

Chapter 7

Flying Monkeys

The forest in which the Mantel thrived was once a vast area of sand dunes built up over millennia along an ancient coastline.

Deep time blanketed the dunes with rich soil and vegetation.

The gently rolling hills now accommodate a network of freshwater streams and ponds.

Three days of steady hiking brought the Abantu to the area of land that the Mantel were most familiar with.

Supplies low, they stopped at a large and well stocked pond to replenish, along a nice length of flat and dry shoreline.

The Mantel watched in awe as the Abantu cleared small trees and undergrowth with impressive efficiency.

The Mantel made excellent knives and axes of bone and wood, but quartzite was difficult to find in the forested regions where they lived.

The Abantu had an abundance of quartzite axes, as well as knives and spears bladed by the unmatched hardness and sharpness of *isipo-gazi*.

Through apprenticeship and training, an *izik-kosa* learned to knap and flake stone to a specific purpose: extended and narrow killing blades for the javelins and *ula-konto*; assorted, smaller blades for knives and sewing tools; as well as other types of blades that required ultra-hardness, such as for drilling holes, scraping mussels from rock or removing fur from hide.

Tiuti spent a lifetime improving the craft of the *izik-kosa*, improving techniques of carving wood, grinding bone, using both to craft handles that fit each blade to its purpose.

The Mantle hooted with pleasure when the *izik-kosa* used long knives and axes to cut away brush in a fraction of the time it would have taken them with their own tools.

Upon their arrival, numerous wenya lay on the shoreline, basking under Ulanga's fire, but as *waka-waka* humans descended, chopping trees and clearing brush, they slithered into the water; however, a single, mighty beast refused to budge.

Forcing the *izik-kosa* to halt cutting saplings and brush.

Everyone else stopped what they were doing.

The tribe gathered down the shoreline at a safe distance.

Eku and Yathi scrambled to get as close to the action as possible.

Yathi said with a voice that bespoke awe, "That is not a wenya. That is *ir-hamka*!"

“For sure,” Eku said.

“The biggest in the world,” Yathi breathed.

The shoreline was long and sloped gradually.

The people had an unobstructed view.

Dark and menacing, the massive beast crouched on dark soil covered by a scattering of fallen leaves.

Eku guessed the wenya’s full length was greater than three adults lying head to foot.

Thick in the middle, belly bulging out from both sides; yet, such a wenya would propel itself quickly forward on powerful legs thick as a human torso, all four limbs splayed-out lizard-like, the huge black talons half sunken into the mud.

The massive tail curled into a half circle and was plated with scales like dark javelin blades the entire length.

The mouth was longer than Eku was tall and lay half open to display rows of fangs.

“Those teeth are longer than my fingers,” Yathi whispered, leaning into Eku.

The two had wrapped themselves behind the trunk of a sycamore, as close as they had been allowed.

Watching in awe from a safe distance.

Eku knew those jaws would snap the spine of a lion.

The wenya before them could drag a full grown buffalo into deeper water and simply drown it.

The pond’s undisputed ruler.

No doubt infuriated by whatever inspired the mass exodus of its smaller brethren.

Whoever trespassed would be greeted by wrath.

As of yet, the weak eyes of the giant did not perceive waka-waka humans lurking under the cover of the trees.

But the beast knew they were there.

Hissing loudly, a sound not unlike Ulayo at her angriest, the giant wenya waited for the tiny humans.

Twitching the tip of a tail that would fracture legs.

Eku felt pride and fear when his father and Nibamaz led a group of Abantu hunters, all of whom carried javelins.

They approached from the shoreline opposite where the rest of the tribe was gathered.

They split into groups and encircled the beast.

Despite such size, the wenya quickly turned one way and then another.

Giant claws slung gobs of mud and the mighty tail gouged the soil.

Hissing with its mouth wide open so that when it turned their way, Eku could see past the teeth and yellowish mouth to the dark oval of its throat.

The hunters danced around the wenya, closer, but still out of range for a javelin thrust.

They were in no hurry.

Eku recognized the tactics.

The wenya was huge and powerful, but only had two eyes at the end of a very long body.

The hunters coaxed the beast further away from the water.

Dancing around on all sides now.

Already weary, the giant wenya lunged less frequently.

The tail no longer plowed mud.

The hunters, however, were only getting warmed up.

They attacked with precision and speed.

The head and back and tail of the wenya was covered by impenetrable armor, but there were vulnerable spots for the long and deadly javelins.

Diminutive compared to such a mighty beast, the hunters clicked back and forth and began striking from one direction and then the other, two-handed javelin thrusts with their full body weight behind, stabbing deep into soft spots near the leg joints and belly.

The wenya snapped its jaws with incredible speed and power, lunging first in one direction, then the other.

Thrashing the huge tail in a way that made Eku think of trees toppling.

Onlookers cried out in fear.

But Eku watched with eyes wide open, not daring to blink.

The Abantu hunters had thoroughly confused the beast.

While one hunter occupied the tunnel of its forward vision, the other hunters circled for opportunities and delivered penetrating stabs.

The wenya lunged one way and the hunters struck from the other.

The beast violently twisted back at its attacker, tail flailing, sending mud flying, only to have the hunter skip out of range while another threw his full body weight behind a spear thrust.

The relentless attack continued until the exhausted wenya gushed blood.

The dark mud became streaked with crimson.

A final series of stabbings sent the beast plowing into the shallows, leaving foamy water tinged with red.

The beast struggled valiantly to reach deeper water, only to flip over and die, exposing a pale, striated belly, blood swirling.

Eku and Yathi charged forward to be among those who got to pull the giant carcass back to shore.

The next morning Eku rose early, as always.

Crept from his family's rounded shelter of saplings and brush.

Wearing only his loincloth and carrying his *ula-konto*.

Ulanga remained low in the sky, obscured behind the hill on the opposite side of the pond.

Though early, the air was warm and moist.

Eku tramped across trampled leaves and twigs, wet and soft under his feet, through the food preparation area, in front of the water.

Dark cones were set against the shimmer of the pond.

Like teepees made of long sticks and covered by fat palm leaves, the cones served as smoke traps for the thinly sliced flesh curing within.

Next to the smokers, ash-filled fire pits also sent smoky tendrils wafting upward, like the tentacles of an upside down jellyfish.

Imagining himself as a hunter patrolling the camp, Eku paced to the edge of the water, *ula-konto* held low at his right side, wary of any wenya silly enough to return where there were so many Abantu.

There were none.

The tribe was safe.

The water was pristine and placid and reflected the brightening sky.

The quiet of morning was Eku's favorite time to practice *ibe-bonakalio*.

He paced the shoreline, leaving the encampment behind.

Entered the shadows.

One step at a time.

Set the inner foot pad down ever so delicately, roll to the outside pad and lower the heel.

His father and Tiuti both said that *ibe-bonakalio* was just a place to seek.

Not actually attainable.

Tiuti liked to say that true *ibe-bonakalio* was where Umawa and Uwama meet not as rivals or lovers, as the Abantu are prone to see them, but as equals, two sides of a whole that made life possible.

Kaleni taught Eku how to keep his movements precise.

How to remain hidden.

Discern every stalk of grass.

Check every leaf.

Observe each crawling insect.

A hunter captured what was vital from a variety of inputs, so concentration must never wane.

“The world and your mind, they are separate,” Kaleni told him. “One you can control. The other you cannot. Learn to control your mind to best understand what Uwama has to offer.”

Even as a tiny child, Kaleni began bringing Eku into the bush for lessons.

Taught him to observe a line of grass, using his eyes to simply soak in everything while his mind parsed the details, singling out the tuft of springhair fur amongst individual stalks.

Separating a crouching duiker from branches and roots.

Eku knew that plants and insects and beasts all follow a sequence.

Patterns of growth.

Patterns of travel.

The patterns of grasses were circles or zig-zagging lines.

No matter how chaotic at first glance, trees and bushes followed predictable patterns that when interrupted, reveal a crouching predator.

Or hidden prey.

A hunter unleashed the full power of eyes and ears and nose, but the mind put them all together.

Eku separated individual sounds from the cacophony.

Took note of where cricket and cicada songs came from ... Where they did not.

Bird calls were common chatter, squabbles or the warning of a four-legged predator.

Or perhaps the reaction to a strange, two-legged beast prowling below.

The continued, soft cooing of doves in the branches above gave Eku some degree of satisfaction.

At least for the birds, he was *ibe-bonakalio*.

Human noses, being weak, needed assistance and Eku used his eyes to put his nostrils where it was best to capture scents: fresh dung, fresh urine, the fresh musk a plant eater's hoof left in the mud.

On the northern end of the camp, the bank leveled and the water was shallow, bristling with water grass and dotted with white flowering lily pads.

The shoreside trees offered sparse leaf cover at this period of *sika-yaka*, mostly yellowed and browned; though, all branches ended in clusters of twigs lumpy with soon-to-burst buds.

Eku gracefully wound around tree trunks and stepped on roots.

Moved with serpentine grace below pale boughs that radiated out along the shoreline.

The harsh cry of a grey ibis burst the silence.

The call of such a bird carried far and signaled an alert hunter that water was near.

Eku crept silently across damp leaves to the shoreline to spot the dark body hunched over.

Stalking, like he was.

The big bird prowled a muddy shore lined with swamp grass, currently lacking thistles, standing straight and light brown and listless.

As though to make up for the abrasive call of the ibis came the musical chatter of yellow canaries.

The flock flitted along pond-side branches.

Forced to move away from the shoreline to remain unseen, Eku walked upright through mature forest, then re-approached the shoreline to peer through branches with only a scattering of narrow leaves, yellowed and browned.

In the shallow inlet before him were two contrasting storks.

Both immobile.

No doubt tolerating each others' presence because they sought different prey.

The closer bird stood on stately, pink legs, the primary feathers of the wings light pink, similar to a flamingo. A knife-like yellow beak led to dark eyes that missed nothing.

The second stork was of a similar size and shape, but with black wings and a white breast. An extended beak of bright orange and black bands matched the same pattern on its long legs.

Eku fervently wished he could use his *ula-konto*.

The angle of Ulanga and his opportune approach made his chance for a successful throw excellent.

He could present the feathers to his mother or Yat or Aunt Shona.

The meat is always useful for stew.

And such legs are brilliant for sinew; though, it would be delicate to remove and would require the skills of an *izik-kosa*, using a precision blade of *isipo-gazi*.

The feet and skull could be cleaned and washed and dried and then bartered as decorations ... But only if they were in a real village.

Besides, until Eku wore an eagle talon, hunting such birds remained the decision of an adult.

Not that that mattered now, anyway.

Because both birds were aware that *something* hovered nearby.

Each of their profiles had an eye focused on Eku's exact location.

The slightest move and they would be gone.

Eku whispered, "Your minds have warned you that I am here, but your eyes do not see me."

He faded into the shadows and continued.

Crept under the drooping branches of silver willow to see yellow billed ducks, the wing feathers brown with white-tips.

Scooting in circular patterns through the lily pads

Eku found their soft quacking comforting.

He settled into a crouch in the tall grass with a clear view of the water.

A kingfisher shot across a beam of sunlight slanted over the opposite treeline, defending its territory from the ducks with a barrage of high-pitched, insect-like chirps, lazy wings a furious blur, the bird's aggression belying its diminutive stature.

The ducks drifted slowly the other way.

Pleasing Eku came the melodic call of the fish eagle.

His hand went to his chest when he saw a circling pair in the lazy oval above the pond.

White crown, throat and tail, everything else dark brown, except the wicked beak and massive, curved talons of yellow.

Eku giggled in his mind at the tiny songbird, chasing after the pair.

A fish eagle only killed what was necessary. Hunting only for itself and its mate and the single offspring they would rear at the start of *lobo-yaka*.

So they let little birds chase them; after all, this plucky fellow was probably trying to impress a mate or guard its territory.

To turn and attack would be ... Beneath the fish eagle.

Spellbound, Eku watched the huge birds turn gracefully, when suddenly, one of the eagles plummeted.

Powerful wings accelerated the raptor down and across the water, mighty taloned claws slashing the surface to emerge with a plump catfish wriggling helplessly, screeching as it headed for the shoreline canopy, its mate gliding behind.

For the Abantu, such a large body of freshwater was a treasure and the tribe enjoyed its time replenishing.

Eku sat with Yathi, uncle Lume and several other *izik-kosa*, cutting rigid, finger-thick bamboo to equal lengths, then used vines to weave funnel-shaped traps, baited and set along the shore at nightfall; sure to be full of catfish the next day.

In the meantime, hunters disappeared into the forest to return with impala.

Adults and children prowled the shoreline, casting lines with fishbone hooks, baited with frogs or insects.

Mounds of tilapia grew alongside the flayed carcass of the monstrous wenya, already in the process of butchering.

The young people scavenged *layit-umlilo*, but thanks to yesterday's hard work, it wasn't long before all smokers and fire pits had full beds of glowing coals, with burnable fuel stacked in reserve.

Chores were done until Yat gathered Eku and Yathi for a late-in-the-day harvest.

They followed the mothers and other young people to the same area of the pond that Eku explored that morning.

Ulanga had travelled to the other side of the pond, allowing Eku to see more clearly bushes of *sek-unda* grew next to where he watched the splendidly feathered waders. Chagrined to realize that, enamored by the birds, he missed the chance to be first to discover the fruit.

When exploring, a hunter was required to pay attention to everything that was valuable to the tribe.

And Eku had to admit he liked being the first to make discoveries.

Sek-unda was simply a phrase used to designate a variety of fruits and plants the Abantu enjoyed eating.

The *sek-unda* here grew large, grooved fruits that sprouted from the node of each branch grown from the main shoot.

When green, Eku knew this particular *sek-unda* was bitter and inedible, but once ripened and red, became tasty, especially after boiling.

He and Yathi followed Yat, pinching stems and filling satchels.

They dumped their haul into a communal basket and joined Tar and Maz, Sisi and Kat, and Dokuk, Odi and Goguk wading through shallows, pulling up clumps of thick sedge grass and using sharp cutters to remove the corms.

The people headed back to camp under a full load.

Despite a long and busy day, Eku and Yathi remained awake well into the night as the tribe enjoyed its first great feast together.

The next morning, Eku exited his familial shelter and repeated his path across the center of camp.

Conical smokers spouted white smoke and offered smells of cured flesh.

He moved purposefully along the water, heading for the same area of the pond as the previous morning, only to find Tiuti and the Mantel Umthi were there ahead of him.

Tiuti wore a brown sealskin vest and stood barefoot in a muddied area trampled from yesterday's harvest.

Umthi, wearing only a loincloth, stood a short distance in front of Tiuti, ankle deep in the shallows. Eku was always intrigued to see Umthi, the revered scout who led the lead group with his father and Nibamaz.

Tiuti excitedly beckoned Eku with one hand, the other pointing at Umthi, who was crouched in a particular manner.

As Eku got close, he saw that Umthi used one hand to grasp a curved stick, the thickness of a spear, but pulled into a bow shape by a taut string tied to either end.

His other hand held a tiny spear, long and reed thin.

Umthi had a concentrated look on his face.

Staring at something in the water.

Eku approached silently and stopped next to Tiuti.

Glanced up at the old master, who remained engrossed by whatever Umthi was doing.

The esteemed Mantel hunter held the bowed stick in front of his body, fingers wrapped at the center like a fist.

The bowed stick was almost the length of an *ula-konto*, but not as hefty and flexible, having been bent into shape by the tied string.

Tiuti whispered, "Watch carefully Eku, this is a most wondrous device!"

Perplexed, Eku did his best to follow.

Umthi stood still, then moved with practiced precision.

He adjusted the bowed stick so it was on a horizontal plane and laid the tiny spear across the thicker middle, against his clenched hand, so the pointy end stuck out ahead.

He then deftly moved his fingers and appeared to attach the butt end of the tiny spear to the string.

Then, in another deft move of the fingers, drew both the string and tiny spear back, increasing the curve of the bowed stick to a half circle.

Umthi leaned forward and titled the bowed device vertically, so the end of the tiny spear poised atop the clenched fist gripping the curved bow.

Umthi appeared to sight down the length of the tiny spear and released the string.

The result was amazing!

With the release of the string, the bowed stick snapped back to its original position while the tiny spear shot forward faster than Eku's eyes could follow, piercing the water with a distinct plunking.

Tiuti yelped and raised his arms and looked at Eku, "Wonderful, yes?"

With a wide grin, Eku could only nod and watch in amazement as Umthi stepped forward to retrieve the tiny spear, smiling as he lifted it from the water with a fat catfish wriggling from the end.

“The Mantel use this weapon for fish and ducks,” Tiuti said. “They are not accurate from a distance, but very effective along the water.”

“It flew so fast,” Eku said.

Umthi waded to shore, raised the stringed bow in one hand, the other with the tiny spear and catfish, now gone limp.

“*Guka-ombe*,” he said.

The tribe never hurried, but progressed steadily.

The Mantel, like the Abantu, sent forth only the strongest adults; those who did have children, none were younger than Kolo, who was the same age as Eku.

Moving comfortably and well-fed through broadleaf forest, the tribe reached the uppermost reach of the Mantel home range, where the trees began to mingle with the tallest bamboo the Abantu had ever seen.

While making camp, Kolo told his new friends that he had a special treat for them to sneak away and see first thing in the morning.

“Not as dangerous as last time,” he said, still sounding apologetic. “Mantel do this many times. It is one of our favorite places. I used to sneak away with my friends in the village.”

“What is it,” Goguk begged. “What are we going to see?”

Kolo shook his head.

“You have to tell us something,” Yathi implored.

Kolo smiled slyly and said, “I take you to where the monkeys can fly.”

The following morning, Kolo, Eku, Yathi, Goguk, Dokuk and Yat—Goguk having told Dokuk what they were doing (and then Dokuk secretly invited Yat to come along)—slipped into the towering bamboo.

The young people moved cautiously, the canopy well above their heads, but dense so that nothing else grew from the ground.

The culms were far enough apart for slender humans to wind their way through.

The dirt was soft, but prickly from a carpet of the fallen, slender leaves.

Exiting the bamboo, the young Abantu were awed by the return of giant jungle trees; though, not quite as enormous or thickly canopied as those of the swamplands.

Ulanga’s first fire filtered through in slanted beams.

The six young people came to a stop, surrounded by emerald greenery.

“This is a good spot,” Kolo said, peering upward.

Nervous, Eku asked, “Do they look like the laza monkeys?”

“No. These are special monkeys.”

The jungle was always a noisy place and mornings were dominated by birds.

Calls came from every direction: sly whistles, cheerful chirps and harsh screeches.

The Abantu instinctively moved closer, shoulders and elbows touching, heads tilted up, staring uneasily through a tangle of vines and branches.

Early morning moisture sent droplets shining through the narrow beams of light.

There was movement, high above.

Rustlings of branches.

Sounds, high pitched.

Dokuk and Eku each carried an *ula-konto* and moved in front of the others.

A monkey-like hoot and then another.

Glimpses of black and white.

“They have long hair,” Yat exclaimed. “Like a black and white weasel, but with such long arms and long legs!”

“I hope they are not angry all the time, like the laza ones,” Yathi said, peering uneasily upward.

“No,” Kolo said. “Flying monkeys like to have fun.”

The monkeys crept downward, almost like crabs, Eku thought, face first, walking upside down on four legs toward the humans.

Though excited to observe an entirely new creature, Eku watched with caution.

The monkeys were slightly larger than a baboon, with long and narrow bodies, but small heads with black faces and black eyes.

In sharp contrast, thick white hair fell from prolonged arms and legs, making Eku think they were like an enormous spider with the coloring of a zebra.

More monkeys crept lower.

From opposing trees, two monkeys launched spectacular leaps across the mid canopy, passing each other close enough to touch, the white fur on their limbs flying out like wings as they soared between opposing trunks.

The Abantu murmured in amazement.

Eku had never seen a monkey leap so far.

They were built for the trees the same way the leaping gazelles were built for the savannah.

Kolo cupped hands to mouth and made a hooting sound, Dokuk and Yat simultaneously imploring, “What?”

“They like to put on a show.”

All six began hooting and the monkeys instantly reacted, using all four limbs to elastically propel themselves.

The monkeys made no vocal sounds and moved quickly through the branches.

The slap of their palms on a thick branch was like a clap.

When several monkeys flew and landed at the same time, the rustlings sounded like gentle rain.

The young Abantu hooted louder and *waka-waka* monkeys descended to the lower canopy, thrilling the young Abantu with acrobatic prowess.

The monkeys spun around branches.

Leaped and twisted with unmatched agility.

Eku had never seen such power combined with speed and size.

Suddenly, as one, the monkeys scampered back to the upper reaches of the trees, vanishing within a verdant vacuum.

“Are they gone?” Gokuk asked, sounding disappointed.

“No, this is the best part,” Kolo said.

A black and white monkey came plummeting out of the greenery, all four limbs splayed out, screaming shrilly, descending at a terrifying speed toward the youths, Yathi and Gokuk shrieking; all of them, but Kolo throwing up their arms in defense.

But even in complete freefall, the monkey easily snatched a branch, swinging low to almost touch the top of Kolo’s head, before the branch sprang upward, the monkey catapulting back into the mid-level canopy.

Everyone began hooting with enthusiasm and it was raining monkeys: slender, graceful black figures with long white fur flying out like wings, performing death-defying plummets from the upper canopy, somehow able to grab the perfectly sized branch or vine to swing close to the laughing Abantu before slingshotting back up.

That night, Eku dreamt of flying monkeys.