When the old gods die

Ngai, who rules the universe from His golden throne atop the holy mountain Kirinyaga, which men now call Mount Kenya, created the Sun and the Moon, and declared that they should have equal domain over the Earth.

The Sun would bring warmth to the world, and all of Ngai's creatures would thrive and grow strong in the light. But even Ngai must sleep, and when He slept He ordered the Moon to watch over His creations.

But the Moon was duplicitous, and formed a secret alliance with the Lion and the Leopard and the Hyena, and many nights, while Ngai slept, it would turn only a part of its face to the Earth. At such times the predators would go forth to maim and kill and eat their fellow creatures.

Finally one man, a _mundumugu_ -- a witch doctor -- realized that the Moon had tricked Ngai, and he made up his mind to correct the problem. He might have appealed to Ngai, but he was a proud man, and so he took it upon himself to make certain that the flesh eaters would no longer have a partnership with the darkness.

He retired to his _boma_ and allowed no visitors. For nine days and nine nights he rolled his bones and arranged his charms and mixed his potions, and when he emerged on the morning of the tenth day, he was ready to do what must be done.

The Sun was overhead, and he knew that there could be no darkness as long as the Sun shone down upon the Earth. He uttered a mystic chant, and soon he was flying into the sky to confront the Sun.

"Halt!" he said. "Your brother the Moon is evil. You must remain where you are, lest Ngai's creatures continue to die."

"What is that to me?" responded the Sun. "I cannot shirk my duty simply because my brother shirks his."

The _mundumugu_ held up a hand. "I will not let you pass," he said.

But the Sun merely laughed, and proceeded on its path, and when it reached the _mundumugu_ it gobbled him up and spat out the ashes, for even the greatest _mundumugu_ cannot stay the Sun from its course. That story has been known to every _mundumugu_ since Ngai created Gikuyu, the first man. Of them all, only one ignored it.

I am that _mundumugu_.

* * *

It is said that from the moment of birth, even of conception, every living thing has embarked upon an inevitable trajectory that culminates in its death. If this is true of all living things, and it seems to be, then it is also true of man. And if it is true of man, then it must be true of the gods who made man in their image.

Yet this knowledge does not lessen the pain of death. I had just come back from comforting Katuma, whose father, old Siboki, had finally died, not from disease or injury, but rather from the awful burden of his years. Siboki had been one of the original colonists on our terraformed world of Kirinyaga, a member of the Council of Elders, and though he had grown feeble in mind as well as body, I knew I would miss him as I missed few others.

As I walked back through the village, on the long, winding path by the river that eventually led to my own _boma_, I was very much aware of my own mortality. I was not that much younger than Siboki, and indeed was already an old man when we left Kenya and emigrated to Kirinyaga. I knew my death could not be too far away, and yet I hoped that it was, not from selfishness, but because Kirinyaga was not yet ready to do without me. The _mundumugu_ is more than a shaman who utters curses and creates spells; he is the repository of all the moral and civil laws, all the customs and traditions, of the Kikuyu people, and I was not convinced that Kirinyaga had yet produced a competent successor.

It is a harsh and lonely life, the life of a _mundumugu_. He is more feared than loved by the people he serves. This is not his fault, but rather the nature of his position. He must do what he knows to be right for his people, and that means he must sometimes make unpopular decisions.

How strange, then, that the decision that brought me down had nothing at all to do with my people.

I should have had a premonition about it, for no conversation is ever truly random. As I was walking past the scarecrows in the fields on the way to my _boma_, I came across Kimanti, the young son of Ngobe, driving two of his goats home from their morning's grazing.

"_Jambo_, Koriba," he greeted me, shading his eyes from the bright overhead sun.

"_Jambo_, Kimanti," I said. "I see that your father now allows you to tend to his goats. Soon the day will come that he puts you in charge of his cattle."

"Soon," he agreed, offering me a water gourd. "It is a warm

day. Would you like something to drink?"

"That is very generous of you," I said, taking the gourd and holding it to my mouth.

"I have always been generous to you, have I not, Koriba?" he said.

"Yes, you have," I replied suspiciously, wondering what favor he was preparing to request.

"Then why do you allow my father's right arm to remain shriveled and useless?" he asked. "Why do you not cast a spell and make it like other men's arms?"

"It is not that simple, Kimanti," I said. "It is not I who shriveled your father's arm, but Ngai. He would not have done so without a purpose."

"What purpose is served by crippling my father?" asked Kimanti.

"If you wish, I shall sacrifice a goat and ask Ngai why He has allowed it," I said.

He considered my offer and then shook his head. "I do not care to hear Ngai's answer, for it will change nothing." He paused, lost in thought for a moment. "How long do you think Ngai will be our god?"

"Forever," I said, surprised at his question.

"That cannot be," he replied seriously. "Surely Ngai was not our god when He was just a _mtoto_. He must have killed the old gods when He was young and powerful. But He has been god for a long time now, and it is time someone killed Him. Maybe the new god will show more compassion toward my father."

"Ngai created the world," I said. "He created the Kikuyu and the Maasai and the Wakamba, and even the European, and He created the holy mountain Kirinyaga, for which our world is named. He has existed since time began, and He will exist until it ends."

Kimanti shook his head again. "If He has been here that long, He is ready to die. It is just a matter of who will kill Him." He paused thoughtfully. "Perhaps I myself will, when I am older and stronger."

"Perhaps," I agreed. "But before you do, let me tell you the story of the King of the Zebras."

"Is this story about Ngai or zebras?" he asked.

"Why don't you listen?" I said. "Then you can tell _me_ what it was about?" I gently lowered myself to the ground, and he squatted down next to me.

"There was a time," I began, "when zebras did not have stripes. They were as brown as the dried grasses on the savannah,

as dull to the eye as the bole of the acacia tree. And because their color protected them, they were rarely taken by the lion and the leopard, who found it much easier to find and stalk the wildebeest and the topi and the impala.

"Then one day a son was born to the King of the Zebras -- but it was not a normal son, for it had no nostrils. The King of the Zebras was first saddened for his son, and then outraged that such a thing should be allowed. The more he dwelt upon it, the more angry he became. Finally he ascended the holy mountain, and came at last to the peak, where Ngai ruled the world from His golden throne.

"'Have you come to sing my praises?' asked Ngai.

"'No!' answered the King of the Zebras. 'I have come to tell you that you are a terrible god, and that I am here to kill you.'

"'What have I done to you that you should wish to kill me?' asked Ngai.

"'You gave me a son who has no nostrils, so he cannot sense when the lion and the leopard are approaching him, and because of that they will surely find and kill him when at last he leaves his mother's side. You have been a god too long, and you have forgotten how to be compassionate.'

"'Wait!' said Ngai, and suddenly there was such power in his voice that the King of the Zebras froze where he was. 'I will give your son nostrils, since that is what you want.'

"'Why were you so cruel in the first place?' demanded the King of the Zebras, his anger not fully assuaged.

"'Gods work in mysterious ways,' answered Ngai, 'and what seems cruel to you may actually be compassionate. Because you had been a good and noble king, I gave your son eyes that could see in the dark, that could see through bushes, that could even see around trees, so that he could never be surprised by the lion and the leopard, even should the wind's direction favor them. And because of this gift, he did not need his nostrils. I took them away so that he would not have to breathe in the dust that chokes his fellow zebras during the dry season. But now I have given him back his sense of smell, and taken away his special vision, because you have demanded it.'

"'Then you _did_ have a reason,' moaned the King of the Zebras. 'When did I become so foolish?'

"'The moment you thought you were greater than me,' answer Ngai, rising to His true height, which was taller than the clouds. 'And to punish you for your audacity, I decree that from this moment forward you and all your kind shall no longer be brown like

the dried grasses, but will be covered with black and white stripes that will attract the lion and the leopard from miles away. No matter where you go on the face of the world, you will never again be able to hide from them.'

"And so saying, Ngai waved a hand and every zebra in the world was suddenly covered with the same stripes you see today."

I stopped and stared at Kimanti.

"That is the end?" he asked.

"That is the end."

Kimanti stared at a millipede crawling in the dirt.

"The zebra was a baby, and could not explain to its father that it had special eyes," he said at last. "My father's arm has been shriveled for many long rains, and the only explanation he has received is that Ngai works in mysterious ways. He has been given no special senses to make up for it, for if he had been he would surely know about them by now." Kimanti looked at me thoughtfully. "It is an interesting story, Koriba, and I am sorry for the King of the Zebras, but I think a new god must come along and kill Ngai very soon."

There we sat, the wise old _mundumugu_ who had a parable for every problem, and the foolish young _kehee_ -- an uncircumsized boy -- who had no more knowledge of his world than a tadpole, in total opposition to each other.

Only a god with Ngai's sense of humor would have arranged for the _kehee_ to be right.

* * *

It began when the ship crashed.

(There are those embittered men and women who would say it began the day Kirinyaga received its charter from the Eutopian Council, but they are wrong.)

Maintenance ships fly among the Utopian worlds, delivering goods to some, mail to others, services to a few. Only Kirinyaga has no traffic with Maintenance. They are permitted to observe us -- indeed, that is one of the conditions of our charter -- but they may not interfere, and since we have tried to create a Kikuyu Utopia, we have no interest in commerce with Europeans.

Still, Maintenance ships _have_ landed on Kirinyaga from time to time. One of the conditions of our charter is that if a citizen is unhappy with our world, he need only walk to that area known as Haven, and a Maintenance ship will pick him up and take him either to Earth or to another Eutopian world. Once a Maintenance ship landed to disgorge two immigrants, and very early in Kirinyaga's existence Maintenance sent a representative to interfere with our

religious practices.

I don't know why the ship was so close to Kirinyaga to begin with. I had not ordered Maintenance to make any orbital adjustments lately, for the short rains were not due for another two months, and it was right that the days passed, hot and bright and unchanging. To the best of my knowledge, none of the villagers had made the pilgrimage to Haven, so no Maintenance ship should have been sent to Kirinyaga. But the fact remains that one moment the sky was clear and blue, and the next there was a streak of light plunging down to the surface of the planet. An explosion followed; though I could not see it, I could both hear it and see the results, for the cattle became very nervous and herds of impala and zebra bolted this way and that in panic.

It was about twenty minutes later that young Jinja, the son of Kichanta, ran up the hill to my _boma_.

"You must come, Koriba!" he said as he gasped for breath.

"What has happened?" I asked.

"A Maintenance ship has crashed!" he said. "The pilot is still alive!"

"Is he badly hurt?"

Jinja nodded. "Very badly. I think he may die soon."

"I am an old man, and it would take me a very long time to walk to the pilot," I said. "It would be better for you to take three young men from the village and bring him back to me on a litter."

Jinja raced off while I went into my hut to see what I had that might ease the pilot's pain. There were some qat leaves, if he was strong enough to chew them, and a few ointments if he wasn't. I contacted Maintenance on my computer, and told them that I would apprise them of the man's condition after I examined him.

In years past, I would have sent my assistant to the river to bring back water which I would boil in preparation for washing out the pilot's wounds, but I no longer had an assistant, and the _mundumugu_ does not carry water, so I simply waited atop my hill, my gaze turned toward the direction of the crash. A grass fire had started, and a column of smoke rose from it. I saw Jinja and the others trotting across the savannah with the litter; I saw topi and impala and even buffalo race out of their way; and then I could not see them for almost ten minutes. When they once again came into view, they were walking, and it was obvious that they were carrying a man on the litter.

Before they reached my _boma_, however, Karenja came up the long, winding path from the village.

"_Jambo_, Koriba," he said.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"The whole village knows that a Maintenance ship has crashed," he replied. "I have never seen a European before. I came to see if his face is really as white as milk."

"You are doomed to be disappointed," I said. "We call them white, but in reality they are shades of pink and tan."

"Even so," he said, squatting down, "I have never seen one."

I shrugged. "As you will."

Jinja and the young men arrived a few minutes later with the litter. On it lay the twisted body of the pilot. His arms and legs were broken, and there was very little skin on him that was not burned. He had lost a lot of blood, and some still seeped through his wounds. He was unconscious, but breathing regularly.

"_Asante sana_," I said to the four young men. "Thank you. You have done well this day."

I had one of them fill my gourds with water. The other three bowed and began walking down the hill, while I went through my various ointments, choosing the one that would cause the least discomfort when placed on the burns.

Karenja watched in rapt fascination. Twice I had to rebuke him for touching the pilot's blond hair in wonderment. As the sun changed positions in the sky, I had him help me move the pilot into the shade.

Then, after I had tended to the pilot's wounds, I went into my hut, activated my computer, and contacted Maintenance again. I explained that the pilot was still alive, but that all of his limbs were broken, his body was covered with burns, and that he was in a coma and would probably die soon.

Their answer was that they had already dispatched a medic, who would arrive within half an hour, and they told me to have someone waiting at Haven to guide the medic to my _boma_. Since Karenja was still looking at the pilot, I ordered him to greet the ship and bring the medic to me.

The pilot did not stir for the next hour. At least, I do not think he did, but I dozed with my back against a tree for a few minutes, so I cannot be sure. What woke me was a woman's voice speaking a language I had not heard for many years. I got painfully to my feet just in time to greet the medic that Maintenance had sent.

"You must be Koriba," she said in English. "I have been trying to communicate with the gentleman who accompanied me, but I don't think he understood a word I said."

"I am Koriba," I said in English.

She extended her hand. "I am Doctor Joyce Witherspoon. May I see the patient?"

I led her over to where the pilot lay.

"Do you know his name?" I asked. "We could not find any identification."

"Samuel or Samuels, I'm not sure," she said, kneeling down next to him. "He's in a bad way." She gave him a perfunctory examination, lasting less than a minute. "We could do much more for him back at Base, but I hate to move him in this condition."

"I can have him moved to Haven within an hour," I said. "The sooner you have him in your hospital, the better."

She shook her head. "I think he'll have to remain here until he's a little stronger."

"I will have to consider it," I said.

"There's nothing to consider," she said. "In my medical opinion, he's too weak to move." She pointed to a piece of his shin bone that had broken through the skin of his leg. "I need to set most of the broken bones, and make sure there's no infection."

"You could do this at your hospital," I said.

"I can do it here at much less cost to the patient's remaining vitality," she said. "What's the problem, Koriba?"

"The problem, _Memsaab_ Witherspoon," I said, "is that Kirinyaga is a Kikuyu Utopia. This means a rejection of all things European, including your medicine."

"I'm not practicing it on any Kikuyu," she said. "I'm trying to save a Maintenance pilot who just happened to crash on your world."

I stared at the pilot for a long moment. "All right," I said at last. "That is a logical argument. You may minister to his wounds."

"Thank you," she said.

"But he must leave in three days' time," I said. "I will not risk contamination beyond that."

She looked at me as if she was about to argue, but said nothing. Instead, she opened the medical kit she had brought, and injected something -- a sedative, I assumed, or a pain killer, or a combination of the two -- into his arm.

"She is a witch!" said Karenja. "See how she punctures his skin with a metal thorn!" He stared at the pilot, fascinated. "Now he will surely die."

Joyce Witherspoon worked well into the night, cleansing the pilot's wounds, setting his broken bones, breaking his fever. I

don't remember when I fell asleep, but when I woke up, shivering, in the cold morning air just after sunrise, she was sleeping and Karenja was gone.

I built a fire, then sat near it with my blanket wrapped around me, until the sun began warming the air. Joyce Witherspoon woke up shortly thereafter.

"Good morning," she said when she saw me sitting a short distance away from her.

"Good morning, _Memsaab_ Witherspoon," I replied.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"It is morning."

"I mean, what hour and minute is it?"

"We do not have hours and minutes on Kirinyaga," I told her. "Only days."

"I should look at Mr. Samuels."

"He is still alive," I said.

"Of course he is," she replied. "But the poor man will need skin grafts, and he may lose that right leg. He'll be a long time recovering." She paused and looked around. "Uh...where do I wash up around here?"

"The river runs by the foot of my hill," I said. "Be sure you beat the water first, to frighten away the crocodiles."

"What kind of Utopia has crocodiles?" she asked with a smile.

"What Eden has no serpents?" I said.

She laughed and walked down the hill. I took a sip from my water gourd, then killed the fire and spread the ashes. One of the boys from the village came by to take my goats out to graze, and another brought firewood and took my gourds down to the river to fill them.

When Joyce Witherspoon returned from the river some twenty minutes later, she was not alone. With her was Kibo, the third and youngest wife of Koinnage, the paramount chief of the village, and in Kibo's arms was Katabo, her infant son. His left arm was swollen to twice it's size, and was badly miscolored.

"I found this woman laundering her clothes by the river," said Joyce Witherspoon, "and I noticed that her child had a badly infected arm. It looks like some kind of insect bite. I managed through sign language to convince her to follow me up here."

"Why did you not bring Katabo to me?" I asked Kibo in Swahili.

"Last time you charged me two goats, and he remained sick for many days, and Koinnage beat me for wasting the goats," she said, so terrified she had made me angry that she could not think of a

lie.

Even as Kibo spoke, Joyce Witherspoon began approaching her and Katabo with a syringe in her hand.

"This is a broad-spectrum antibiotic," she explained to me. "It also contains a steroid that will prevent itching or any discomfort while the infection remains."

"Stop!" I said harshly in English.

"What's the matter?"

"You may not do this," I said. "You are here to minister to the pilot only."

"This is a baby, and it's suffering," she said. "It'll take me two seconds to give it a shot and cure it."

"I cannot permit it."

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "I read your biography. You may dress like a savage and sit in the dirt next to your fire, but you were educated at Cambridge and received your post-graduate degrees from Yale. Surely you know how easily I can end this child's suffering."

"That's not the point," I said.

"Then what _is_ the point?"

"You may not medicate this child. It seems like a blessing now -- but once before we accepted the Europeans' medicine, and then their religion, and their clothing, and their laws, and their customs, and eventually we ceased to be Kikuyu and became a new race, a race of black Europeans known only as Kenyans. We came to Kirinyaga to make sure that such a thing does not happen to us again."

"_He_ won't know why he feels better. You can credit it to your god or yourself for all I care."

I shook my head. "I appreciate your sentiment, but I cannot let you corrupt our Utopia."

"Look at him," she said, pointing to Katabo's swollen arm. "Is Kirinyaga a Utopia for _him_? Where is it written that Utopias must have sick and suffering children?"

"Nowhere."

"Well, then?"

"It is not written," I continued, "because the Kikuyu do not have a written language."

"Will you at least let the mother decide?"

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"The mother will think only of her child," I answered. "I must think of an entire world."

"Perhaps her child is more important to her than your world is to you."

"She is incapable of making a reasoned decision," I said. "Only _I_ can foresee all the consequences."

Suddenly Kibo, who understood not a word of English, turned to me.

"Will the European witch make my little Katabo better?" she asked. "Why are you two arguing?"

"The European witch is here only for the European," I answered. "She has no power to help the Kikuyu."

"Can she not try?" asked Kibo.

"_I_ am your _mundumugu_," I said harshly.

"But look at the pilot," said Kibo, pointing to Samuels. "Yesterday he was all but dead. Today his skin is already healing, and his arms and legs are straight again."

"Her god is the god of the Europeans," I answered, "just as her magic is the magic of the Europeans. Her spells do not work on the Kikuyu."

Kibo fell silent, and clutched Katabo to her breast.

I turned to Joyce Witherspoon. "I apologize for speaking in Swahili, but Kibo knows no other language."

"It's all right," she said. "I had no difficulty following it."

"I thought you told me you only spoke English."

"Sometimes you needn't understand the words to translate. I believe you were saying, in essence, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.'"

The pilot moaned just then, and suddenly all of her attention was focused upon him. He was coming into a state of semi-consciousness, unfocused and unintelligible but no longer comatose, and she began administering medications into the tubes that were already attached to his arms and legs. Kibo watched in wonderment, but kept her distance.

I remained on my hill most of the morning. I offered to remove the curse from Katabo's arm and give him some soothing lotions, but Kibo refused, saying that Koinnage steadfastly refused to part with any more goats.

"I will not charge you this time," I said, for I wanted Koinnage on my side. I uttered a spell over the child, then treated his arm with a salve made from the pulped bark of the acacia tree. I ordered Kibo to return to her _shamba_ with him, and told her that the child's arm would return to normal within five days.

Finally it was time for me to go into the village to bless the scarecrows and give Leibo, who had lost her baby, ointment to ease the pain in her breasts. I would meet with Bakada, who had accepted the bride price for his daughter and wanted me to preside at the wedding, and finally I would join Koinnage and the Council of Elders as they discussed the weighty issues of the day.

As I walked down the long, winding path beside the river, I found myself thinking how much like the European's Garden of Eden this world looked.

How was I to know that the serpent had already arrived?

* * *

After I had tended to my chores in the village, I stopped at Ngobe's hut to share a gourd of _pombe_ with him. He asked about the pilot, for by now everyone in the village had heard about him, and I explained that the European's _mundumugu_ was curing him and would take him back to Maintenance headquarters in two more days.

"She must have powerful magic," he said, "for I am told that the man's body was badly broken." He paused. "It is too bad," he added wistfully, "that such magic will not work for the Kikuyu."

"My magic has always been sufficient," I said.

"True," he said uneasily. "But I remember the day when we brought Tabari's son back after the hyenas had attacked him and chewed off one of his legs. You eased his pain, but you could not save him. Perhaps the witch from Maintenance could have."

"The pilot had broken his legs, but they were not chewed off," I said defensively. "No one could have saved Tabari's son after the hyenas had finished with him."

"Perhaps you are right," he said.

My first inclination was to pounce on the word _"perhaps"_, but then I decided that he meant no insult by it, so I finished my _pombe_, cast the bones and read that he would have a successful harvest, and left his hut.

I stopped in the center of the village to recite a fable to the children, then went over to Koinnage's _shamba_ and entered his _boma_ for the daily meeting of the Council of Elders. Most of them were already there, grim-faced and silent. Finally Koinnage emerged from his hut and joined us.

"We have serious business to discuss today," he announced. "Perhaps the most serious we have _ever_ discussed," he added, staring straight at me. Suddenly he faced his wives' huts. "Kibo!" he shouted. "Come here!"

Kibo emerged from her hut and walked over to us, carrying little Katabo in her arms.

"You all saw my son's arm yesterday," said Koinnage. "It was swollen to twice it's normal size, and was the color of death." He took the child and held it above his head. "Now look at him!" he cried.

Katabo's arm was once again a healthy color, and almost all of the swelling had vanished.

"My medicine worked faster than I had anticipated," I said.

"This is not _your_ medicine at all!" he said accusingly. "This is the European witch's medicine!"

I looked at Kibo. "I ordered you to leave my _boma_ ahead of me!" I said sternly.

"You did not order me not to return," she said, her face fill with defiance as she stood next to Koinnage. "The witch pierced Katabo's arm with a metal thorn, and before I could climb back down your hill the swelling was already half gone."

"You disobeyed my command," I said ominously.

"I am the paramount chief, and I absolve her," interjected Koinnage.

"I am the _mundumugu_, and I do not!" I said, and suddenly Kibo's defiance was replaced by terror.

"We have more important things to discuss," snapped Koinnage. This startled me, for when I am angry, no one has the courage to confront or contradict me.

I pulled some luminscent powder, made from the ground-up bodies of night-stalking beetles, out of my pouch, held it on the palm of my hand, raised my hand to my mouth, and blew the power in Kibo's direction. She screamed in terror and fell writhing to the ground.

"What have you done to her?" demanded Koinnage.

I have terrified her beyond your ability to comprehend, which is a just and fitting punishment for disobeying me, I thought. Aloud I said, "I have marked her spirit so that all the predators of the Other World can find it at night when she sleeps. If she swears never to disobey her _mundumugu_ again, if she shows proper contrition for disobeying me today, then I shall remove the markings before she goes to sleep this evening. If not..." I shrugged and let the threat hang in the air.

"Then perhaps the European witch will remove the markings," said Koinnage.

"Do you think the god of the Europeans is mightier than Ngai?" I demanded.

"I do not know," replied Koinnage. "But he healed my son's arm in moments, when Ngai would have taken days."

"For years you have told us to reject all things European," added Karenja, "yet I myself have seen the witch use her magic on the dying pilot, and I think it is stronger that _your_ magic."

"It is a magic for Europeans only," I said.

"This is not so," answered Koinnage. "For did the witch not offer it to Katabo? If she can halt the suffering of our sick and our injured faster than Ngai can, then we must consider accepting her offer."

"If you accept her offer," I said, "before long you will be asked to accept her god, and her science, and her clothing, and her customs."

"Her science is what created Kirinyaga and flew us here," said Ngobe. "How can it be bad if it made Kirinyaga possible?"

"It is not bad for the Europeans," I said, "because it is part of their culture. But we must never forget why we came to Kirinyaga in the first place: to create a Kikuyu world and re-establish a Kikuyu culture."

"We must think seriously about this," said Koinnage. "For years we have believed that every facet of the Europeans' culture was evil, for we had no examples of it. But now that we see that even a female can cure our illness faster than Ngai can, it is time to reconsider."

"If her magic could have cured my withered arm when I was still a boy," added Ngobe, "why would that have been evil?"

"It would have been against the will of Ngai," I said.

"Does not Ngai rule the universe?" he asked.

"You know that He does," I replied.

"Then nothing that happens can be contrary to His wishes, and if she could have cured me, it would _not_ have been against Ngai's will."

I shook my head. "You do not understand."

"We are trying to understand," said Koinnage. "Enlighten us."

"The Europeans have many wonders, and these wonders will entice you, as they are doing right now...but if you accept one European thing, soon they will insist that you accept them all. Koinnage, their religion only allows a man to have one wife. Which two will you divorce?"

I turned to the others. "Ngobe, they will make Kimanti attend a school where he will learn to read and write. But since we do not have a written language, he will learn to write only in a European language, and the things and people he reads about and learns about will all be European."

I walked among the Elders, offering an example to each.

"Karenja, if you do a service for Tabari, you will expect a chicken or a goat or perhaps even a cow in return, depending on the nature of the service. But the Europeans will make him reward you with paper money, which you cannot eat, and which cannot reproduce and make a man rich."

On and on I went, until I had run through all the Elders, pointing out what they would lose if they allowed the Europeans a toehold in our society.

"All that is on the one hand," said Koinnage when I had finished. He held his other hand out, palm up. "On the other hand is an end to illness and suffering, which is no small achievement in itself. Koriba has said that if we let the Europeans in, they will force us to change our ways. _I_ say that some of our ways _need_ changing. If their god is a greater healer than Ngai, who is to say that he may not also bring better weather, or more fertile cattle, or richer soil?"

_"No!"_ I cried. "_You_ may all have forgotten why we came here, but _I_ have not. Our mandate was not to establish a European Utopia, but a Kikuyu one!"

"And _have_ we established it?" asked Karenja sardonically.

"We are coming closer every day," I told him. "_I_ am making it a reality."

"Do children suffer in Utopia?" persisted Karenja. "Do men grow up with withered arms? Do women die in childbirth? Do hyenas attack shepherds in Utopia?"

"It is a matter of balance," I said. "Unrestricted growth would eventually lead to unrestricted hunger. You have not seen what it has done on Earth, but _I_ have."

Finally it was old Jandara who spoke.

"Do people _think_ in a Utopia?" he asked me.

"Of course they do," I replied.

"If they think, are some of their thoughts new, just as some are old?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps we should consider letting the witch tend to our illnesses and injuries," he said. "For if Ngai allows new thoughts in His Utopia, He must realize they will lead to change. And if change is not evil, then perhaps lack of change, such as we have striven for here, _is_ evil, or at least wrong." He got to his feet. "You may debate the merits of the question. As for myself, I have had pain in my joints for many years, and Ngai has not cured it. I am climbing Koriba's hill to see if the god of the Europeans can end my pain."

And with that, he walked past me and out of the _boma_.

I was prepared to argue my case all day and all night if necessary, but Koinnage turned his back on me -- on _me_, his _mundumugu_! -- and began carrying his son back to Kibo's hut. That signaled the end to the meeting, and each of the Elders got up and left without daring to look me in the face.

* * *

There were more than a dozen villagers gathered at the foot of my hill when I arrived. I walked past them and soon reached my _boma_.

Jandara was still there. Joyce Witherspoon had given him an injection, and was handing him a small bottle of pills as I arrived.

"Who told you that you could treat the Kikuyu?" I demanded in English.

"I did not offer to treat them," she replied. "But I am a doctor, and I will not turn them away."

"Then _I_ will," I said. I turned and looked down at the villagers. "You may not come up here!" I said sternly. "Go back to your _shambas_."

The adults all looked uneasy but stood their ground, while one small boy began climbing up the hill.

"Your _mundumugu_ has forbidden you to climb this hill!" I said. "Ngai will punish you for your transgression!"

"The god of the Europeans is young and powerful," said the boy. "He will protect me from Ngai."

And now I saw that the boy was Kimanti.

"Stay back -- I warn you!" I shouted.

Kimanti hefted his wooden spear. "Ngai will not harm me," he said confidentally. "If He tries, I will kill him with _this_."

He walked right by me and approached Joyce Witherspoon.

"I have cut my foot on a rock," he said. "If your god will heal me, I will sacrifice a goat to thank him."

She did not understand a word he said, but when he showed her his foot she began treating it.

He walked back down the hill, unmolested by Ngai, and when he was both alive and healed the next morning, word went out to other villages and soon there was a seemingly endless line of the sick and the lame, all waiting to climb my hill and accept European cures for Kikuyu ills.

Once again I told them to disperse. This time they seemed not even to hear me. They simply remained in line, neither arguing back as Kimanti had, nor even acknowledging my presence, each of

them waiting patiently until it was their turn to be treated by the European witch.

* * *

I thought that when she left, things would go back to the way they had been, that the people would once again fear Ngai and show respect to their _mundumugu_ -- but this was not to be. Oh, they went about their daily chores, they planted their crops and tended to their cattle...but they did not come to me with their problems as they always had done in the past.

At first I thought we had entered one of those rare periods in which no one in the village was ill or injured, but then one day I saw Shanaka walking out across the savannah. Since he rarely left his _shamba_, and _never_ left the village, I was curious about his destination and I decided to follow him. He walked due west for more than half an hour, until he reached the landing area at Haven.

"What is wrong?" I asked when I finally caught up with him.

He opened his mouth to reveal a serious abcess above one of his teeth. "I am in great pain," he said, "I have been unable to eat for three days."

"Why did you not come to me?" I asked.

"The god of the Europeans has defeated Ngai," answered Shanaka. "He will not help me."

"He will," I assured him.

Shanaka shook his head, then winced from the motion. "You are an old man, and Ngai is an old god, and both of you have lost your powers," he said unhappily. "I wish it were otherwise, but it is not."

"So you are deserting your wives and children because you have lost your faith in Ngai?" I demanded.

"No," he replied. "I will ask the Maintenance ship to take me to a European _mundumugu_, and when I am cured I will return home."

"_I_ will cure you," I said.

He looked at me for a long moment. "There was a time when you could cure me," he said at last. "But that time has passed. I will go to the Europeans' _mundumugu_."

"If you do," I said sternly, "you may never call on me for help again."

He shrugged. "I never intend to," he said with neither bitterness nor rancor.

* * *

Shanaka returned the next day, his mouth healed.

I stopped by his _boma_ to see how he was feeling, for I remained the _mundumugu_ whether he wanted my services or not, and as I walked through the fields of his _shamba_ I saw that he had two new scarecrows, gifts of the Europeans. The scarecrows had mechanical arms that flapped constantly, and they rotated so that they did not always face in one direction.

"_Jambo_, Koriba," he greeted me. Then, seeing that I was looking at his scarecrows, he added, "Are they not wonderful?"

"I will withhold judgment until I see how long they function," I said. "The more moving parts an object has, the more likely it is to break."

He looked at me, and I thought I detected a hint of pity in his expression. "They were created by the God of Maintenance," he said. "They will last forever."

"Or until their power packs are empty," I said, but he did not know what I meant, and so my sarcasm was lost on him. "How is your mouth?"

"It feels much better," he replied. "They pricked me with a magic thorn to end the pain, then cut away the evil spirits that had invaded my mouth." He paused. "They have very powerful gods, Koriba."

"You are back on Kirinyaga now," I said sternly. "Be careful how you blaspheme."

"I do not blaspheme," he said. "I speak the truth."

"And now you will want me to bless the Europeans' scarecrows, I suppose," I said with finely-wrought irony.

He shrugged. "If it makes you happy," he said.

"If it makes _me_ happy?" I repeated angrily.

"That's right," he said nonchalantly. "The scarecerows, being European, certainly do not _need_ your blessings, but if you will feel better..."

I had often wondered what might happen if for some reason the _mundumugu_ was no longer feared by the members of the village. I had never once considered what it might be like if he were merely tolerated.

* * *

Still more villagers went to Maintenance's infirmary, and each came back with some gift from the Europeans: time-saving gadgets for the most part. Western gadgets. Culture-killing gadgets.

Again and again I went into the village and explained why such things must be rejected. Day after day I spoke to the Council of Elders, reminding them of why we had come to Kirinyaga -- but

most of the original settlers were dead, and the next generation, those who had become our Elders, had no memories of Kenya. Indeed, those of them who spoke to the Maintenance staff came home thinking that Kenya, rather than Kirinyaga, was some kind of Utopia, in which everyone was well-fed and well-cared-for and no farm ever suffered from drought.

They were polite, they listened respectfully to me, and then they went right ahead with whatever they had been doing or discussing when I arrived. I reminded them of the many times I and I alone had saved them from themselves, but they seemed not to care; indeed, one or two of the Elders acted as if, far from keeping Kirinyaga pure, I had in some mysterious way been hindering its growth.

"Kirinyaga is not _supposed_ to grow!" I argued. "When you achieve a Utopia, you do not cast it aside and say, 'What changes can we make tomorrow?'"

"If you do not grow, you stagnate," answered Karenja.

"We can grow by expanding," I said. "We have an entire world to populate."

"That is not growing, but breeding," he repled. "You have done your job admirably, Koriba, for in the beginning we needed order and purpose above all else...but the time for your job is past. Now we have established ourselves here, and it is for _us_ to choose how we will live."

"We have _already_ chosen how to live!" I said angrily. "That is why we came here to begin with."

"I was just a _kehee_," said Karenja. "Nobody asked me. And I did not ask my son, who was born here."

"Kirinyaga was created for the purpose of becoming a Kikuyu Utopia," I said. "This purpose is even the basis of our charter. It cannot be changed."

"No one is suggesting that we don't want to live in a Utopia, Koriba," interjected Shanaka. "But the time has passed when you and you alone shall be the sole judge of what constitutes a Utopia."

"It is clearly defined."

"By _you_," said Shanaka. "Some of us have our own definitions of Utopia."

"You were one of the original founders of Kirinyaga," I said accusingly. "Why have you never spoken out before?"

"Many times I wanted to," admitted Karenja. "But always I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of Ngai. Or you."

"They are much the same thing," said Karenja.

"But now that Ngai has lost His battle to the god of Maintence, I am no longer afraid to speak," continued Shanaka. "Why should I suffer with the pain in my teeth? How was it unholy or blasphemous for the European witches to cure me? Why should my wife, who is as old as I am and whose back is bent from years of carrying wood and water, continue to carry them where there are machines to carry things for her?"

"Why should you live on Kirinyaga at all, if that is the way you feel?" I asked bitterly.

"Because I have worked as hard to make Kirinyaga a home for the Kikuyu as you have!" he shot back. "And I see no reason to leave just because my definition of Utopia doesn't agree with yours. Why don't _you_ leave, Koriba?"

"Because I was charged with establishing our Utopia, and I have not yet completed my assignment," I said. "In fact, it is false Kikuyu like you who have made my work that much harder."

Shanaka got to his feet and looked around at the Elders.

"Am I a false Kikuyu because I want my grandson to read?" he demanded. "Or because I want to ease my wife's burden? Or because I do not wish to suffer physical pain that can easily be avoided?"

"No!" cried the Elders as one.

"Be very careful," I warned them. "For if _he_ is not a false Kikuyu, then you are calling _me_ one."

"No, Koriba," said Koinnage, rising to his feet. "You are not a false Kikuyu." He paused. "But you are a mistaken one. Your day -- and mine -- has passed. Perhaps, for a fleeting second, we did achieve Utopia -- but that second is gone, and the new moments and hours require new Utopias." Then Koinnage, who had looked at me with fear so many times in the past, suddenly looked at me with great compassion. "It was _our_ dream, Koriba, but it is not _theirs_ -- and if we still have some feeble handhold on today, tomorrow surely belongs to them."

"I will hear none of this!" I said. "You cannot redefine a Utopia as a matter of convenience. We moved here in order to be true to our faith and traditions, to avoid becoming what so many Kikuyu had become in Kenya. I will not let us become black Europeans!"

"We are becoming _something_," said Shanaka. "Perhaps just once there was an instant when you felt we were perfect Kikuyu -- but that instant has long since passed. To remain so, not one of us could have had a new thought, could have seen the world in a

different way. We would have become the scarecrows you bless every morning."

I was silent for a very long time. Then, at last, I spoke. "This world breaks my heart," I said. "I tried so hard to mold it into what we had all wanted, and look at what it has become. What _you_ have become."

"You can direct change, Koriba," said Shanaka, "but you cannot prevent it, and that is why Kirinyaga will always break your heart."

"I must go to my _boma_ and think," I said.

"_Kwaheri_, Koriba," said Koinnage. _Good-bye_, Koriba. It had a sense of finality to it.

* * *

I spent many days alone on my hill, looking across the winding river to the green savannah, and thinking. I had been betrayed by the people I had tried to lead, by the very world I had helped to create. I felt that I had surely displeased Ngai in some way, and that He would strike me dead. I was quite prepared to die, even willing...but I did not die, for the gods draw their strength from their worshippers, and Ngai was now so weak that He could not even kill a feeble old man like myself.

Eventually I decided to go down among my people one last time, to see if any of them had rejected the enticements of the Europeans and come back to the ways of the Kikuyu.

The path was lined with mechanical scarecrows. The only meaningful way to bless _them_ would be to renew their charges. I saw several women washing clothes by the river, but instead of pounding the fabrics with rocks, they were rubbing them on some artificial board that had obviously been made for the purpose.

Suddenly I heard a ringing noise behind me, and, startled, I jumped, lost my footing, and fell heavily against a thorn bush. When I was able to get my bearings, I saw that I had almost been run over by a bicycle.

"I am sorry, Koriba," said the rider, who turned out to be young Kimanti. "I thought you heard me coming."

He helped me gingerly to my feet.

"My ears have heard many things," I said. "The scream of the fish eagle, the bleat of the goat, the laugh of the hyena, the cry of the newborn baby. But they were never meant to hear artificial wheels going down a dirt hill."

"It is much faster and easier than walking," he replied. "Are you going anywhere in particular? I will be happy to give you a ride."

It was probably the bicycle that made up my mind. "Yes," I replied, "I am going somewhere, and no, I will not be taken on a bicycle."

"Then I will walk with you," he said. "Where are you going?"

"To Haven," I said.

"Ah," he said with a smile. "You, too, have business with Maintenance. Where do you hurt?"

I touched the left side of my chest. "I hurt _here_ -- and the only business I have with Maintenance is to get as far from the cause of that pain as I can."

"You are leaving Kirinyaga?"

"I am leaving what Kirinyaga has become," I answered.

"Where will you go?" he asked. "What will you do?"

"I will go elsewhere, and I will do other things," I said vaguely, for where _does_ an unemployed _mundumugu_ go?

"We will miss you, Koriba," said Kimanti.

"I doubt it."

"We will," he repeated with sincerity. "When we recite the history of Kirinyaga to our children, you will not be forgotten." He paused. "It is true that you were wrong, but you were necessary."

"Is that how I am to be remembered?" I asked. "As a necessary evil?"

"I did not call you evil, just wrong."

We walked the next few miles in silence, and at last we came to Haven.

"I will wait with you if you wish," said Kimanti.

"I would rather wait alone," I said.

He shrugged. "As you wish. _Kwaheri_, Koriba."

"_Kwaheri_," I replied.

After he left I looked around, studying the savannah and the river, the wildebeest and the zebras, the fish eagles and the marabou storks, trying to set them in my memory for all time to come.

"I am sorry, Ngai," I said at last. "I have done my best, but I have failed you."

The ship that would take me away from Kirinyaga forever suddenly came into view.

"You must view them with compassion, Ngai," I said as the ship approached the landing strip. "They are not the first of your people to be bewitched by the Europeans."

And it seemed, as the ship touched down, that a voice spoke into my ear and said, _You have been my most faithful servant,

Koriba, and so I shall be guided by your counsel. Do you really wish me to view them with compassion?_

I looked toward the village one last time, the village that had once feared and worshipped Ngai, and which had sold itself, like some prostitute, to the god of the Europeans.

"No," I said firmly.

"Are you speaking to me?" asked the pilot, and I realized that the hatch was open and waiting for me.

"No," I replied.

He looked around. "I don't see anyone else."

"He is very old and very tired," I said. "But he is Here."

I climbed into the ship and did not look back.