

Chapter 2

A Hunt During Harvest

The traveling Abantu were well up the Indian Ocean coastal belt.

Gone were the steep ravines and rocky river crossings of the south.

Beaches were wide with soft sand, bordered by margins of grass covered bluffs that overlooked healthy savannah, mostly grass with scatterings of bush and trees.

Ekú was thrilled by so many new and exotic beasts.

There were different antelope than at home, from the tiny oribi that bounced as though their slender legs were coiled springs, to the robust oryx, with spear-like horns and distinctive, black and white patterned faces.

Even more spectacular were the towering, spotted giraffes, the most amazing beasts he had ever seen.

Frustrated, Ekú was only allowed to see such beasts from a distance.

He yearned for the day he became a hunter, like his father, free to range beyond the boundaries of an encampment. To be able to explore wherever and whenever he wanted!

The land along Uwama's salted coast was fertile, with plenty of small rivers bringing freshwater back to her womb.

Wherever they marched, Ekú maintained a keen eye, always observant of the signs of beasts.

This land included elephants, zebras, buffalos, wildebeests, kudus, impalas, bushbucks, baboons, warthogs and bush pigs.

As well as vervet monkeys, aardvarks and aardwolves, genets, meerkats, springhares and ground squirrels, pangolins and porcupines.

Occasionally, trailing from a distance came jackals, looking for scraps.

Inevitably there were lions, leopards and hyenas.

Predators, for the most part, knew to avoid Abantu; though, on occasion—especially being in a strange land—hunters killed an occasional hyena or lion, leaving the carcass in a specific location as an explicit warning to the others: stay away if you want to live.

The eye-catching patch of green at the top of the only hillock for some distance had been impossible to miss.

Marula trees.

Given open sunlight, marula grew nicely rounded canopies, dense with small branches of long, compound leaves.

Plentiful in their homeland, the Abantu had not seen marula since leaving the southern shores; and yet, there was a small copse atop a hill with a rocky spire, easily spotted from the wonderfully walkable beach.

Even at a distance, the people could see the trees were laden with ripened, yellow fruit.

The tribe marched up an incline covered by bristle grass gone thin and yellow and brown, wind-blown, stripped of all but the clingiest seed tuft.

The earth was hard and dry beneath Eku's toes.

The day was warm and bright.

Yathi walked beside Eku amidst the center of the procession. He said, "Marula. So what? We eat marula fruit and nuts all the time?"

"The trees at the top of this hill came from the hands of our ancestors," his mother, Shona said.

She strode ahead of them, with Krele, her younger sister, along with some of the other mothers.

Luvu, one of those mothers, added, "Scouting parties who travelled here before we did brought pouches of nuts to put in the ground. So the trees could grow for future scouting parties."

She pointed at the mature canopy ahead of them.

"They have been growing for some time now. From the time when your grandfathers scouted. This is good, no?"

Yathi grimaced and stuck out his tongue. He disliked harvest; though, Eku typically looked forward to it.

The two walked amidst a parade of people, the younger at center, the adults at the front and bringing up the rear.

Yathi was a robust, young male with a round nose, dimpled chin and the *laza* eyes of his father Lume, whose wide span of shoulders bespoke the adult Yathi would become.

Unless hungry, Yathi was eternally easy going and happy to follow Eku's lead.

Astride Eku and Yathi were the brothers Gokuk and Dokuk, whose mother Luvu walked just ahead.

Gokuk was short and slight, the same age as Eku and Yathi, who were the youngest members of the new tribe. Dokuk was tall, a cycle older than Yatyambo and completely in love with her. The brothers were different physically, but had identical, round faces: big ears, bright eyes, flat noses and toothy smiles.

All of the young people wore soft-pelted loincloths and carried seal skin sacks over their shoulders.

Adults wore similar loincloths of softened skins; many also wore vests, brown and cured, wrapped over one or both shoulders and tied to the waist.

Everyone carried satchels, grass baskets or turtle shell bowls.

Dokuk announced, "I'm staying on the ground and watching for squirrels and springhares." He glanced at Eku to see if there was a reaction.

Eku, focused on keeping up with Dokuk's long strides, kept his eyes to the front, face betraying nothing.

He and Dokuk, like many young, aspiring hunters, had an unspoken competition of who had more prowess with a keru stick.

Dokuk, older and bigger, could throw much harder, but Eku, despite his youth, had already developed an uncanny precision when it came to bringing down live prey.

"I'm climbing," Gokuk said, pointing at the patch of trees at the peak of the rise. "The big one in the middle looks like a green jellyfish."

Yathi groaned.

He didn't like anything about harvest.

Unreachable by elephants, the marula grew full, rounded canopies at the center of the hill. The low-sprawling branches offered opportunistic climbing.

A rocky spire of sandstone rose at the edge of the hill, as though placed there as a viewfinder for the endless spread of Uwama.

Other than the trees and rock, the hill was carpeted by the worn yellowed grass.

When the Abantu approached close, a flock of tan parrots with orange beaks burst upward to coalesce and whisk away inland, immediately followed by another group of birds, rising from a different section of the trees.

Eku marvelled at the sight of a new and splendid species, shaped like a swift, with wings of light green and a breast and tail of lilac to lavender.

Lingering last were portly turacos, the wings of the local variety stained with a splash of red.

Familiar to the Abantu, the stout birds spiraled away from the marula and settled in the bushes that grew at the base of the rocky spire.

Once atop the hill, the Abantu were able to see past the trees and observe north.

Ahead of them lay a continued stretch of gentle, low-rising bluffs.

Sandy shores created a yellowish margin between a lazy ocean and an ever-extending coastline, where orange-brown rock outcroppings interrupted green vegetation.

Beyond the beautiful beaches, a dramatic change awaited: the savannah the Abantu had followed for so long was changing.

A mass of green awaited, stretching into the distance.

The outlying band of a tropical forest.

Adults broke off from the parade in an organized pattern

Young people, excited at the prospect of climbing, nevertheless moved with the same practiced precision as the adults, knowing which plants had thorns or cutting edges, which bush to never brush up against because of insects, and most important, where to watch for dangerous beasts, large and small.

Hunters carrying *ula-konto* and wearing a necklace with the talon of a fish eagle walked the perimeter of the trees in pairs.

Under the shaded area of the canopy, Gokuk happily ran for the nearest, low-hung branch where the quickest youths were already ascending.

Dokuk eyed Eku for a moment, then spotted Odi, waving at him from an area between the trees and the rocky spire—a likely place for springhares to burrow.

Odi and Dokuk were *ikanabe* and he ran off to join him.

Eku was considering where he and Yathi should get started when Yathi said, “Eku look! Inka is walking right at us.”

Eku, still looking in the direction Dokuk and the other young aspiring hunters were gathered, turned and felt an unexpected thrill at the sight of Inka, having separated from the adults setting up workstations.

Heading their way.

Inka only recently cut her hair.

She was mated to Goagu, a stalwart hunter who all the young females admired, or so Eku heard.

Curious, Eku had an opportunity to ask Yat, “Is it because Goagu is a good hunter?”

But she only laughed at him and walked away.

Uncle Lume, who happened to be standing nearby, said (somewhat mockingly, Eku thought), that Goagu being popular with the females had nothing to do with his hunting skills.

Inka was a captivating beauty with large eyes and pouty lips.

Enamored, Eku thought of an elegant, long-legged wader.

Inka moved gracefully through knee-deep yellow grass, wearing a brown wrap of shorn skin and a scarf of black and white ferret. Bracelets of white ostrich beads adorned each forearm.

Yathi, unabashed, stared with his mouth partly open.

Ingwe said with a knowing smile, "Hello Yathi. Hello Eku. Good to see you at harvest."

Even Inka's voice was bewitching, sweet and full of flavors Eku couldn't quite put his finger on; nevertheless, he frowned and said, "I am always at harvest."

Inka giggled and Yathi let out a kind of whimper, eyes going more vacant, his open mouth becoming a broad smile.

"Yes I know silly," she said. "I was wondering if you might do something for me?"

When Inka pointed at the bushes where the turaco settled, Eku tried not to show the burst of excitement.

She was going to give him permission for a hunt!

Well, maybe not a real hunt, but Eku now had the fantastic opportunity to use his keru stick for something other than a springhare or squirrel.

Not wanting to appear overeager, Eku put on his most serious look and asked, "The red feathers?"

Inka clicked yes, adding, "I will add the flesh to a stew tonight. Or slice it thin and let it cure for the first meal tomorrow. But the feathers, those are for something special."

She winked, put a hand to the alluring curve of her hip and waited for Eku to respond.

Eku clicked respectfully while looking her in the eye and said, "Turaco are clever."

"Yes, but see, turaco here are not familiar with Abantu. See how the silly birds linger."

Inka clicked softly, pointing again.

Eku had to admit that even the way she gestured with a single finger was attractive.

He looked from her expressive eyes to the direction of her finger and the bushes, crowded with brightly colored birds.

"I will try for a throw, but I might miss."

"Yes, but I picked you for a reason. When something is meant to be, something happens."

Eku smiled and clicked yes.

Inka gave him an affectionate pat on the head and walked smooth and supple back to where the adults organized the fruit husking.

Yathi, unable to take his eyes away, breathed, "How can she be so beautiful?"

"I do not know," Eku said. "She just is."

"You have to get one."

"I might miss."

"Well, if you do get one, make sure I'm there when you give it to her."

The tribe settled into a familiar routine.

Adults formed stations underneath the canopy.

First, a place to drop off the fruit where it was stripped of the outer skin.

Next, remove the inner core for later use, while slopping the pulp into turtle shell basins to drain the sugary nectar into bladders.

Finally, squeeze and twist the pulp to extract the last of the nectar, setting out the stringy remains to dry and later carry as travel food.

While the adults processed the harvest, young people had to either climb or gather.

Deciding to keep his feet on the ground, Eku took care of his share quickly, remaining bent over to snatch ripened fruit off the ground while keeping one eye upward.

Eku, Yathi and everyone else on the ground engaged those climbing above with playful banter, the two sides hollering back and forth.

The climbers rained down a bounty, while those on the ground dodged and gathered.

Eku emptied his full sack at the de-husk station, making sure he caught the eye of his mother as he did so. He set down the empty sack where she could find it and paced to the edge of the canopy, knowing he was already running out of time.

Took a moment to observe the turaco, settled by the rocks in tall bushes with waxy, ovate leaves of deep green, waiting for the humans to leave.

The birds would blend perfectly were it not for the scarlet on their wings; though, Eku knew that during *lobo-yaka*—the hot and rainy cycle—that same bush bloomed bright red flowers.

Depending on the type of harvest, aspiring young hunters fiercely contested over permissible options.

Springhares were by far the most popular small beast to take during a harvest.

Springhares were valued for meat, skin and sinew; thus, were permissible for a keri stick throw during harvest—but only after an aspiring hunter finished what was assigned by the mothers!

Occasionally other small beasts became a target, but required the permission of an adult.

Eku could not wait for the next time the tribe harvested fantails that grew alongside freshwater (the long, flat leaves were ultra-valuable for weaving mats and baskets, as well as making cordage). His mother gave him permission to use his *ula-konto* in pursuit of water rats and giant frogs—as long as baseline chores were done first, as always.

Eku's favorite subject was to study beasts.

Of all varieties.

He liked to use his mind to imagine his human eyes were fish eagle eyes, able to discern the tiniest detail.

A hunter needed to recognize the meaning behind any change in posture, whether a ripple of fur, the flick of a whisker or the ruffle of a single feather.

Ekú paid attention.

He knew how bodies worked; after all, even at a young age, he had participated in *waka-waka-waka* harvests, which often included butcherings. Usually fish and turtles and other small beasts, such as springhare or bushpigs, but also large beasts, slain by the hunters.

But there were also harvests of birds and baboons and even an occasional leopard or hyena.

On a rare occasion, Ekú witnessed the dismantling of a bull elephant after the beast went rogue and hunters were forced to kill it.

Ekú knew that all beasts shared similar body parts.

Beasts, especially the big ones, held many valuable parts.

And Ekú knew the different parts of the body worked together because of the mind.

He and Yathi liked to joke about the mind being inside the skull; after all, inside skulls were the brains the mothers used to soften hides for loincloths.

The two of them couldn't figure out why saying brains and loincloths together made them laugh, it just did.

But joking was set aside when it came to hunting.

Ekú knew that to fool the beast, you had to fool the mind of the beast.

Stealth and patience were vital.

Ekú looked over the feathered crowd perched in ladder-like arrangements along heavily leafed branches.

Nothing but tall grass between where he stood and where the birds roosted.

Daunting odds; nevertheless, Ekú confidently selected a plump target with vibrantly red wings.

Between Ekú and his prey was grass and the high pitched hum of cicadas and body shakers.

When Ekú was alone and able to concentrate, he often thought he could pick up a current created by so many wing rubbers and body shakers through the soft spots on his feet ... At least when they got really loud.

Ekú was always trying to improve his skills.

The feet and skin, like the eyes, ears and nose, spoke the hidden languages of Umawa.

While still on his mother's teat, Kaleni was already training Eku how to navigate Umawa's world.

Eku would accompany Kaleni into the bush where he taught Eku that a hunter's greatest asset was *ibe-bonakalio*.

To become invisible.

Birds were difficult prey, like antelope, watching individually in all directions and reacting as a group.

Eku moved from beneath the shade of the marula, continuing to bend over and reach, as though picking up fruit.

Not looking directly at the birds, he watched using the periphery of his vision, feet acting as a second set of eyes, toes poking through stems of tall grass.

Bend over.

Extend the arm.

Step forward and slowly straighten.

Repeat.

The day was still young and Ulanga was high and bright.

Adults remained busy at the workstations; young people swarmed in the trees; hunters with *ula-konto* stalked the periphery.

Eku stood slightly hunched in the tall grass, a bit away from everyone else.

Warm and loose.

Already close enough for a long throw.

Plus, he was running out of time.

But, while turacos looked chubby with pigeon-like bodies, those short and stout wings were very strong.

They flew in short, but fast bursts.

A long throw would be a wasted effort.

Patience.

The grass tickled Eku's stomach, but would not interfere.

That was good.

He just had to get closer.

Bend over.

Extend the arm.

Step forward and slowly straighten.

Repeat.

A long-winged fly fluttered gracefully by.

As though to make up, a clumsy flying beetle rammed itself into a shoot in front of Eku, frantically clinging as the grass stem tail-wagged back and forth.

Some of the birds adjusted their claws on the branches.

His proximity was making them nervous.

Eku gripped Umawa with his toes and slid the keri stick free.

Reacquired the plump target at the end of a branch.

Deliberately turned his head so both eyes could focus.

Purplish upper body.

Bright red wings.

Pupil of the bird's observing eye locked on his human form.

Eku adjusted the placement of fingers and thumb on the keri stick, making sure the movement of his hand remained hidden behind his body.

Not hurrying, he smoothly drew back his throwing arm and turned his hips while shifting weight to the rear foot to begin a muscular chain of events that he had practiced *waka-waka-waka* times.

Pivoting hard, Eku shifted his weight forward while stepping, twisting the torso back to add even more energy to his right arm as it whipped forward in a throwing motion.

The keri stick flew from his hand at a remarkable speed.

Spinning.

As always, there was a micro-instant netherworld between triumph and failure.

Turaco reacted like lightning, but the rapidly rotating stick caught the target flush as it leaped from the branch, the bird's light and hollow bones caving under the impact so that death was instant, the body falling as the others exploded upward with flashes of crimson and much screeching.

The commotion attracted the attention of all the young Abantu, but only a casual glance from the adults.

Eku moved quickly through the grass.

Found his keri stick and picked up the bird, holding the warm and soft body close to his side.

Dokuk and several others were instantly upon him; the tallest named Tuve, already with an adult's deep voice, demanded, "Who gave you permission?"

Tuve sidled up aggressively, but Eku held his ground and was grateful when Dokuk stepped to his side.

Stone faced, Eku snapped, "Inka."

All of the males groaned in envy and immediately moved away, but Dokuk hesitated; smiled.

There was something about Eku that made it impossible to be jealous.

He slapped Eku's shoulder with affection, clicked congratulations and followed after the others, still hopeful for one last throw at a springhare.

Eku watched him run off.

Dokuk was pleasant to the youngest tribe's males, which was not always the case, especially when a child was about to become an adult, like Tuve.

Tuve did not like it when someone younger than him was picked for an extra hunting opportunity.

Especially a female like Inka.

Eku fought down his exhilaration.

At moments like this, he could almost believe himself a hunter and couldn't help place a hand to his chest, trying to imagine the feel of a fish eagle talon.

But then Eku shook his head, irritated, knowing there was still so much to learn.

And it would help if he could grow bigger, like Yathi did without even trying.

Eku headed back to the marula and saw Goguk amongst other young people descending from the branches.

The adults had finished skinning fruit and extracting cores and were now focused on separating pulp from sweet nectar.

Harvest was almost done.

Eku noted where Inka was working and hurried to find Yathi.

All of the Abantu came down the hill carrying something.

Eku balanced a bladder of nectar on one shoulder; his satchel, crammed full of cores, hung from the other shoulder.

Burly Yathi lugged a turtle shell bowl packed with stringy pulp.

The rich rewards of harvest were evenly dispersed and the tribe set out on the day's march.

Eku and Yathi paced stride for stride, a travois handle to each inside arm.

Being young, the netting of supplies hung between the poles wasn't heavy and pulling while hiking along the beach would only leave them extra hungry.

The tribe walked leisurely across beachside plains, the ground firm and dry; only thin bladed grasses found purchase in the gritty soils alongside Uwama.

The heels of the travois hissed through the sand and Eku felt strong, exhilarated by his success at harvest.

How fortunate that Inka picked him!

Eku reminded himself to keep practicing with a keru stick—and now with the *ula-konto*!

Krele increased her pace to come up from behind and join Eku, who noted that his mother had folded skins in the carrying pack over her shoulders, which probably should have gone into the travois that he and Yathi were pulling.

Krele saw Eku smiling, despite the labor.

Clicked, though she already had his attention and said, “Must have been a good throw.”

Eku’s smile broadened.

“I knew the turaco had only one direction to rise from the branch, so I threw where it would leap.”

“You made Inka happy. The feathers are bright red. Very beautiful, like she is, yes?”

Yathi moaned loudly and said, “Inka is *sooo* beautiful.”

Eku said nothing, but the darkening wave across his face was all too apparent.

Krele grinned, but hid it, knowing Eku didn’t understand why he blushed; though, her sweet child would, soon enough.

The entire tribe hiked as one group, something that rarely happened.

Eku was thrilled to see everyone together, especially his father, but wondered: the more experienced hunters normally advanced well ahead, to establish a safe path.

Why weren’t they doing that now?