

Chapter 9

A Tree Felling Axe

A momentous event was in the making.

A host of people moved to the upriver side of the encampment to the edge of the forest, Eku and Yathi making sure they were at the forefront, to be sure they saw all the action.

Amongst the Mantel were those with skills similar to an *izik-kosa*. Who knew how to make the dugouts used at the previous crossing.

The special Mantel builders selected two trees, suitably close to the water, growing on an incline so the base of the trunks naturally curved before growing straight up for a sufficient height.

Curious, Eku watched as the entire Mantel tribe gathered next to the two trees.

An animated conversation began, but only in the Mantel language.

“What are they doing,” Yathi kept repeating.

Because the Mantel were talking so fast—and many at the same time, Eku had no idea what was going on, but watched closely.

There was a lot of gesticulating.

Voices were raised.

Sometimes loudly.

Arguing, no doubt, but with a ritualistic feel, as though the entire population had to be involved in a decision to choose the trees recommended by the builders in the first place.

“Maybe that is like one of their tribal councils,” Eku guessed.

Yathi clicked neutral, and said, “I think they are wasting time.”

The Mantel group finally broke apart into smaller groups.

It seemed that everyone was pleased.

They all got something to say, Eku figured.

By now, all of the Abantu had wandered over.

The entire tribe was curious to see how the forest people made the amazing crafts upon which they crossed the previous river.

Several Mantel began chopping away at the base of the two trees, while others set up work platforms at the base of the incline, closer to the water.

Stones for sharpening were carried into place.

Eku paid close attention to those wielding the axes around the base of the trees.

The bark was soft and they cut through the outer layers quickly, a handbreadth deep the entire circumference.

The trees were very broad.

Mantel stepped onto the incline to take turns chopping away at each tree, creating a wedge on the side of each tree facing the incline.

The sharp thwack of rock on wood echoed.

The Mantel had excellent axes, having enough quartzite to knap quality, adze-shaped heads, which they bound and glued to a short haft.

The axes were effective for hacking away chunks of wood, but really, no more than a well balanced club with a cutting edge.

While the Mantel would do the actual carving of the dugout, the Abantu begged for the honor to finish cutting down the trees.

Once the Mantel were satisfied with the wedges cut into each trunk, they happily relinquished the remaining brute labor to the Abantu.

The Abantu also made axes of quartzite.

There was no need to waste precious *isipo-igazi* on tools used for blunt force chopping.

But, where the Mantel struggled to find good stone, the *izik-kosa* had a wealth of quarries to draw from on the southern shores.

They had learned to use vices and hammers to groove and expertly shape the knapped heads.

Tiuti invented chisels of *isipo-igazi*, hard enough to fine-tune blades of quartzite.

He created drills using *isipo-igazi* that bored holes cleanly through an axe head of quartzite, making ever-more effective ways to attach larger blades to tools and weapons.

The Mantel had been awed by the precision blades of *isipo-igazi*, and equally so when they first laid eyes on the *izik-kosa* with their tree-felling axes.

As for the Abantu, they simply loved a contest.

The hunters quickly challenged the *izik-kosa* over who could cut down a tree the fastest.

Four of the special, tree-felling axes were brought forth and teams selected.

Yathi grinned ear to ear when his big brother Kozik stepped forward with Ingwabi, his ikanabe.

Kozik was one of the tallest in the tribe with broad shoulders and powerful legs.

Ingwabi was the eldest child of Nibamaz and supremely capable, like his father.

Teaming up to attack the other tree were Azik and Kizma, also ikabane and two of the tribe's strongest young *izik-kosa*.

Dokuk leaned over Eku and Yathi's shoulders to whisper, "Azik and Kizma do not have a chance."

The trees grew halfway up a gentle slope and all brush around the base had been cleared.

The people gathered to either side of the fall area, while others gathered up the incline and around the back to form a circle around the contestants and their respective trees.

Burly Yathi took command, leading Eku, Goguk and Kolo through a group of young people to an optimal viewpoint, partway up the incline and as close to the trees as possible.

Eku watched eagerly as Kozik and Ingwabi swung necklaces with a single talon around their backs, while Azik and Kizma did the same with their pendants of carved wood and bone.

The first to begin swinging their axe stepped into place next to their respective tree.

One of the Mantel craftsmen let out a hoot and the contest began.

The Abantu swung their long tree-felling axes and the wood chips flew.

Kozik and Ingwabi and Azik and Kizma switched positions.

Each member of each team furiously whacked away at their respective tree before resting.

Though the *izik-kosa* were more familiar with an ax and applied more precise cuts, they fell behind, mostly due to the sheer might of Kozik.

It was clear the *izik-kosa* were overmatched, when a shout came from the top of the incline.

"Out of the way," a stern voice commanded.

The contest momentarily halted.

The crowd parted and Lume lumbered through like a bull elephant making its way to a watering hole.

Yathi's father was known for two things: being Tiuti's most highly skilled *izik-kosa*, and for his size.

Lume loved to eat.

A lot.

Yathi's father's capacity to put food into his belly was legendary across the southern shores.

And such a belly might have been cumbersome, were it not set between boulder-like shoulders and tree trunk legs.

Even Lume's hands were large, like seal flippers, fingers thick and powerful from a lifetime of working rock and bone.

"My turn," he said to Azik and Kizma.

He stepped down the incline, the large muscles of his legs bulging.

In one meaty hand was a magnificent, tree-felling axe.

The hardwood haft was perfectly straight and smooth to a wedge-shaped head.

The axe head was wide, thick on one side and tapered gradually to a knife-sharp edge.

The thick head had been drilled through the center by Tiuti, allowing Lume to use resin-glue and sinew to permanently seal the stone to haft.

A truly fearsome and magnificent weapon.

Nevertheless, Kozik grinned.

He motioned with his tree-felling axe, as though to say, look how much deeper me and Ingwabi have cut.

Said confidently to his father, "You cannot catch up."

"We shall see," Lume answered.

The contest began again with great fervor and the crowd rhythmically clapped and shouted.

Kozik and Ingwabi were young and strong and proud and vigorously attacked their tree.

Everyone knew it would fall shortly.

In Lume's massive hands, the beautifully crafted ax was something to behold.

His huge belly bounced and roiled and wood chips flew in chunks.

The crowd murmured in amazement, then began cheering for their favorite as Lume firmly anchored his feet and whirled the ax faster.

Ekü could not believe the sound the ax head began to make when striking wood, each blow slamming hard with a visceral crack, as though the entire tree was shocked by the impact.

Kozik and Ingwabi each took frantic turns, their young muscles striated and straining, but normally placid Lume was possessed by a demon, the ax spinning over his head, first from one direction than the other, wood chunks flying in all directions, slivers plastered against his shaking belly.

Lume surpassed the hunters and soon the tree groaned and creaked and after a last, wicked blow, fell downward, the crash drowned by the roar of the crowd.

Shortly after, Kozik delivered a final blow to the hunters' tree and the crowd cheered again.

Sweating profusely and covered with slivers of wood, Lume hugged his powerful, but still young son and pulled him toward the river.

"I'm going with them," Yathi bellowed and tore off to squeeze himself between his big brother and giant father, the three of them leading a large group for a swim.

Ekü grinned up at Tiuti.

The two of them stayed to watch the Mantel carvers.

Watching as the Mantle attacked each tree, stripping bark and smoothing knots.

Other *izik-kosa* grabbed their own tree-felling axes and took turns chopping through the thick trunk where the first branches began.

After the brush was cleared, each end of the giant log was chopped and scraped to a tapered point.

A crowd gathered once more to push and roll the big logs down the remainder of the incline to the platforms by the water, where the more precise carving would take place.

Eku noted the tools the Mantel would use for the precision carving had been modified by Tiuti with blades of *isipo-gazi*.

He spent the following days with the old master, the two of them learning everything they could about how the dugouts took proper form.

This is a good night, Eku thought.

Darkness fell some time ago, but the entire tribe was awake and active, excited for the next day and the crossing of the river.

The air was warm, but clear, more like early *lobo-yaka*, before the heavy rains.

Eku sat with Yathi, Kolo and Goguk at the edge of a flat rock, feet dangled, toes just above the water.

The bellies of the young males were full; they were content, enjoying the atmosphere of a mysterious land.

Yanga had yet to rise and a sweep of stars speckled the night sky sable to plum; the flat plane of the water reflected inky black with a silver shimmer; in the void between, invisible bats sang high-pitched songs in the pursuit of infinite insects.

Eku looked up at a vast sprawl of celestial bodies so vivid he wanted to jump up and grab one.

The cough of a leopard echoed across the water and he lowered his gaze earthbound.

"I like it here," he said.

"Me too," Yathi agreed.

"I like home better," Goguk said.

"I want to see the land of legend," Kolo said.

"Me too," Eku agreed.

"You miss home?" Kolo asked Goguk.

The two of them were spending much free time together, many of the Abantu hoping that Goguk might have found a new ikanabe.

"It was nice where we lived. I like eating mussels. They are my favorite."

Yathi clicked rapidly, added a grunt and quipped, “I want to go back to the other river, with the little palm trees.”

“You will end up fat like a vubu,” Kolo said. Giggled, adding, “When they get mad at each other, they shit and use their tail to fling it in all directions.”

Yathi said, “I’m going to try that the next time we have to do chores.”

The others laughed and made appropriate sounds of disgust.

Once the chuckling subsided, Kolo made a face and said with emphasis, “Vubu are horrible and disgusting. Never drink water near a pond where they are.”

“For sure,” Yathi said.

Kolo leaned close.

Nose to nose, the night was bright enough for them to see each other’s features.

“Why are your eyes so?”

“Laza eyes,” Yathi said.

“Laza?”

“My mother says laza eyes are a gift from Uwama, for taking her islands back. She gave my ancestors’ eyes the color of her water.”

Yathi opened his eyes wide and Kolo peered closer.

Solemn, he said, “I have never seen Uwama.”

The Abantu males chimed, “Never!”

Kolo leaned back, saying, “We do not travel beyond the mangroves.”

Yathi said, “My father says our ancestors lived on islands. They had ipyane. Probably like yours. We fished and speared seals.

“But then Uwama raised her waters and we took ipyane to Umawa and became Abantu. But that was a long time ago. During the terrible times.”

Kolo said, “That is a shared *isipo-bali*. When ash fell from the sky and even the trees died.”

Eku blurted, “Probably not the jungle trees.”

Goguk exclaimed, “Have the jungle trees been here forever? Like the rivers?”

“Rivers are forever, but jungle trees die,” Kolo said matter of factly. “They fall and then bamboo grows.”

“But jungle trees are very old, for sure,” Eku said.

“Very old,” Kolo agreed. “Like Tiuti.”

There was a sound and they all turned to look: Yat and Dokuk settled on a rise of grassy earth, a bit away from the younger children.

"I cannot wait to ride tomorrow," Goguk announced.

"You are lucky," Yathi said, with envy.

"I want to swim," Eku offered, knowing he sounded braver than he felt.

"Not me," Yathi answered, though Eku knew he was an excellent swimmer. "I would rather ride. The last part is too far."

Kolo said, "We are many together. It is safe. Besides, this river is not good for vubu. They like mud and ponds.

"And wenya, if there are big ones, the hunters on the dugouts will stop them."

The tribe crossed en masse, as the wildebeest did, cutting across the river as a river themselves.

The river was wide but calm, the current negligible.

The presence of so many able bodies was reassuring for the weaker swimmers, especially the Mantel, who, ironically, having lived their entire lives along ponds and streams, rarely swam; whereas, the Abantu were raised diving for shellfish.

Immediately before them lay a tame expanse of riffles.

Eku and the other young people needed only to wade or float from small island to small island, some thicketed with brush, others just rock covered shoals.

The first, real swim began where the center channel deepened, but was not far.

Eku swam easily across with *waka-waka* others.

He and Yathi walked gingerly across more rocky shallows, where the land rose again to an island large and dry enough to support a partial ecosystem, with monkeys in the trees and evidence of duiker and pig.

Eku and Yathi followed Yat and Tar and Maz and the other young people through shoreline tangles to find an open area under the tall trees, where they waited until the entire tribe arrived.

The two dugouts transported supplies and gave rides to those who could not swim safely.

Through the trees, Eku could see from one side of the island to the other, as well as one side of the river to the other.

So far they had crossed about half the river with little difficulty, but the remaining portion was wide open.

No more islands meant swimming the entire distance.

Far, even for an Abantu.

While the rest of the tribe prepared, Eku watched his father and the lead hunters swim the remaining distance, while the dugouts transported javelins, *ula-konto* and other supplies.

Soon after, Eku, Yathi and Yat set out with the rest of the tribe, swimming steadily, the dugouts roaming back and forth, watching for wenya and other dangers, and giving rides to those not swimming.

At times, the current seemed to pull, especially where the temperature varied with a cold spot, and Eku scissor-kicked to maintain course.

Yat and Yathi were strong swimmers and stayed close, offering encouragement.

At one point, Goguk passed on one of the dugouts, sitting with Doagu and another pregnant passenger, hollering gleefully.

Lume sat at the front, huge shoulders straight, making him look lopsided even for the large dugout, refusing to relinquish the paddling duties to anyone else no matter how many trips across.

Beyond the two rivers, the land returned to savannah, pockmarked by trees and bush, level as far as the eye can see.

After conferring with the mothers, Kaleni and Nibamaz charted a course to the right of north, where the people spent several days crossing a vast and flat grassland, which led to mangroves.

The hunters found a gently moving stream and the tribe moved hunched over, knee-deep in water that tunneled beneath interwoven branches.

Amidst a parade of people, Eku and Yathi worked their way up to the front, eventually crouching and then floating beneath a ceiling of twigs and green leaves that abruptly ended at laza sky.

Once out from the mangroves, the lead Abantu stood in warm water up to their knees.

Screaming exuberantly, Eku and Yathi joined the surge in front of them, skipping across the shallow estuary, splashing through a weaving of ankle-high grass to—joy of joys—a sandy beach.

Eku and Yathi bound onto the sand, like all the Abantu, wearing goofy smiles.

The Mantel came slowly after, sharing looks of awe.

Before them, a small and narrow beach of yellow-brown sand and then, rolling waves of green-gray crested with foamy white caps.

A few crawling crabs.

Bird calls from the mangroves.

Before them, in all her majesty: Uwama.

There were soft murmurs.

A few tears.

Words cannot suffice.

Nevertheless, Kolo, coming up to stand beside Eku and Yathi, tried, saying, “She is *soooo* big.”

Yat stepped next to them and said, “Uwama carries the world.”

“I missed her,” Yathi said.

“Me too,” Dokuk and Goguk chimed, having joined them.

Kolo said in the same, reverent voice, “How far does she go?”

“Forever,” Goguk said.

“And then back again,” Yat added.

Eku watched his sister purse her lips the way she did, when thoughtful.

Yat added, “There are songs of Uwama’s caress turning Umawa one way or the other, but my father thinks Umawa does not turn around at all, and that the land goes on very far, like the salted water of Uwama does, in every direction.”

Eku said, “He taught us how to tell.”

Gazed up to find Ulanga and checked his shadow.

Oriented himself and pointed up the coastline, adding, “We find out by going that way.”

Kolo asked, “Does Tiuti think there is more land beyond the land of legend?”

Proudly, Yat said, “Him and my father.”

Goguk exclaimed, “How big is the world?”

“I do not know,” Eku said. “But we will be the ones who find out.”

For several days the tribe clung to the coast, wading around pockets of mangroves; swimming across the intertidal zones that separated one pristine beach from another; feasting on giant turtles, *ubhak-unda*, fish and octopi.

Three straight nights where all the Abantu had to do to make camp was roll out bed mats on the sand and gaze at the stars.

The rain, when it came, was gentle and they made crude shelters and slept together for warmth.

Finally, the mangroves thickened and the shoreline dropped.

The tribe found another stream to follow, this time against the current and out of the mangroves, to begin marching into the heart of Umawa.