

# A Jungle Tale

*by* Sushmita Narayana

He awoke with a start. This was not the first time he did so. He couldn't afford these occasional bouts of sleep. And certainly not in the land of the Tsantsa hunters.

He was everything that could put a price on his head. A member of the rival tribe, he had hunted in their woods, spied on their women and had sacrificed one of them to his rain Gods. But most of all, he was one of them. The mere thought of becoming a feast to one's own kind made the palms clammy.

He wouldn't be found. It was a decision that now sounded to him as absurd as the thought of eating fruit. Both were equally difficult decisions for a warrior of his pedigree in this situation.

He had never imagined that he'd get stuck in a quagmire like this. Hell, he had been the most sure-footed in his tribe. That had been his name too. Luchikawa.

Going back was not an option. The path to his hamlet wasn't unknown, but it surely was unwelcoming now. Famine and subsequent death of the tribe's leader had led every one of his friends astray. His return would only burden them. Worst of all, by deserting them he had lost his name - his identity.

Enough thought. He had to stay alert. During the last few days, sleep had turned into his worst enemy. Every long spell of it was followed by a numbness in his body. The hallucinations that accompanied it were now becoming shameful to admit to, even to his brave self that had once lain its soul bare for his kind. The fear in each awakening dream had begun overwhelming him.

*One more sacrifice.* The visions he had had and the sounds that had haunted him for long begged for one more human soul. Freedom awaited. Fear would desert him.

*Sleep not, brave one,*

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*What I seek is near:  
O'er the waves of despair,  
Lies one soul to sear.*

He smirked. These voices were his only friends, *but not for long*, he hoped. It wasn't difficult to keep one's eyes open, though. There was enough discomfort to prevent that from happening. The sunlight streamed into his eyes through the stuffy layers of air that had long stopped cooling his skin. The ground was wet and lush with undergrowth that threatened to devour his scrawny feet.

After logically reasoning about the surroundings and concluding that there wasn't even a remote possibility of him falling asleep, the warrior seated himself to conquer all enemies.

But the wait for the unknown became upsetting. Several hours had passed by, with not a single movement taking place. The lights were growing dim and by now, matters of the stomach had earned their priority. But fear lurked around at close quarters. So he decided to stay put.

The sun had long bid farewell. But nothing had happened yet. Perhaps he had imagined too much. Like the wise men in his village had always done and then failed to save them all from misery. By now he was convinced that he need fear none. He was his own responsibility and hence, his conscience was clear. A warrior needed rest. Luchikawa sprawled himself on the forest floor as mightily as he could and tried gazing into the sky as a last attempt at staying awake.

The canopy above shielded him from the stars that would tell his future. It was funny that he had to think about the future when he was living every moment of it now. The thought was heavy enough to weigh his body down to sleep.

It wasn't long before it happened again.

The awakening.

All he was sensing were frozen limbs and a face that couldn't turn around to see where danger was coming from. *Move, head, move!!*

The sounds were loud and pierced through his ears like an elephant's trumpet. Again and again. *Move!!*

Through the corner of his eyes, he sensed a sharp movement among the trees. A figure emerged, not the least bit stealthily. Wasn't he awake? Couldn't the stranger see him awake?

But fear had already returned uninvited. It was like never before. The hallucination was too close to reality. It was a hallucination, he reminded himself. But his body didn't understand him. The heart continued pounding loudly like before and he could feel his blood pooling into a knot in his stomach. *Run!!*

The stranger fished out his small axe and in one swift movement brought it down to the sleeping man's throat. Luchikawa jumped up and fell backwards. He was surprised at the ease with which he did so.

And then he looked down. The stranger didn't lift his head to see him. He had hardly flinched. The air in the woods stayed still as Luchikawa watched while the sharp edges of the axe slid past deftly across the pale skin of a thin neck wreathed with a beautiful necklace made of tiny bones. His neck.

Blood oozed out like the wine he had not known of. The stranger looked up at him, intoxicated by his success.

Luchikawa smirked again into the darkness. Fear had finally set him free.

