

The Eldáling

by Ace Antonio-Hall

A swarm of blue butterflies took flight, blinding me from the purplish-black leopard speeding toward me.

Shingk—shingk!

I tapped the kukri knives I'd borrowed from the vampire monastery together, psyching myself up for battle. There was no doubt in my mind the leopard would die, so it didn't matter if I could see her or not. I knew what I knew.

Assuming a fighting stance, I listened for her heartbeat, zeroing in on its rapid pace as the two-hundred pound, massive feline quickly closed the distance. The butterflies dispersed, giving the darkened red sky cobalt blue freckles. Beneath the setting sun, I could see the leopard in full Technicolor horror: slick black fur, silver eyes that mirrored my own, a large skull, short legs full of purpose, and sharp teeth baring.

Five feet away. Four. Three.

I planned to kill her in one of two ways. If she tried to pounce on me, I would wait until the last second, step sideways and slash first into her throat and, with my other knife, into her belly. Or if she stopped short to size me up, I would charge her and stab the usually stealthy animal in her oversized head with both blades, hungry for blood.

Something growled behind me, followed by high-pitched sounds of distress.

I turned, wondering, Are those babies crying?

The leopard bowled me over.

“Damn it, Aspen,” I said, berating myself. I'd let myself get distracted. Falling toward the ground, I swung my kukri knives, slicing nothing but thin air. My left elbow landed in the wild field of yellow-green weeds. An intense pain in my funny bone shot through me. Wincing, I prepared for the teeth of the leopard to cash in on its prize.

Instead, she dashed past me. The cries from the distressed animals grew louder, more desperate. Another growl, which sounded more like a devouring grunt of satisfaction, filled the air, and then I understood.

I rolled over then scrambled to my feet, grasped my kukri knives and followed behind the panicked feline. She was already fifty yards ahead of me, so I picked up my pace, smelling fresh blood in the air.

When I finally caught up with her, she was entangled in a brawl with a three-hundred-pound white gorilla; an arctic ape. The area was infested with the rare albino species. Its long arms were around the belly of the leopard, savagely biting into her neck, spilling blood.

Remains of her cubs littered the ground like discarded butcher's meat. An ache twisted my heart, watching the mother leopard fight to the death for her children. The two of them rolled over through the high blue weeds, rousing up dirt, separating and clashing again. Mother Leopard dug her teeth into the arm of the arctic ape. The arctic apes were mountain gorillas that lived in the High Mountains, fed off of surrounding vegetation and small invertebrates. They never migrated far from their nests.

I wanted to help Mother Leopard, but they were moving too fast, and I couldn't get a clear enough view of the white ape to sling my knife. Blood from the ape covered its mouth, and tainted its coat. It was bathed in a disgusting dark reddish color, parts of its fur matted in patches; a strip of silver-colored hair was on its back.

I danced around the two of them, seeking a vantage point to strike. Mother Leopard tore her mouth away from the white ape, producing a chunk of gorilla meat in her jowls.

The arctic ape spit out a long roar of agony that vibrated through my body. It flung Mother Leopard away and stumbled backward, holding its mangled arm. The blood gushed in spurts, as if a paint can had been punctured.

Mother Leopard and the arctic ape were beside an oak tree, the two of them hidden from the rising blue moon under an umbrella of red leaves. I bolted toward the tree, leaped so that my left foot landed four feet up the side of it, and launched myself up and into the white ape.

It saw me.

The bloodied beast was much quicker than I anticipated and swatted me with its uninjured arm as if I were a pesky mosquito. I flew back into the tree, my back smacking hard, knocking the air out of me, and crumpled to the ground like a deflating balloon. The knives slipped from my grasp and clinked to the ground.

The white ape was on me before I blinked. It grabbed my head, teeth bared, breath acrid, expelling angry grunts. Truly, the odor it gave off was rancid, but its pink eyes—I knew those eyes—reminded me of too many nights waking up drenched in sweat. Those eyes lived in my nightmares.

The arctic beast growled, but I uppercut its chin with the heel of my hand, hearing its teeth clatter, and slipped from its grasp. Tumbling on the ground, I picked up the Gurkha knives and slung them at the big ape before fully standing up—piercing its upper chest cavity and the left side of its neck, proper.

The white beast squirmed like the thirteen-inch blades were nothing more than a prick from rose thorns. Two steps and I was up in the air with a flying side kick. My foot pressed against the butt-end of the kurki knife, impaling the blade through the arctic ape and into the oak tree. I fell to the ground and red leaves showered me. I sprung up, ready for the arctic ape to tear itself out of the tree, but its head slumped down and to the side, pink eyes staring into nothingness.

It was dead.

Mother Leopard released a cry of agony. I turned quickly and saw her lying on the ground. Pools of blood formed beneath her head and her stomach. Death was caressing her the way a mother soothes a sleeping infant. I knelt down beside her.

“Oh, Mother Leopard,” I said. “I’m so sorry. Wish I could’ve done more to help.”

Her eyes met mine. Mother Leopard’s breathing became slow, labored. It stunk of the arctic ape’s blood.

“You can help,” she said, in my head.

The voice, which was neither male nor female, but more of an understanding, a knowing, gave me a start. I looked around, seeking out the voice. My head swiveled left, right, left again. I looked up in the tree.

“Who’s there? Show yourself, or die,” I said.

“No, brave one,” she said, in my thoughts. “It is me. The one you call ... Mother Leopard.”

I glanced down, wide-eyed. “You?”

“What are you called, brave one?”

“My name is Aspen. Aspen Harp.”

“There... is... one more, Aspen,” she said, in my mind. “She was my eldáling. Find... her...”

I heard Mother Leopard’s heartbeat slowing. My heart ached, and decided my next actions for me. Her eyes closed, and a red leaf sprinkled to the ground, landing on her eyelids. Another leaf fell, and then another, and then several. I glanced up, suddenly aware of another heartbeat. It drummed rapidly. Up, high in the tree, I saw another leopard, a melanistic leopard, just like her mother; a black panther.

I climbed up the tree, and high above the ground, I found Mother Leopard’s eldáling. She was older than the other pups the arctic ape had attacked. Although her fur was black, she had neatly round purple rosettes, or spots marked on her fur.

The entire limb she clung to was shaking from her trembling, frightened body. Her eyes were closed tight, and she was whimpering so softly, it was almost inaudible.

“It’s okay, little one,” I said.

Her eyes snapped open, and she snarled at me in a high pitched tone.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I said, and caressed her small warm body.

Her thoughts spoke to me. “Mama?”

The voice was not so much as a child's voice, but an understanding, a feeling of immaturity.

“Mama went to open the door of heaven for you.”

“Hea-ven?”

“It's not your time yet, but when it is, she'll meet you there.”

The poor thing started whimpering and was shaking so much, leaves continued to fall from the tree, sprinkling the ground around her dead mother.

For some reason, my thoughts had gone back to the times in high school when the class studied ancient Egyptian mythology. There was one Goddess, Seshat, who always resonated with me. One of her titles was the Mistress of the House of Books, but the great African Pharaoh, Tuthmosis III, stated in the Coffin Texts that, “Seshat, opens the door of heaven for you.” She always wore leopard skins, which was a symbol for funerary priests.

The frightened cub was no more than ten pounds. I wondered how old she was, one, maybe two-months old. It seemed unlikely that a leopard would have a litter so close together, but I didn't know about things like that. Maybe she was an orphan, and Mother Leopard took care of her. She did look slightly different from the rest of them.

“I think I'll call you, Seshata,” I said, and gently carried the little leopard down the tree.

Seshata watched me bury her siblings and mother, digging in the dirt with my kukri knives until I made six small graves and one large grave. By the time I finished packing the mounds of dirt on her mother's grave, Seshata was asleep, behind me under a row of wild bushes. I slipped the now-dull knives into my waist, picked her up, and she let out a sleepy growl. Pressing her close to my heart, I walked back to the monastery, feeling her tremble still.

So all those nightmares I had about white apes with pink eyes were really a vision. There weren't any lice crawling around the ape's fur like in my dreams, but the beast was repulsive enough that I never wanted to see another one ever again.

Still, why did it come down this far from its natural habitat? Mom told me a lot of strange things have been happening. Maybe some kind of weather anomalies in the mountains forced the apes to migrate down. I had no idea.

Seshata purred in her sleep. After all the turmoil: peace and serenity. I was a bit fatigued, and sat down for a second under the cool shade of an oak tree. Before I knew it, I was dozing off to sleep.

“What in heaven's name are you doing with that—that beast?” a familiar female voice asked.

My heart leaped. It was a voice that had always made me safe, no matter the circumstance. I smiled, and turned to face her.

“You missed the vigil,” she said, with her hands on her hips. “You had everyone worried that you stayed true to your threats and left the monastery. And while everyone is worried sick looking for you, I find you here, sleeping under a tree with a filthy animal in your lap? WHAT makes you think that any of this is okay?”

My smile faded. “Hi, Mom.”

A thought suddenly hit me. I carefully, but quickly sat Seshata down on the ground and hugged my mother. She let out a sound of cheerful surprise.

“I love you so much,” I said, with a film of tears in my eyes.

My mother didn't reply, verbally. She pulled away and held me by my shoulders, staring into my eyes. Her tears told me all I needed to know.

I was her eldaling.

The End