

## Nyira

### Near the Congo River, 1760

The Mikoni crept across the Yguni plateau while her village was asleep. Their medicine man shrouded them in the mist. But Nyira's father, Ahmed, could smell the mist men in his sleep. He awoke.

"Get up, child," he whispered to her.

Nyira loved how her father appeared in her dreams, as a butterfly or a raindrop, or as the wind. It was his way of not startling her from her sleep. Such an act could damage a child's spirit and fuel nightmares. This time he was himself: tall and lean, wearing his blue cotton sleeping robes.

"You must hide, child," he said, without smiling. "Wake now!"

A shadow rose behind him.

"Papa...?" When she sat up, she heard people running and screaming. She rushed to the door of her hut and saw some of the village structures were ablaze. She ran to the well at the center of the village and almost couldn't get through. All her people were pushing and fighting past the square, trying to escape the fire and the Mikoni. Her only thought was to get to her father. When she finally broke through, Gngangi, the chief's massive wife, reached out and caught her by the arm.

"You're going the wrong way, child."

"Let me go! I have to find papa!"

"No, Nyira. We must leave." She snatched the seven-year-old up and tucked her onto her hip. Nyira was enveloped by Gngangi's coconut oil aroma as she disappeared into the folds of her Kente robe.

"Please Gngangi! Papa woke me from my dream, and there was a shadow behind him." She kicked and squirmed.

"If you don't behave, I will pull a reed," said Gngangi. "You must escape, Nyira, the slavers are slaught—" Gngangi's grip slackened, and Nyira slid from her grasp. When she fell over, Nyira saw a red spear with yellow lines painted on it protruding from Gngangi's back. She also saw the

warrior who threw it; he stood beside a burning lodge about twenty feet away: an almost seven-foot heavily-muscled ebony man painted with yellow, white and bright green, upon his chest shoulders and thighs. When they locked eyes, he said:

“Come here, girl.”

Nyira turned and fled down the path to the jungle. She felt the warrior’s footsteps as he pursued her. “Don’t make me chase you, girl,” he snarled. “I will be angry if you make me chase you!” The heat of him was on her back, and just as he lunged to grab her, she darted into the darkness of the bush. He wouldn’t follow her there. No one went into the jungle at night. Not even warriors. They hunted there during the day, and the women of her village collected the banana and coconuts and other fruit from its many trees, but they always left before sundown. Only Nyira, the medicine man’s strange daughter, who had no mother to teach her better, ventured into the hot teeming blackness.

She stopped about thirty yards into the foliage. The warrior had stopped as well, right at the edge of the darkness.

“The jungle is not safe for a child,” he said. “Come out, girl.” He sounded almost pleading. Nyira wasn’t listening, and the blur of her tears made the village’s burning huts appear distorted. Where was Papa? Why couldn’t she hear his mind? She stood still and closed her eyes.

*Papa? Where are you?*

An image appeared to her—though it wasn’t very substantial. It was as if her father had turned into a kind of smoke, like she was dreaming. This was no dream. He wore the cream-colored garments he preferred when traveling in the spirit realm.

*Nyira, my daughter, he said. Don’t hide in the jungle too long. I don’t want you to get wild. I know you could hide forever if you chose to. Don’t, my princess. There is a place you must go. You’ll know when it’s time to let them take you. I love you...*

When she came out of her trance, the warrior held her in his embrace. His smell was sweaty with a thick musk she knew was fear.

“You didn’t go far enough, girl. Now you will pay—” Something bumped him. It was huge but smooth, and there was more than one.

He looked around him; his eyes got wider. Nyira watched the warrior’s face in the darkness—she had moon vision. That’s what her papa called it, so she only needed a minute amount of light to make out his expression. He had beautiful eyes, not the green of a sorcerer, a light hazel. Like Gnangi or some of the other women of her village. The big thing bumped him again. The warrior’s musk got stronger, and the sweat of his brow fell onto her face like large raindrops.

“Let me go!” she told him, kicking and wriggling.

“No... you... you are mine. I will—” The thing hit them harder, and knocked him off his feet. She broke away then. But he stood, breathing fast as he reached for her.

“What...? What was—” The thing smacked him again. It knocked him flat. “I—stop! Stop it!” He jumped up, took out a knife, and slashed at the darkness. His sweat glistened in the moonlight. The thing let out a low booming growl. The warrior backed away, trembling. He then turned his head toward the opening at the edge of the jungle, and Nyira could see he thought there was a chance.

“Don’t run,” said Nyira. He wasn’t listening. “You won’t—” He bolted for the clearing. He barely made five steps and was ripped back into the blackness. They tossed him around, like a straw ju-ju doll. “Help me!” he screamed. “Stop it! He—” Nyira turned her head away. She heard him make a gurgling sound from his throat, then nothing.

She turned and moved further into the jungle, but the thing bumped her now. She smelled the warrior’s fear on it. There was a rumbling moan, so deep it vibrated the ground, and then a huff. She reached out and touched it. A heavy, muscled form rolled itself around her.

*Aboo, she admonished. You were bad.*

*Brothers see run, grumbled Aboo. Should not run. It not moving. Can have it?*

Nyira fought back tears thinking about Gnangi lying face down, with a spear in her back.

*Yes, she said. Take him.*

\*

After her encounter with the Mikoni warrior, Nyira stayed up in the mahogany trees. The monkeys tried to bring her fruit, but she couldn’t eat as she gazed at the remains of her village—so they cried with her and did all they could to ease her grief.

The Mikoni herded most of her people into boats for transport up the river. The next day, some of the warriors searched the jungle, like they were looking for her, or for the other warrior. One of them, a big tall man wearing a long black and gold *pagne* that was secured by a gold skull brooch at his shoulder, leaned down at the edge of the clearing and picked up a knife that was on the ground. He looked up as if he could hear something. Nyira wasn’t moving, so it wasn’t her he could hear. His mind reached out, asking a question:

*Where is my son?*

Nyira wanted to ask: *where is my papa?* But kept the thought to herself.

After the Mikoni had left and her village was deserted, she went back to search the men's lodge. She never made it that far. The hyenas got to the village first. She'd seen what they did to a water buffalo that died along the banks of the river. She only got as far as Gnangi's body. Nyira let out a scream that scattered the hyenas and then ran back into the jungle, howling in sorrow. She did that for the rest of the day. The other creatures of the bush must have wondered what type of animal howled while the sun was up.

She spent the next few weeks mourning and sleeping on the backs of hippos near the bank of the Congo River. At one point, the bonobos coaxed her into a game of catch the monkey-fruit, but she never mustered the enthusiasm they were hoping for. The Mikoni returned to her village—a few times during that period. She never showed herself, and had no plans to give herself up, not yet. The big man in the *pagne* was always with them.

One morning, as she roamed the forest, a banana dropped from the tree above. She looked up and saw a young gorilla dangling from the vine in the tree above her.

“I am called Gord,” he said. “Are you not too small to be away from your mother?”

“I am called Nyira. And I have no mother.” She picked up the fruit and tossed it back to him.

“Thank you. My mother is sad, since the loss of my sister.”

“I am sad, too. I lost my papa. Why are you away from your band?”

“I must find my courage. Father says I must learn to be brave—or I will not win a breeding group. But I have an idea that will make mother happy.” He dropped to the ground. “Come. Climb onto my back. We will go and meet mother.” Nyira was apprehensive, but still intrigued, so she hopped onto the ape's back, and he climbed back into the tree and sprang quickly from branch to branch until they reached his home. It was deeper into the jungle, but still not far from her village.

Gord's mother, Nje, sat sullenly near a copse of mahogany trees in the clearing. His older brothers, Dyil, Biko, and Djat, were performing feats of strength to lift her spirits.

Dyil, the eldest, picked up a small boulder.

“Look mother! See how far I can throw this!” He heaved the rock a good distance across the field. Nje hardly noticed the display. She smiled when she saw her youngest drop from a tree with something on his back.

“Look, mother!” cried Gord. “I bring something to cheer you.” He stopped in front of the sad-eyed old female and Nyira climbed off his back.

“That is a human!” roared Dyil, charging up as if he might trample Nyira. “You cannot bring a human here!” Nje approached Nyira very slowly, as though afraid to frighten her.

“Ooh... such a tiny. Where did you find her?”

“She was alone in the forest.”

“Oh, you are such a thing. Such a tiny, tiny.” She reached her arms out. There were tears in her eyes. “I would like to hold the tiny—”

“Nje!” A massive male charged out of the bush. He was so tall he cast a shadow over Nje and little Nyira. “What are you doing, woman?”

“Mogi. Don’t be so loud. You will frighten her.”

“Why is there a human here?” growled the big male.

“My youngest has found a tiny for me to hold.” Mogi turned his gaze upon Gord, and the youngster almost fled.

“I—ugh—mother was so sad,” stammered Gord, not able to meet his father’s eyes. “She was lost in the forest.”

“I have seen this creature,” said Mogi. “It is she who converses with the night force, Aboo. She has a village. They will be searching for her. Humans are dangerous.”

“Her village was destroyed by her own kind,” said Gord. “Her father was killed.”

“As I said. These creatures are dangerous.”

“I want to hold her, Mogi,” whined Nje, she was crying. “She is so small and has no one. Can I not hold the tiny one?” Mogi looked upon Nyira as she sat quietly on the grass in the clearing.

“I don’t think this will be good for us, Nje. We have done well to keep clear of them.”

Nje clenched her arms to her chest and rocked back and forth, as she made a groaning sound in her throat.

“Do not make the mothering sound at me! I didn’t take your child! I—all right! But keep it out of my nest!” He snatched a medium sized gum tree up by the roots and hurled it past Dyil’s stone.

For the next couple weeks, Nje toted and groomed Nyira like a small child. She realized that this couldn’t possibly go on forever, but enjoyed the attention, and needed it almost as much as Nje. The older males kept their distance. Nje threw coconut shells and sticks if they got too close.

“Stay away from my tiny tiny! You will scare her!”

One evening Mogi made a decision.

“We must leave this valley. The humans are searching for the tiny tiny. They will attack if we stay here. Tomorrow I will go find a place deeper in the forest. You must all remain concealed until I return.” The younger apes took to the trees. But Nje had some tasks to complete before the journey.

“If you put me down, I can help,” said Nyira.

“Are you strong enough?” She handed the girl one coconut.

“I could maybe carry two.” Nje looked suspicious of this claim.

Gord and his brothers left the clearing for a monkey-fruit tree at the edge of the valley. At night, while Nje was asleep, Nyira and Gord leaped and cavorted through the trees. To make sure she could keep up, Gord had Nyira ride on his back.

“I didn’t get to play with my sister,” Gord said. “You are a good replacement.”

“I didn’t have a sister,” replied Nyira. “But I played with the girls in my village. When their mothers allowed it. That changed when I got older.” Gord led her to secret berry bushes that even his brothers and father were not aware of. They made sure to get back to the band before Nje awoke the next morning.

On the following day, when the young males left the clearing, Nje put Nyira down and went about her final tasks before the journey. Suddenly a leopard rushed out of the high grass and pounced on Nyira. When it closed its jaws on one of her little arms, it received a jolt of pain. Nyira broke free and ran for the trees.

“Run, Nje!” she cried. The leopard recovered and was quickly on her tail.

Unfortunately, Nje showed no regard for her own safety. She ran straight at the leopard.

“Not my tiny tiny!” she screamed, flinging sticks and coconut shells. The flimsy debris bounced off the cat; and it paused briefly, as it focused on a much larger prey. That was the moment Nje seemed to realize the danger she was in, and turned, trying to get away. The leopard jumped on her back. She flung it off and kept running. The leopard was quicker than the old ape though, and cut her off. Cornered, the gorilla displayed her considerable fangs and swatted at the cat. The cat swatted back, tearing out her right eye and a good part of her jaw. Nje took off again, only in the wrong direction—away from the trees. The cat jumped her again, sunk its teeth into the back of her head, and dragged her off her feet. By the time Gord and his brothers responded to the sound of their mother’s cries, she was dead.

Nyira hid in the bush and sobbed. Her first instinct was to run away, fearing herself pulled back into despair. She fought against it for the sake of Gord. She climbed into the trees with Gord and the rest of his brothers and watched, as the leopard dragged the body of Nje under a nearby sycamore, and fed.

“Don’t look,” Nyira told Gord.

She took her own advice and kept her eyes closed. She periodically stole a peek at Dyl. Nyira sensed he was hurting, but he would never allow his brothers to see him cry.

“We must fight!” cried Gord. “Why are we sitting while that monster feeds on our mother?”

“Shut up!” said Hjat. He smacked his younger brother across his nose. “You know nothing. You speak when you’re asked.” Gord touched his nose and looked at his paw. There was a bit of blood, but he wasn’t finished.

“Papa wouldn’t want us to be cowards! We shoul—” Hjat struck him so hard this time he knocked him from the tree. He reached out and caught a branch as he fell. Gord didn’t say anything more after that. The other brothers wouldn’t protect him from Hjat.

“I must leave,” he told Nyira, as they slept in the trees that night.

“Why? Your papa will be back soon.” She envied Gord that fact. At least he had a father who could return.

“I couldn’t face him. Mother must be avenged.”

“Can I go with you?”

“It may be dangerous. Stay here, my brothers will protect you.”

“I—I could help you...”

\*

The leopard wasn’t difficult to track. After it had had its fill of Nje, it picked up the carcass and carried it out of the clearing.

“Maybe she has cubs nearby,” said Nyira.

“That would slow her down,” replied Gord. “It could be an advantage.”

They moved within the thick canopies of the trees and managed to keep pace with the cat, but Nyira needed to inform Gord of something.

“She senses us.”

“No. How?” said Gord. “We’ve been very quiet.”

“I don’t know. But she does,” said Nyira. “I can tell how she drops Nje and pretends to take a bite. She’s listening.”

“Then this will be harder. I was hoping for surprise.”

“We could wait,” said Nyira. “Your papa could—”

“I can’t,” replied Gord. “That beast carries my mother in its jaws. I have to get her back!”

“But if she feeds her to the cubs...” She couldn’t say it. “Oh, Gord! I’m sorry.” Gord stayed quiet for a long time. They both remained in the trees.

“We can just go back,” Nyira finally said. “Your brothers won’t know.”

“Yes, they will. They’ll know by now,” said Gord. “To them I’m nothing, so I can at least die with honor. Father will respect that.”

Nyira threw her arms around him. “No! I don’t want you to die, Gord!” She began to sob.

“That’s why I didn’t want you come, so you wouldn’t have to see.”

“I came to help so you wouldn’t die. Please, let’s wait and try to think of something.”

“But I don’t want to lose her.”

“We won’t. I can hear what she’s thinking. She won’t get away.”

Gord climbed to a lower limb and never took his eyes off the leopard.

The leopard reached her lair where her cubs awaited the arrival of their meal.

The lair was located in the western valley, off a tributary of the Congo River. Nyira liked that there was a rear approach to the cave. The river flowed past it as well. So the leopard wouldn’t have to look for water.

“She goes into the cave,” cried Gord. “We have her trapped!”

“But... she might be waiting for us to come through the mouth of the cave.”

“I don’t care if she is waiting.” He jumped to the ground and lumbered toward the cave opening. Nyira had no time to react.

“Gord! Wait—”

“Come out, monster!” roared Gord, beating his chest and flinging dirt at the entrance. “Come out and face me!”

Nyira realized that if she was going to help, she needed to leave the trees as well. As she got closer, she saw the leopard crouched at the mouth of the cave. Nyira could sense she was unnerved by the young gorilla’s brazen challenge, and wanted to make sure there weren’t others with him, who might attack her from the rear. Nyira had an idea. She ran around the side of the cave and came over the top, and hid in the brush. Once there, she mimicked the sounds of Gord’s three other brothers. The sounds were so realistic, Gord apparently thought his brothers had actually joined him. This was not what Nyira intended, because Gord got much bolder.

“My brothers! Join me!” cried Gord. “Dyil, Hjat, and Biko! Let’s avenge our mother!” He snatched up a large stick from the bank of the river and charged the leopard.

“Gord, don’t!” cried Nyira. But it was too late. Gord ran up and smacked the confused feline across the face with his club. She swatted him away and tried to run, thinking that others would be upon her. Instead of taking the victory and letting her go, Gord grabbed her tail. This was not a good idea. The leopard spun around and caught him across the face with a vicious swipe. Gord staggered—blinded by the blood in his eyes. But he kept calling to his brothers and swinging the club. He hit the beast a solid blow on the top of her head. He pushed the blood out of his eyes and backed her up to the river, while Nyira increased her echoes and threw rocks and dirt, too—making it seem like the brothers were attacking from the left side of the cave, out of the bush. Gord took the opportunity of her confusion to beat the cat toward the river. Nyira wasn’t sure what he intended. Gord didn’t swim, or at least not that well. That didn’t stop him from pushing the leopard into the water while flailing away at her with his stick. Leopards are usually adept swimmers. Although in this instance, Gord had the advantage. He was upright, and the waist-high water helped blunt the swipes the leopard took at him. Gord was able to land a number of significant blows. Nyira just hoped he didn’t lose his weapon in the water. Otherwise, he was dead. The last blow to the leopard’s skull was so vicious it broke Gord’s club, and the creature didn’t come up again.

When Gord emerged from the water, he collapsed onto the bank, and Nyira saw the bloody gashes on his chest and torso.

“Gord, lie down!” she said when he tried to get up. She quickly gathered moss to pack his wounds. “Let me help you.” But Gord wasn’t happy.

“I failed. I couldn’t get her,” he said, breathless, as he watched the leopard float further out of his reach. “I wanted to take her body back to my papa. I failed, Nyira. It was all for nothing!” He began to cry.

“Don’t Gord. Please rest. I’ll find something to put on your wounds, and we can get back to your brothers.”

“Why should I go back? They won’t believe me. And I don’t have anything to show for my efforts.”

“Yes they will. Every animal in the bush saw what you did, and your papa and brothers will hear of it.”

Nyira was able to get him to relax then. She left Gord on the bank and went into the jungle to find herbs to put on his wounds. She shouldn't have left him.

When Nyira was returning, she heard the sound of Gord in distress, so she moved quietly and concealed herself in the bush. When she climbed the trees overlooking the bank near the leopard's cave, she saw Gord tied down by a net and a group of men standing over him, as he struggled to free himself. One of them was the big man from the Mikoni.

Nyira didn't know what she should do. She was afraid of the Mikoni, but couldn't just leave her friend in their clutches.

“Let him go!” she demanded. “What do you want?”

The big man turned and faced the direction her voice was coming from.

“Good day, my little sorceress,” said the man. He was actually smiling. This irritated Nyira very much for some reason.

“Let him go! He's hurt!”

“Yes, I see,” said the man. “But he was magnificent against the leopard. I've never seen a gorilla use a weapon.”

“He was brave!” yelled Nyira, as if that fact alone should be enough. “Let him go!”

“You speak animal very well, by the way. I've been watching you with them. Your gorilla will command a high price at my village market.”

“You can't take him! I won't let you!”

“You don't have a choice. My warriors will kill him rather than let him go. His large head alone will make a great prize.”

“No! Please...” she said and began to cry a little. “He was... brave.”

“Yes, I saw. That will make him worth the price.”

Nyira didn't speak for a while, as she considered what might happen to her friend.

The big man turned to his men.

“Let's go,” he commanded. “Pick him up.”

“No wait!” cried Nyira. “I... I’ll give you something else.”

“What would that be?”

“Take him home, and I... will come with you. And you promise not to hunt him or his brothers?”

The big man seemed to think about that for a moment.

“That’s a good offer, child. How do I know you’ll honor it?”

“If I don’t, you’ll know where to find him.”

The big man smiled.

“It is agreed.”

She stayed in the bush and followed as the warriors carried Gord back to his band, in the jungle near her burned out village.