

ROSARA AND THE JUNGLE KING

By Dorian Tsukioka

First Chapter Sample



THE KNIFE IN my hand flies in an arc, felling the unfortunate vines and foliage blocking my escape. Quick and quiet, my strokes cut through the thick underbrush of the jungle, but I worry that using the stone knife will lead a path straight to me. That's the last thing I want to do.

I stop for a moment, crouch down low to the ground, and attempt to keep my breathing silent. I need to hear how closely I'm being followed. The sound of another knife hacking through the jungle tells me that my pursuer, though less careful than I, is not far off.

I have to make a choice. If I continue to cut a path, I can move much more quickly through the dense undergrowth, but I will no doubt be followed. The jungle is too thick for me to crawl through quickly, though I'm small enough that I can probably make it through the tangled vines and saplings without giving away my location. It would be a very slow escape. Or . . . I can climb.

I look around for a suitable tree and sigh in frustration when I spot one close by. A young wimba tree is making its way toward the top of the canopy, and according to the legends of our tribe, it is cursed and filled with evil spirits. The sound of my pursuer closing in behind gives me the impetus to ignore my fear and scurry my way through the ferns and liana vines.

In a few moments I reach the base of the tree. Its smooth bark and straight trunk would normally be difficult to climb, but I am in luck—this tree is being slowly suffocated by a strangler fig. Thick vines have wound their way down to the earth, enveloping the tree in a deathly embrace.

I waste no time. The bark tears at my skin as I climb the tree as silently as possible. I watch out for howler monkeys, fearing my climb may set them off and their alarm would enable whoever is following to catch me all the sooner. Luckily, I seem to be alone. I secure a spot in the tree that will hide most of me and pray that my pursuer does not look up.

A few minutes later the steady *whack-whack* of the knife comes to a stop not far from where I stopped cutting vines myself. Whoever it is was closer than I thought or faster than I had anticipated. The jungle is as silent as I've ever heard it. The animals of the forest must be as frightened as I am, for they seem to be holding their breath too.

I know I should not look, should keep my face hidden in the shadows of the tree, but curiosity maddens me for a moment, and I feel my body shift forward to get a look at the person following me. I see him and stiffen.

Maor.

The strongest man of the village is standing just under the wimba tree. He is also the cruelest. And he is looking right at me. Or so I think until his gaze shifts and he peers into the tree next to mine and frowns. Now that I know who is following me, I want to shrink back into the shadows of my hiding place, but I'm afraid that movement will draw attention to myself. So I wait.

Before long he alters his course and is gone. I take a moment to thank the spirits for hiding me. I had intended to offer prayers at the river this evening. Alone. The men of the village should be still accompanying my father, the chieftain, on a hunt while the moon is bright and nearly full. The extra light gives them an advantage in the hunt for peccaries, deer, and other wild game, allowing them to see into the dense foliage. They must have returned early.

When I was a child, my father allowed me to accompany him on the week-long trek through the forest, but once I reached womanhood it was no longer appropriate. In fact, if a man is found alone with me now he can claim me as his wife, and I will be bound to him. Whether I like it or not.

Not even my father can break the traditions of our tribe.

This reason alone is exactly why my father forbade me to leave the village and enter the jungle by myself even when the men were supposed to be far away. I want to obey my father, but life in the village is so dull and monotonous. Each day I must help the other women tend to the gardens, weeding away saplings and vines from a jungle attempting to claim back the small plot of land that makes up our home. I try to help with the women's work, but the jungle calls to me, beckoning me to leave the village behind.

Today I needed time to listen to the sound of the river under the great canopy of life and to offer my prayers up to the karawara, the spirits of the jungle. Maybe they would give me peace and help to soothe my restless spirit. Such had been my intention as I forayed into the jungle, but my plans quickly changed when I noticed I was being followed.

I shift my body into a more comfortable position and wait. I do not wish to leave the tree too early and chance running into Maor. Neither do I want to wait too long and run into him as I return to the village. I'm not sure what action to take.

Maor's face passes through my mind, and I shudder. Only my father, as chief, has more standing in the village. Maor already has two wives. I see them in the village sometimes, tending to their children, helping with the garden, and cleaning the kills that the men bring back from their hunts. I also see where their skin is bruised, their limbs battered due to Maor's short temper and quick use of his club to beat them into obedient submission.

I have no desire to become Maor's third wife.

As chief, only my father has permission to have so many wives. If Maor claims me it would be a direct challenge to my father for control of the village. I know Maor is cruel, but I didn't know he was also so devious. Claiming me would not only be a challenge to my father, but would be a personal insult. I vow to never allow myself to be claimed by him.

Time passes and my stomach rumbles. I have been hiding long enough, I think. I poke my head out slowly from behind the trunk. A green-haired sloth hangs upside down from a branch of a neighboring tree and winks a sleepy eye at me as a pair of brightly colored macaws take flight,

startled by my movement. The sound of a twig snapping on the ground below freezes me to my spot, but it is only a lone anteater that waddles out from the underbrush and over the thick maze of roots littering the jungle floor. I exhale in relief and begin a search for fruit-bearing trees.

Pushing back a cluster of hanging flowers as brightly colored as a parrot, I am rewarded with a jaboticaba tree nearby. It is just within arm's reach of the branch above me, its plump, purple fruit ripened to perfection, growing directly on the trunk of the tree. I climb higher up into the wimba tree and wonder if I will tell my father of the lack of evil spirits when I return to the village. This tree has so far provided me with shelter and access to food; it seems lucky instead of cursed.

I reach out and pluck the jaboticaba fruit, taking enough to fill my hands, then I crawl carefully back to the sturdy trunk of the wimba tree. My teeth break through the crisp skin, and a rush of sweetness fills my mouth. I take a second bite, and that's when I see it.

A jaguar. Sitting in the branch just above me and looking right at me

My eyes travel the length of its immense body. Easily as large as any man in my village, it is the most enormous animal I have ever seen. My stomach knots as I realize that I have been hiding right under this creature and never knew it. His paw dangles off the branch where he perches lazily, looking as if he is ready to put his head down for a nap. I am unconvinced. The tightness of his hindquarters and a twitch of his ear indicate that he is just as alert as I am. Perhaps more so.

I have no weapon other than the short stone knife. I hope it will be enough if he decides to pounce. I try to calm my quickened heartbeat, telling myself that jaguars rarely attack humans, and if I seem to pose no threat to it I will probably be safe. My heart doesn't agree and continues to drum at a maddening pace.

The tip of his tail flicks back and forth, and his nostrils flare as he sniffs at the air. Does he scent my fear? Undoubtedly, he does. I try to relax my muscles, to appear unthreatening, but I cannot quite will my eyes to tear away from the beast. If I am to die in the next few moments, I want to know that it's coming.

His ears fold back, and his thick, powerful legs lift his body up into a crouch. My body stiffens, and I sit farther back into the cursed tree, pushing as far from the beast as I possibly can.

He yawns, shakes his head, and breaks our eye contact for a brief moment. I hope that he has grown bored of me and will leave. Instead, he fixes his gaze on me once again. Whiskers flick. He opens his mouth, baring his teeth.

And then he speaks.

End of Sample

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