belay paced as he spoke. "Wal may be right about Yasmine's fate."

Changa was confused. "You agree with him, bwana?"

"Yasmine may be better off with Abdul," Belay reasoned. "Her virtue has been compromised. No man will marry her now, not even Naragisi. She will have a good life as Naragisi's concubine."

Changa bristled. "She will still be a slave. She has no one to protect her from the whims of Abdul. What if tires of her? She'll be casted into the masses. Yasmine should not be punished for her beauty. She did not ask for this fate."

Belay stopped pacing and looked at Changa with sympathy. "You're feelings are personal and you raise valid questions. However, I did not make the world."

"She should have a choice," Changa retorted. He was pushing his authority, spurred by shame of his memories. "This was Naragisi's doing. You are always fixing his mistakes. You should fix this."

Belay dropped his head. "That is true. I would be a much richer man if not for the debts of my sons. Prepare the Sada. We will sail to Zanzibar and meet with Sheik Abdul. We will see how much a princess is worth these days."

The Sada sailed into the harbor of Zanzibar on a clear, cloudless day. Belay sent messengers to Abdul as soon as they docked. The Mombassans awaited the sheik's reply

on board. Changa did not take part in the dhows chores; he, Yusef and others were present as Belay's bodyguards. The messengers returned quickly. Sheik Abdul would meet with them in three days.

While Belay took the time to conduct business, Changa's anxiousness grew. His mind kept slipping back to his early days of captivity, remembering the pain and confusion as he was torn from his family. The images of what the women and girls suffered were too terrible for him to clearly recall. He followed Belay about in angry silence, the minutes passing like eternity. When the day finally came for the meeting, Changa's mood was at the least tense.

Sheik Abdul's palace lay south of the harbor, surrounded by the slave pens. Changa tried to ignore the human cages but his eyes betrayed him. Hundreds of people lay chained in the filthy compartments waiting to be sold to slavers who would take them north to Arabia and beyond. He looked into their desperate eyes and saw a sense of hopelessness far beyond anything he ever experienced while similarly confined. Abdul's control was more than physical; there was something deeper at work.

One pair of eyes caught his attention. They belonged to a boy clutching the bars with emaciated fingers. Changa found himself falling into the boy's gaze until he looked into the streets of Zanzibar from the cage. He saw dense forest as the cage rocked back and forth with the contours of the wooded hills as the caravan travelled the muddy road leading from his city, his kingdom and his family. The fear of an eight year old boy returned, the terror of a child that saw his father murdered and his mothers and sisters taken as wives of the murderer.

“Kibwana, are you well?”

Yusef's deep intrusive voice shattered his waking nightmare.

"I'm fine."

They stood before Abdul's palace. A servant greeted them at the gates, a welcoming smile on his face.

"Welcome, Bwana Belay. My master awaits you in the veranda."

The servant led them through the gates to the veranda. Sheik Abdul sat before a table filled with food and sweets, a banquet fit for a dignitary. A solemn servant offered Belay a seat. Changa and Yusef flanked the merchant.

Abdul nodded to Belay. "Welcome, my brother. This is a pleasant surprise. I have heard much of you and I am flattered you wished to visit me.

Belay nodded in return. "The reputation of Abdul sails on the sea as far as the Spice Lands. I am flattered you agreed to allow me this visit."

Abdul nodded to a servant who poured him a glass of wine. Changa noticed the same look in the woman's eyes like the boy in the cage, a vacuous vision of despair.

"I can't believe we've never met before," Abdul continued. "Belay of Mombassa is a man well known throughout Swahililand."

Belay refrained from wine, preferring water. "Sheik Abdul is a legend among merchants."

Abdul closed his eyes as he replied. "I am but a humble man. But tell me, rafiki; is it business that finds you here this day?"

"Yes, but not the type you are familiar with."

Abdul's face looked puzzled. "Surely a man with wealth such as yours has need of what I provide?"

“I prefer paid help,” Belay replied. “It’s less worrisome.”

Abdul took an orange from his bowl. “Slaves can be docile as cows if properly trained. I seem to recall there is one in your employ that may be an exception.”

Abdul’s eyes rested on Changa. Belay glanced at the Bakonga and smiled.

“I freed Changa soon after rescuing him from the fighting pit. A man with his skills and abilities didn’t deserve to be a slave.”

“No one does,” Abdul agreed. “But we did not make the world.”

“That is true.”

The two carried on a casual conversation as they ate. Changa glared at Abdul, his distaste for the man growing with every minute past. There was something missing in a man like Abdul, an emptiness of that allowed them to treat some men like objects while showing kindness to others.

The servants cleared the table. Belay leaned back in his chair, rubbing his stomach.

“An excellent feast,” he said.

“I’m humbled by your praise.” Abdul took another cup of wine. “Now my friend, why have you come?”

“I’m here to make right a wrong committed by my son. I was told you purchased a woman from Wal Wasaki, a woman my son had kidnapped for refusing his marriage offer. I have come to purchase her back.”

Abdul’s face contorted in confusion. “I do not know of what you speak. I do conduct business with Wasaki occasionally, but I never deal directly with him. Maybe one of my men has seen this woman. Can you describe her?”

“She needs no description, for she is a queen among queens. Her beauty knows no rival and her virtue honors her family. That is why it is so important that I do this. The woman is innocent.”

Abdul rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I would remember such a woman. What is her name?”

“Yasmine.”

Abdul folded his jeweled hands in his lap as a lie glimmered in his eyes before escaping his lips.

“I’m sorry, my friend. I have not seen this Yasmine. A woman such as you described would be very valuable, not for what she possess in beauty but for what she may harbor within. If I did come across such a woman, I would not be able to part with her. She would be priceless.”

Changa coughed to keep from cursing. Abdul’s eyes narrowed as they took in the Bakonga, the threat emanating from them clear. Belay saw the exchange and stood.

“I will not waste anymore of your time, Abdul. I realized this might be a fruitless journey but I had to try. I thank you for your time and hospitality.”

Abdul came to Belay and they hugged. “You must come again soon,” Abdul lied. “The hunting on the southern tip of the island is excellent.”

“I will,” Belay replied. “Allah be with you.”

“And with you.”

Changa’s restraint failed him as soon as he set foot on the Sada.

“He has her!”

Belay sat at his desk in the cabin. “I know.”

“You should have made him an offer.”

Belay sighed. “He would have refused. Yasmine’s beauty seems to be a curse to her.”

Changa slammed his fist as against the wall. “You didn’t even try!”

Belay came to his feet. “Enough, Changa! If you hope to be a merchant one day you must learn keep you personal feelings under control. This is business.”

“No, bwana, it is not. This is about a person’s life.”

“This became business the moment Wal took Yasmine. I have done all I can do. We are finished with this matter, you hear me? When we return to Mombassa I will pay Mustafa a proper lobola.”

Changa’s glare subsided into a disappointed stare.

“Go see about the crew,” Belay commanded. “We leave in the morning.”

Night had descended on Zanzibar when Changa finished his inspection. He went immediately to his cabin, gathered his weapons and returned to the deck.

“Where are you going, kibwana?”

Yusef leaned against the main mast, his thick arms folded across his chest.

“Go back below,” Changa advised. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“You’re going to get Yasmine, aren’t you?”

Changa ignored the big man as he walked down the plank. Yusef strode toward him.

“I’m going with you.”

Changa turned, looking up into Yusef’s defiant eyes.

“Don’t be ridiculous. This has nothing to do with you.”

“You defeated me in front of everyone,” Yusef answered. “If I wish a chance to redeem myself I need to make sure you come back alive.”

“I won’t slow down for you,” Changa warned.

“You won’t have to,” Yusef smiled.

The two made their way to the dark streets of Zanzibar. Changa set a fast pace and Yusef, true to his word, kept pace with him. They reached Abdul’s palace in moments, the streets strangely quiet for such a large town.

Changa went immediately to the compound. He leapt over the wall like a panther then jumped down into the courtyard, sword drawn. The courtyard was unguarded, unusual for a compound that held such wealth. He went to the gate and let Yusef in. They crept to the palace door. Changa tested it and it held firm.

“Stand aside, kibwana,” Yusef whispered.

“This is not the time for brute strength,” Changa warned.

“You insult me,” Yusef replied.

The bid Mombassan leaned against the door until he heard a cracking sound. Yusef stepped away and pushed the door open effortlessly.

The faint scuff of padded paws was the only warning. Changa instinctively jumped aside and the black leopard flashed by him, slamming onto Yusef’s back. He moved to help his friend but suddenly found himself dodging the charge of another leopard. The beast opened its mouth in a silent roar as it crept towards him. Changa backed away, brandishing a throwing knife in each hand. The cat struck out with its paw and Changa struck back, batting the claws away. The silence was shattered by Yusef’s bellow and the leopard’s cohort sailed out the doorway, landing lifeless in the dirt.

Changa's attacker was distracted for a moment, which was all the time he needed. A knife flew from his hand into the leopard's breast and the cat rose up on its hind legs, grasping the knife with its forelimbs. Changa's second knife ripped into the feline's belly and it fell onto its back. He finished it with his sword, driving the point into the leopard's throat.

He ran inside and found Yusef slumped against the wall, bleeding from his shoulder and chest.

"We have to go back," Changa said. "You need help."

"No!" Yusef snapped. "These are flesh wounds, nothing more. We came for Yasmine."

Yusef stood unsteadily. "Lead the way, kibwana, unless those kittens stole your nerve."

Changa smirked as he re-entered the house. The foyer was pitch black so he felt along the wall, searching for a torch when he heard the twang of bowstrings. He dropped quickly and rolled to his left, pulling out his throwing knives as he came to his feet. The strings thumped again and he heard a familiar grunt. Changa threw his knife at the bow sound and was rewarded with a painful cry. He moved and the arrow meant for his throat clattered against the stone wall. Changa threw a second knife. It missed its mark but accomplished its goal. The archer opened a door across the room to escape, a stream of torchlight streaming into the room. Changa ran back to check on Yusef and found him sitting at the entrance, an arrow protruding from his chest. The big man grasped the arrow and twisted it from his chest without a sound.

“Another scratch,” he said.

“Stay here,” Changa ordered. He chased after the bowman, entering a corridor lit by a succession of torches. He looked back at the room. Yusef was on his feet, wincing as he lumbered to the open door.

“Go back,” Changa urged.

“No, kibwana, I’m staying with you.”

They crept down the hall in pursuit of the bowman. Changa’s instincts were on edge; the house was wrong. Abdul was a rich man; his house should have been filled with people and possessions. With the exception of the bowman they had encountered no one.

A door at the end of the hall was opened slightly. Changa saw a smattering of blood staining the white marble floor. Something more escaped from the room, something sensed rather than seen. Changa reached for the door and stopped.

Yusef eased up behind him. “What are we waiting for?”

“Can’t you feel it?” Changa whispered.

Yusef shook his head. “Feel what?”

Changa turned to his companion. “Something is not right.”

The big man was around Changa and through the door before Changa could stop him. He hesitated, listening for some response to Yusef’s intrusion but there was none. His curiosity overcame his stealth and he entered the room.

Yusef stood frozen. The bowman lay dead a few feet before the Mombassan. Beyond them both in the center of the room was a large dais. Sitting on the surface was Yasmine. She was naked, her arms and legs chained to thick iron loops protruding from the stone. A blank expression ruled her face; her eyes staring at Changa and reaching into

his mind like loving fingers, searching for a way to control him. He jerked his head away to see Yusef raising his sword at him.

“Yusef, no!” Changa shouted. Yusef raised his scimitar high then slashed down. Changa dodged the swipe then ducked the swing aimed at his neck. Yusef moved faster than Changa thought capable of a man of his size. Changa danced away as well as he could, knowing he had no chance stopping those powerful blows. Yasmine controlled him, driving him far beyond his abilities. Changa realized he could not stop Yusef but he could stop Yasmine.

He dodged another swing, jumping between Yusef and the dais. He snatched out a throwing knife, holding it by the blade. The edge sliced his hand and he threw it at Yasmine, the handle striking her on the head and sprawling her on the dais. Yusef fell as she fell, crashing onto the floor in a massive heap.

Changa ran to his companion. Yusef panted, his body burning. Changa was approaching the dais when dozens of armed slaves charged into the room through doors on either side of the pedestal, forming an armed barrier between the Mombassan and the woman. Abdul sauntered into the room and climbed onto the dais. He knelt beside Yasmine, cradling her injured head in his hands.

“You discovered my secret,” he said as he smiled. “Do you know the power of beauty, Mombassan? Most men just see the surface, lusting for physical contact to sate their shallow desires. But the power lies within. It is the power to manipulate and control. It’s the reason why men fear women, why we spend so much time attempting to control that which we have no control.”

Abdul propped Yasmine up, holding her face in his hands.

“But the true power lies deeper still. It is beyond women, a strength so deep it can only be tapped by ancient spells created at the beginning of time.”

Abdul closed his eyes, whispering into Yasmine’s ear. Her eyes snapped open and she sat erect. She leveled her blank white orbs on Changa and pain exploded behind his eyes. He dropped his weapons, clutching his head as the pain bored into his sanity. He was losing consciousness, blood running from his ears and nose. But then the pain went too far, touching a place within the Mombassan that even he never knew existed. Changa reared back and emitted a cry that startled the guardsmen and their master. The sound jolted Yasmine, her eyes clearing. Changa grabbed his throwing knife and hurled it at Abdul. The knife sunk into the slave master’s head, knocking him from the dais to the floor. A wail rose from the compound, a collective cry of a thousands souls suddenly released from an evil stupor. The guards ran from the room, their faces bright with the prospect of freedom. Changa staggered to Abdul’s body. He searched the man’s robes and found a key ring. He was so weak the climb up the dais was like scaling a mountain. It took him a long moment to find the key for Yasmine’s shackles. He freed the woman, and then lay at her side exhausted.

The urgent sounds of destruction awoke him. Men and women screamed, shouted and cursed in the distance. Swords rang out down the corridors and the smell of smoke hung heavy in the air. Changa rose to the hulking image of Yusef. He towered above him, his scimitar in his hand. He turned and looked down on Changa.

“So, kibwana, you’re done with your nap.”

Changa struggle to his feet and Yasmine stirred. A painful moan escaped her lips.

“What’s going on?” Changa asked.

“Chaos,” Yusef replied. “Abdul’s slaves are running rampant. The city guard is attempting to keep them in the compound.”

Changa found his weapons. “Give me your scimitar,” he said to Yusef. Pick up Yasmine.”

Changa took the sword and Yusef lifted Yasmine to his shoulders. Together they plunged into the chaos of the compound, pushing through desperate people and eventually found their way to the gates. Guardsmen blocked the way, their pikes lowered as they secured the gates from the outside. Changa sheathed his sword and stepped a few paces from the wall. He ran and jumped, his fingertips landing on the wall’s edge. With a loud grunt he lifted himself onto the wall then jumped down into the midst of the guards. Changa’s sword was out and slashing before the soldiers knew what happening. In moments he stood surrounded by dying men.

“Pull down the gate!” he shouted. The men inside grasped the bars, jerking with all their strength. Changa turned his back to them as more guardsmen appeared. He never considered the overwhelming odds; he gripped his sword and waiting for their assault. The gate gave way just as the guardsmen reached Changa. A human flood surged past him, overwhelming the hapless guards. Changa found Yasmine and Yusef and they ran towards the docks. The streets swarmed with people, some fleeing for their freedom, some fleeing for their lives while the city guard fought to restore order. Changa and the others reached the dock as Belay’s bahari hastily untied the Sara. The sailors crowded around their friends and Yasmine as they carried her aboard.

Yusef knocked them away. “Have some decency!” he bellowed. He removed his shirt, wrapping it around the woman. Yasmine looked up at her saviors and smiled.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Make way! Make way!”

The bahari parted for Belay. He looked at the woman, Changa and Yusef.

“So you’re the cause of this,” he said.

“Yes, bwana,” Changa replied.

“You disobeyed me.”

Changa looked at Belay defiantly. “I did what was right.”

A relieved smile came to the merchant’s face. “I’m glad you did.”

He knelt beside Yasmine. “We will take you home, daughter. Your family will be happy to see you.”

Belay stood and the stern expression returned to his face. “What are you dogs looking at? Get us out of here. I’m losing money with all you standing around!”

The sails unfurled and the dhow fled the harbor of Zanzibar. Changa led Yasmine below deck and into his cabin.

“You will be safe now,” he said. “I give you my word.”

Yasmine touched his face and kissed his cheek. “You are a brave man. If by chance you decide to offer lobola to my father it would be a happy day for me.”

She entered the cabin and smiled again before Changa closed the door.

Changa turned to the sound of approaching footsteps. Belay walked up to him and hugged him.

“You are the son I should have had,” he announced. “You may not be of my blood, but you have my spirit. When we return to Mombassa I will proclaim it so.”

“That is not necessary,” Changa replied. “You are already a father to me.”

Belay beamed as he walked away. Changa was proud of Belay's promise, but he was most proud of rescuing Yasmine. He hoped that one day he could do the same for those he left behind so long ago.

"Are you done?"

Yusef loomed above him, his wounds patched by the ship's healer. A grin creased Changa's face.

"Yes I am," he replied.

Yusef smiled back. "Good. We have unfinished business in Mombassa, Mbogo."

Changa swatted the big man on his wounded shoulder and he winched.

"You'll get your chance. You earned it."

Yusef swatted him back. "Don't run away from me this time, kibwana."

Changa rubbed his aching shoulder and smiled.

"Don't worry," he said. "This time I won't have to."

-End-

