

## **Part 1**

### **Caress of Uwama**

*The tranquility of the stars no longer soothed his rage.*

*The old alpha lay on his back.*

*One hand supported his head, the other stroked the fang on his chest, worn as a necklace.*

*Gazing up at infinite points of light in a clear, moonless sky, stroking a tooth the length of his hand, slightly curved, pried from the jaws of the beast he slew when much younger; stronger.*

*The clan slept all around on beds of skins and matted grass and leaves, bodies scattered across a meadow spread between a rocky outcropping and trees.*

*The air was warm with a soft breeze; a good night for rest.*

*For most of the clan, anyway.*

*To remain in the same position for too long was excruciating; thus, the old alpha often lay awake while others slept, suffering in silence the aftershocks that came from a lifetime of hunting and rituals of combat.*

*He did not bother to lay with a female.*

*His body hurt too much for sex.*

*Or even pleasurable company.*

*Despite throbbing joints and aching bones, the old alpha was still capable of hunting worthy adversaries, such as the sabertooth; though, those mighty predators, like so many other beasts, had not been seen in some time.*

*Many things are different since the earth shook violently.*

*Rivers altered course.*

*Hippo, elephant and buffalo migrated elsewhere.*

*Forced to make an agonizing decision, the old alpha was still young when he led the clan away from the land of their forebears.*

*Move or die.*

*There was a difficult journey through dying wetlands that seemed to go on forever, the clan surviving on the rotting corpses of beasts unable to make it out, when at last they arrived at a vast lake of salted water.*

*Land of the flat faces.*

*Similar to his own kind, but with disgusting little mouths and oddly shaped heads.*

*Their incessant chattering bothered his ears, worse than monkeys.*

*Flat faces appeared vulnerable, at first, scattered in small groups, but turned stunningly fierce in battle.*

*Uniting in numbers and using superior clubs and spears to drive his clan away from the fertile hunting grounds that surrounded the salted water.*

*The old alpha stroked the tooth that lay on his chest, as though his rage might flow out of him and into the world.*

## **Chapter 1**

### **Ekú**

When clouds were mountains.

That was the last memory Eku had of his homeland.

Standing with his tribe at the highpoint of a coastal rise, surveying the mysteries of *Umawa* to one side, the majesty of *Uwama* to the other.

Looking inland, at first, Eku thought storm clouds interrupted the flat horizon, hazy and purple across a forested plain, but it was a mountain range, so vast he mistook it for clouds.

That was also when the world began to shift.

The elders said that was *Uwama's* caress.

She coaxes *Umawa*, the rock and the earth, to eventually turn around, one way or the other.

The elders were smart all right, for once the tribe left behind the clouds that were mountains, Eku saw that *Ulanga* rose each morning from *Uwama's* salted water, before journeying overhead, into the heart of the *Umawa*.

The world had shifted indeed.

Ekú grew up on a fertile, south facing coast, where *Ulanga* always followed an arranged path: rising and setting over land.

A full cycle has passed since the pilgrimage began, too many days to remember spent hiking along a coastline that, for the most part, appeared the same.

Ekú began to wonder what the big deal was all about.

When the tribe stopped to make camp, the people did as always: harvest from rich beds of mussels and clams; dig corms and tubers from the hearty soils along rivers and streams; venture inland to gather fruit from trees so bounteous that the elephants, baboons and bats could take only a fraction.

When hunters disappeared into the bush, they always returned with the beasts the tribe required.

And beyond the next bluff, there would be seals and giant turtles, crabs and fish and octopus hiding in tidal pools.

Walking was easy with a full belly and Eku's was always full.

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Eku kaleni-yana was born into the *Abantu-Uwama*: people of the ocean.

His extended family was part of a new tribe, hand-picked by the elders.

A powerful and young tribe that would pilgrimage to a place of unimaginable splendor.

A place that many thought only existed in song, known as the land of legend.

Eku's father, Kaleni, was part of a team of hunters that disappeared for an entire *yaka-yaka*—the full seasonal cycle.

All of the hunters were feared dead.

Even Krele, Eku's mother, began to prepare him and his sister Yatyambo for the possibility that father may have left for the afterlife.

Many long nights Eku lay awake, using his mind to evoke scenarios in which father returned.

How he would wake up in the morning and see the face he knew so well.

The scar through the center of the left eyebrow.

The constellation of three, pale spots in the lower half of his right, brown eye.

Details he saw only when their noses almost touched.

And then the sound of his voice ... Like Mother's, always calm; reassuring.

Soon, Eku dismissed such fanciful conjurings, yearning only for the real thing, fearing that his father would become just another name in a song.

And then one day, on the top of a bluff, from the direction from which Ulanga rose, Kaleni and the other hunters returned with a story so incredible the elders required three straight nights of long discussion to get through it all.

Eku's father led a scouting party farther than anyone before, following the coastline as previous parties had done, but then continuing inland along a great river.

When the hunters encountered a conjoining river, they followed it to a magnificent lake of clear and drinkable fresh water, surrounded by mountains.

A freshwater lake so vast that it seemed to expand forever.

Teeming with fish of every color of the rainbow.

A paradise.

The elders said that Kaleni had found the land of legend, known only from the words of an ancient song.

A song of the old world and the terrible times:

*the sky turned black*  
*Ulayo's breath became smoke*  
*ash fell from the sky*  
*Umawa called Ulanga home*  
*beyond shatssheli-lambo*  
*beyond ichi-sikalo-ata*  
*into the land of legend*  
*Leaving darkness, cold*  
*and death*

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Well into the pilgrimage, Eku's morning ritual remained intact, waking a bit before everyone else, as though he could feel Umawa stir and Ulanga begin to rise.

Vision adjusted to the low light inside a shelter of poles and skins, he checked Yathi, his cousin and *ikabane* since birth, laying next to him, sound asleep.

Yathi never wanted to get up early.

Eku pulled himself into a seated position on a bed mat that was thin, but strong and pliant; firm when rolled up for carrying, but soft when spread over a cushion of grass and warmed by his body.

Rubbing sleep from his eyes with the back of a hand, he ran the palm over a closely cropped head. Leaned and peered at Yat, having rolled away from the outside so that all he could see was a pile of hair, lower back, loincloth and slim, scissored legs.

Mother and father, aunt Shona and the bulk of uncle Lume were dark mounds, the deep breathing of their sleep lost in the splash-thump of the surf, the soothing sounds of Uwama's caress familiar to every Abantu since birth.

Eku rubbed his face once more to get rid of any lingering sleep.

He was a good looking young male, at least people told him so (especially his mother), with a long, narrow nose like his mother, and the solid chin of his father.

His eyes were round and downturned and always bright, always inquisitive.

A constant, restless energy thrummed within Eku that never allowed him to sleep in.

Proudly, he inspected his *ula-konto*, the throwing spear balanced on two, flat rocks at the edge of the shelter, alongside his bed mat.

Closed one eye and peered along the length, running a finger down the smooth, hard wood followed by heat-hardened wrappings, fusing the haft to a killing barb of shaped bone.

Next to his *ula-konto* was a sack of sealskin, from which Eku pulled his beloved *keri* stick.

He rose to a bent over crouch, wearing only a loincloth and shuffled to the shelter's opening.

Cool at night, the poles, ropes and skins that made up the travois during the day were converted to shelters in the evening.

Eku shivered away from the heat of his family.

Settled cross-legged on sandy soil, between his shelter and a neighbor of similar design, positioned so that Ulanga's fire could warm his bare back.

Bent his neck to inspect the *keri* stick.

Ran fingers across a rounded end he could still rub to a glow, despite *waka-waka-waka* practice throws.

This *keri* stick had once been underground—and alive!

But now, had achieved a second, greater life by becoming Eku's *keri* stick.

The length of his forearm, slightly curved with a heavy end, chopped from the main nodule of an ultra-dense scrub bush root while still green, scraped and smoothed by the expert blade of uncle Lume, who was *izik-kosa*, master of sinew, rock, bone and wood.

Once dry, a *keri* stick was nearly indestructible, the dense wood grain hard as an elephant tusk.

Still chilly, Eku dug in his heels and pulled with his legs to cinch his body further into a bar of amber, allowing Ulanga to warm him.

Glanced between the shelters, across trampled grass and more shelters of poles and skins.

Fire pits scented the air with smoke and remnants of yesterday's harvest.

Warmed and ready, Eku stood, stuck the *keri* stick into the band of his loincloth and moved away from the cluster of shelters.

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A blow from *Ulayo* and the cry of seagulls greeted Eku when he cleared the top of a grass-strewn hillock.

Ulanga's yellow orb interrupted a horizontal plane of hazy sky and dark ocean.

Uwama delivered curling white caps of turquoise and gray.

Eku breathed deep the scent of salt.

Observed a shoreline cluttered with pockmarked coral rock and boulders of limestone, yellow-brown sand offering a glimpse of orange after each lick of a foamy swell.

The bluff was a series of gently rolling hills that stretched endlessly in either direction, the beachside edge worn ragged by the relentless battering of ocean against land.

Uwama, Umawa.

Eku gripped sandy soil with his toes and cast a well-trained eye along the bluff, looking for inconsistencies among the grasses, the scrub brush, parsing the landscape into individual objects, separating one pattern from another, a habit drilled into all Abantu youth: constant vigilance.

He was confident venturing solo with *waka-waka* people bedded behind him.

The encampment had no restrictive perimeter.

There were no large beasts nearby.

Besides, even elephants ranged clear of the Abantu in such numbers.

The vantage of the hillock allowed Eku to spot the dark shape of Tiuti down the beach, up to his usual, early morning wandering.

Tiuti was not only an esteemed elder, he was *izik-ikiz*, a master of masters.

Most Abantu youth (and probably most adults) were terrified of Tiuti.

Eku and Yathi (with no adults nearby, of course) joked that Tiuti had skin like an old seal, deeply wrinkled from countless days basking under Ulanga's hot eye.

He rarely bothered to cut his hair, now threaded with coils of white and sticking awkwardly in all directions.

But everyone held Tiuti in reverence, despite occasional, erratic behavior.

Eku raced down the beach into ankle deep water, hitched aside his loincloth and peed.

Returned to shore and continued down the sand, bounding over and around boulders, splashing through tidal pools, padding along Tiuti's tracks.

Once caught up, Eku found a nice, round rock to sit upon and angled himself to best receive Ulanga's early fire.

Watched as Tiuti shuffled along an arc of broken shells at the edge of the tide.

Tall and lean and barefoot, Tiuti wore a shorn loincloth that covered front and back; a holster and long knife was tied to the right thigh; a sleeveless, sealskin vest was draped over a shoulder to cover his torso to the waist; a favored necklace of small and oddly shaped bones hung from his neck.

When preparation for the pilgrimage began, the old master made clear his intent to go along.

The pilgrimage was long and difficult, meant only for the young and strong; thus, at first, the other elders balked.

As always, Tiuti got his way.

Elated that Tiuti was going, but curious at the incongruity of his age, Eku had asked his mother, "Is it because he is so wise?"

Krele told him, "Tiuti has given to the tribe all that he knows. He earned the honor of choosing where his life goes from here."

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“Umawa give me your blood!” Tiuti suddenly cried.

Bent over to pick up a pebble.

Straightened to look, holding the rock close to an eye.

Shook his head and cast it to the sand.

Feeling brave, Eku called, “*Izik-ikiz* Tiuti, why do you say those words?”

The old Abantu glanced over.

Dismissed him with a wave; but then, whirled to approach.

Shocked, Eku dared not budge from his seat on the boulder.

Bone necklace bouncing, beach wind whipping his too-long hair, Tiuti stomped over.

A long arm speared inland, fingers spread like the primary feathers of an eagle in a hard turn.

His voice was high-pitched for a male, especially for one so tall, and his dark eyes were intense.

“The blood of Umawa appears rarely,” he said, seeming to tower over Eku.

The arm fell as he explained, “A scratch in the ground and then you have to hurry to find it before Umawa covers such a petty wound with a scab of stone and dirt.”

Nervous, but above all curious, Eku asked, “But what do you mean, Umawa’s blood?”

With a smooth move, Tiuti pulled the knife from the holster on his thigh and knelt before Eku, whose involuntary intake of breath was swift.

Eye level with the young male, Tiuti raised the blade between them, the cutting edge catching the angle of Ulanga’s fire, becoming a gradient of gray to honey.

Gravely, Tiuti said, “This Eku, *isipo-igazi*, is Umawa’s blood.”

The old master deftly spun the knife and respectfully offered the weapon, handle first, as a hunter would.

Eku sucked in his breath.

Hesitated.

Swallowed nervously and reached to grasp a smooth, pale bone handle with both hands, hoping by some miracle Yathi had roused from sleep and snuck away to watch this.

Took the knife, surprised at how heavy it was, but when held correctly, became lighter, perfectly balanced.

Cast admiring eyes up and down the weapon, the haft shaped and hallowed from an ultra-hard foreleg bone while still wet, to perfectly conjoin with a stone that only formed in exact circumstance, requiring a precise blend of minerals, pressure and deep time.

“That is not a blade of ordinary rock,” the old master said.

Eku’s curiosity shoved aside all remaining nervousness and he said, “It looks like tree sap.”

Peered from the blade to the wrinkled face and saw the wisdom that fueled Tiuti’s mind as powerfully as Uwama moved the tides, and added, “When left under the gaze of Ulanga to harden.”

“Yes, Eku. Very good. Umawa’s blood only comes from deep in the ground.”

Tiuti shifted and leaned close so Eku could smell his breath, pointing with a finger covered with callouses, the roughened edge of the fingernail tracing an edge strong enough to chop wood, yet sharp enough to shear whiskers from soft skin.

“You do not see the grain of quartzite or the pattern of a bone,” the old master continued. “Nor do you see the growth layers of a shell or the rings of once living wood.

“Umawa’s blood only comes from a source of fire, deep in his belly.”

Eku’s voice betrayed his awe, “Did you find the *isipo-igazi* to make this blade?”

Tiuti leaned back and clicked with satisfaction.

“Long ago. With my father. Our last scouting together. We found a piece of *isipo-igazi* big as a buffalo, piercing our world from below.”

Smiled, remembering and said, “Unusually colored. Patchy. Like a hyena with light and dark spots. We still carry many blades from that quarry.”

Waved his long fingers in the direction opposite the water, wistfully adding, “But those rocks were found to the other side of Umawa. At the base of great mountains. As tall as the ones recently passed.”

Knowing the songs the people sang to recount the heroic forays to the land where the irreplaceable *isipo-gazi* could be found, Eku said, “That was a long journey. Like my father was on, when he found the land of legend.”

Tiuti clicked yes and said, “But we go in different directions.”

Leaned back on his haunches.

Motioned away from the water again.

“To travel to where *isipo-igazi* can be found in abundance requires a journey that takes you to where Uwama’s caress turns Umawa the other way, so that Ulanga sinks into her water at night.”

Winked and added, “Or so we like to explain in song.”

Thinking of the limited supply of core rock spread amongst the travois the tribe pulled each day, Eku asked, “Do you think we will find more?”

Tiuti clicked to indicate satisfaction.

“Your father brought back a stone from the land of legend. Carried a piece from where he found it at the base of another mountain.



“A rock as black as the darkest, starless night, but shiny and hard and knappable into a sharp blade, like *isipo-igazi*.”

Eku blurted, “Maybe Umawa’s old blood?”

Tiuti tilted his head back and laughed, an event so rare that Eku almost fell off his perch.

Still chuckling, Tiuti said, “You are clever, young one.”

Beaming from the compliment, but not understanding, Eku handed the magnificent weapon back, asking, “Will you and uncle Lume be able to make blades such as this from the black *isipo-igazi*?”

Tiuti looked serious again.

“I believe so. I believe the land of legend will provide riches to fill our dreams.”

Eku smiled. “Me too.”

Tiuti stood tall and sheathed the knife.

Waved a calloused finger in front of Eku, whose eyes widened once more.

“Remember this, Eku kaleni-yana. With great riches will come great danger.”

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Tiuti resumed his beachside wandering and Eku was lost in thought, basking in the attention of the old master and letting his mind run free with adventures and conquests when a shrill cry from Yat yanked him out of his daydreaming.

“Eku come eat. Now, before harvest.”

Spun on his butt to see her standing at the top of the bluff, hands on hips, wearing only a loincloth, Ulayo pushing her hair out like a plume of feathers.

Yat was fast becoming an adult and would soon cut her hair.

She had always been a serious child, but now, having reached an age where she could be paired off with a potential mate, Yat took her responsibilities seriously.

Unlike other sisters stuck tracking down wayward little brothers, she waited for him to clamber up the berm Umawa used to separate the beach from the land of rock and earth.

Eku didn’t mind.

Not *that* much.

Yat could boss him around once in a while; after all, when a stingray stabbed his leg and he bled into a feverish sleep, it was Yat at Eku’s bed mat every time he woke, applying bee honey to the wound and providing water and fruit throughout his recovery.

And of course it was Yat who teased him into a rage so that he chased her across camp, even though his leg hurt; mother laughing at his frustration, telling him that his sister was only helping him to get better.

Ekü reached the top of the bluff and remembered what he should have been doing as Yat scolded with a sharp click and added, "You skipped melons."

"I forgot," Eku said, a truthful answer, though Yat clicked again in a way that expressed skepticism.

"I like to watch Tiuti."

"Especially in the morning when you should be gathering melons," she said, turning to head down the back side of the bluff for the encampment.

Hurrying after, Eku called, "Did Yathi go?"

"Of course not," Yat hollered back. "Yathi is a lazy bushpig! He sleeps and you go scampering off."

She waved a hand forward without looking back.

"Come now, eat. You will need it. You and him get to pull the travois for skipping melons!"

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The bluff where the Abantu set up camp had gritty top soil with an orange-ish hue.

In the area that beach transitioned to earth, grass was sparse. Spider-webbing everywhere were the gnarled, spiny vines with dull round leaves that somehow produce the sweetest melon.

Away from the water, Umawa expanded endlessly as savannah: gentle, grass-covered hills variegating from green to yellow to brown; the occasional cluster of trees defined by flat tops and bulging trunks.

Yathi joked how the strange trees looked like they were upside down, the roots sticking into the air where the canopy should have been.

The camp site was chosen because of the melon patch.

Undiscovered by elephants and with no baboons or monkeys nearby, the fruit was untouched, plump and ripe.

Sweet melon was nice for feasting, but not appropriate for travel; thus, the marula patch discovered a short distance away caused considerably more excitement.

The previous evening, after the travois were disassembled into shelters and camp established, adults explored further up the beach to find a wonderful surprise: marula trees, the ultra-dependable staple of the Abantu diet found in abundance across their homeland, but not seen since journeying past the clouds that were mountains.

Ekü dashed through the waist-high grass, having realized how long he daydreamed on the beach.

Camp was in full preparation.

Smoke rose from fire pits.

Shelters were disassembled, leaving scattered skins and poles across the trampled grass; many of which were already reassembled and loaded with supplies.

Young people mingled with adults in familial groups.

A steady movement of people went back and forth from the food preparation area.

Hunters wearing loincloths and seal skin vests were gathered along the outskirts of camp, no doubt discussing the logistics of the day's trek.

Eku had no choice but to run by.

He caught his father's eye and grinned guiltily; though, Kaleni only smiled back.

His father had a soft spot when it came to spending time with Tiuti.

The reaction of Krele, his mother, was what concerned him.

While on the beach with Tiuti, other early risers gathered melons; cutting holes to drain the sweet nectar to store in bladders, tossing the remaining pulp into a communal dish and separating the nuts to dry for later meals.

Yat slowed to a walk to join some of her friends and Eku jogged through the bustle of camp to where his family shelter had been, mother and aunt Shona having already dismantled the skin and poles into a travois.

Krele smiled at the appearance of Eku, wearing his loincloth of cured springhare, as always, keri stick bouncing from the strap of cordage she sewed into the waist.

Seeing Krele's reaction, Eku sighed with relief.

Yat could scold him all she wanted, but a single, harsh word from mother would ruin his day.

Melon gathering was the easiest of chores and really, only *waka-waka* people were required to gather enough fruit.

Food preparation was the real labor and Eku was not required to participate in that; nevertheless, by skipping melons, which would have taken just a few moments out of his early morning, once harvest was done, he was stuck hauling the travois with Yathi.

Krele clicked at Eku and pointed to his sealskin satchel sitting on a flat rock, *ula-konto* rested against it.

Eku bellowed his heartfelt thanks and went to dig out a hollowed melon shell and a scooper before racing off to fill his belly with a mix of fresh fruit, shellfish and nuts.