

Chapter 12

Ichi-Bwana

The crossing of *shatsbeli-lambo* proved to be laborious, as expected, but manageable.

The *isiga-wila* floated nice and high above the water, though compared to a dugout, the craft was clunky and difficult to move.

The Abantu used the long poles to push off the river bottom.

Those poling stood on opposite sides faced away from each other, feet set wide, one person leaning to thrust his pole to the bottom and then push, while the other pulled his pole from the water and took a rest.

Tools and weapons lay in the center of the raft.

The third person on board was there to keep an eye out for trouble and make sure none of their supplies tumbled over the side.

Parts of the channel ran deeper than the poles could reach, in which case, swimmers clung to the raft and kicked, while those on top paddled best they could.

The Abantu were raised in the water and knew how to conserve their strength.

The pace was kept slow, not that they had a choice.

Swimmers used easy, side strokes or floated on their backs and kicked to maintain momentum.

Whenever someone needed a break, they pulled themselves onto the platform to take the extra spot and rest.

Halfway across, Ulanga had risen over the enormous river and their slow-moving disturbance was clearly visible to anyone or anything waiting on the other side.

As fate would have it, the Abantu's approach was curiously observed by people settled on the north side of the river.

A tribe that called themselves the Bwana.

There was much time for the Bwana to have discussions as the strangers maintained a methodical crossing.

No living Bwana had encountered humans from outside their tribe; though, there were stories from times of old that described visits from people who lived beyond the lands of *ichi-Bwana*, the great salt lake from which the Bwana believed they emerged into the world.

Watching the strangers' approach, the Bwana discussed what was known of the old stories.

There was little to go on.

Rumors and legends.

Superstitions.

Everyone tried to guess where the strangers might be from.

The Bwana had done enough travelling to learn the world was much more vast than any of them first imagined after leaving the salted lake.

Wherever the visitors were from, the more important question became, what was their intent?

Outcomes were discussed that ranged from bad to worse.

As well as good to sensational.

Eventually, the Bwana came to an agreement that, due to the number of individuals in or around the raft, the strangers were not a threat, considering the size of their own tribe.

Eventually, the entire Bwana population followed their esteemed leader to the shoreline, intent on welcoming the travelers.

The Bwana people were naturally friendly and curious; though, many adults carried spears and axes. Just in case.

In the Bwana language, the simplest translation of *ichi-Bwana* would be the lake of the people.

Or, the lake from which the Bwana people arose to live upon the world.

ichi-Bwana was a vast, inland sea fed by the overflow of an equally vast, freshwater inland delta, nourished by rivers that drain the immense, central African plateau.

North and east of the salt lake were healthy forests and savannah. Beyond the southern edge was thought to be arid wasteland, never recovered from the terrible times.

Like the Abantu and Mantel, the Bwana survived the terrible times due to an extraordinarily robust ecosystem.

After the terrible times came and went, the Bwana prospered to the north of the salt lake, as the Abantu thrived alongside the ocean, some 1,500 kilometers to the south.

Now the ancient lake was undergoing radical changes.

A series of small earthquakes climaxed with an awful, tectonic event.

Across a large, central portion of *ichi-Bwana*, the streams and rivers that delivered freshwater went dry.

Alterations to the landscape were visible from one seasonal cycle to the next.

Impossible to believe, at first, *ichi-Bwana* was shrinking.

The people of *ichi-Bwana* became nomadic, moving along a receding coastline while sending scouting parties north and east.

A generation passed and the inland sea, while enormous, was shallow and quickly lost much of its original size; worse, the dry and salted regions along the former coast turned to choking, eye-irritating dust when the dry season arrived.

Similar to the Abantu, the Bwana put together a tribe to pilgrimage eastward, strong and capable young couples, including families with adolescent children.

The new tribe was led by Uta, who was the first *nesibindi*, a recently conceived Bwana word to describe a new tribal role—that of a warrior.

Uta led the new tribe north and then east, tracing streams gone dry and grass covered, but showing a path that eventually led them to the upper reaches of the Zambezi.

The Bwana followed the great river eastward, descending newly formed, cavernous gorges and traversing magnificent waterfalls to reach fertile lowlands.

Since leaving their homeland, the Bwana remained nomadic, leisurely moving along the river; eventually, establishing camp for the upcoming wet season, precisely where the Abantu would cross.

When something is meant to be, something happens.

When the Abantu floated close to shore, they almost turned back.

Waka-waka strange humans waited on the riverbank!

Gathered on the opposite shore, maybe half as large in population as their tribe of Abantu and Mantel.

The hunters and *izik-kosa* quickly determined the gathering was meant to be peaceful ... They were obviously not trying to hide.

Just ... Waiting.

Feeling relatively safe for the moment, seeing how far out they were in the water, there was time to make a decision whether to turn back.

Hunters climbed onto the raft to sit or kneel, while others remained in the water and gathered around the sides, taking turns kicking to keep the drift in line with the opposite shore.

Discussing what to do.

Some wanted to press forward.

Others wanted to turn back.

A young hunter kept repeating, “They will be like hyenas!”

Kaleni, clinging to the side of the raft between Lume and Nibamaz, knew that hyenas were kind and helpful to those of their own pack, but killed members of other packs who strayed into their territory.

Keeping arms extended so his body was away from the raft, Kaleni made sure he avoided Lume and Nibamaz to either side as he kicked with his feet.

He did not know what to suggest.

Lume said, loudly in his ear, so that everyone else could hear, “They might be friendly, as we are, and the Mantel.”

There was more discussion.

Finally, seeing that both the Abantu of the ocean and the Mantel of the forest had only experienced human behavior where, in a harsh world, comradery greatly enhanced mutual survival, they voted to continue.

The extra hunters on the raft went back in the water and the poling resumed.

The Abantu eventually navigated into shallows where they could walk beside the raft.

A single male from the tribe massed on the river bank stepped forward, as though to greet them.

Not sure what to do, the bulk of the Abantu remained nervously in knee-deep water next to the raft, keeping one eye on the strangers, the other on their weapons while Kaleni and Nibamaz waded to shore.

Colorful, was Kaleni’s initial impression.

Glancing over the crowd, he saw excellent vests and wraps of soft pelts dyed colors he had never seen put to skins—red and orange and yellow.

The people had long hair and wore beaded necklaces and bracelets, similar in style to the Abantu.

Kaleni guessed they were dressed fancifully as a way to greet or impress him and the others.

He thought that was nice.

Respectful.

A good number of the adults held spears with blades of rock that looked like quartzite.

Others wore axes at the waist.

Maybe that was not so respectful, but the weapons were held or worn in a casual way.

Kaleni did note the blades were far from Abantu standards, though well shaped and certainly effective.

The tall male who stood at the front of the strange tribe, however, was most impressive.

He is a male lion, Kaleni thought.

Older than he and Nibamaz, taller and muscular.

Eyeing them with a look of wariness and confidence, but of welcoming curiosity ... Or at least that was Kaleni’s best guess.

He and Nibamaz wore only loincloths and were bedraggled and soft-skinned from so much time in the water.

They approached cautiously, exchanging soft clicks.

The Bwana male was even more imposing up close.

Very tall with very broad shoulders.

His forehead was wide and heavily lined as though by much worry.

He had a long and tapered nose, wide nostrils flaring out.

Narrow, down-turned eyes.

His skin was a deeper hue of brown than an Abantu and his hair was startlingly long—like a young Abantu female—braided tightly around his head and pulled back into a thick ponytail down the back.

The people behind him talked in sounds both foreign and familiar.

Everyone appeared nervous, but friendly.

Most of the people were smiling.

Curiously, Kaleni realized that all of the strangers wore zebra loincloths, the pelts soft and well cured, with the fur left on.

Unlike the others, the tall male before them wore an elaborate necklace of claws and fangs.

But what distinguished him most was a fearsome looking scar.

Finger thick, jaggedy pink welts began at the left eye and curved down the cheek to the corner of the mouth, as though a clawed beast tore into him long ago.

Casually, but in a way that suggested intimate familiarity, the spear rested vertically at his side, haft set on the shoreside mud, hand gripped at center, blade of quartzite rising to the steady gaze of someone who commanded respect.

The tall male raised his free hand to his heart, then used two fingers to point at the chest of Kaleni and Nibamaz, in a manner that showed admiration for their matching, full sets of eagle talons.

Kaleni and Nibamaz took a step closer.

Leaned to look upon the necklace of the tall Bwana male.

Most impressive, like he is, Kaleni thought.

Some of the teeth and talons were genuine, others beautifully carved from ivory.

Kaleni and Nibamaz glanced at each other and clicked rapidly, motioned to their necks and then to the necklace of the tall stranger and performed a short bow.

The tall Bwana male smiled, the scar giving him a half-sinister, half-friendly appearance.

He offered a similar bow, stepped back with a foot and gestured to the crowd behind him with an open palm, speaking in a language Kaleni did not know; though, the body language was clear: they were welcome to come ashore.

The Bwana village was located on the shoreline of a narrow plain spread between opposing ridgelines.

The riverbank sloped upward before leveling high enough so there was no floodplain.

The area would remain dry, even through the heaviest rains of *lobo-yaka*.

Kaleni stepped past the tall male to crest the riverbank.

Once able to see past the zebra-clad crowd, he was amazed at the sight of the Bwana's well established village, set just back from the water.

While crossing the river, even when standing on top of the raft, none of the Abantu had detected even the suggestion of a village, let alone the presence of so many people.

As the Abantu approached, the angle of the embankment did not allow them to see past the initial rise of land. All they saw was a muddied slope merged with green forest, the hazy hump of the lone mountain looming in the background.

After a bit of pantomiming between the two groups, the Abantu followed the Bwana in the upriver direction, along a well-worn path to a wide open expanse.

Underbrush was eradicated and the ground was dirt, hard packed from *waka-waka* bare feet.

Interspersed throughout the cleared area were the tall palms with the naked trunks, similar to the enormous trees they saw while crossing between the two rivers.

Not quite as towering, but still splendidly tall, provide shading while allowing plenty of light across an expansive, open area.

Drainage ditches zig-zagged through the trees toward the water.

The more open areas had fire pits ringed with stone.

Bamboo racks held zebra and antelope pelts stretched and tied for curing.

Bamboo frameworks were hung with strips of sinew and flesh.

The Abantu recognized much of what was around them, being nearly identical in structure to what they made themselves.

They began pointing at familiar objects and saying words in Abantu.

The Bwana recognized what they were doing and responded with their own words.

A natural kinship blossomed.

The Abantu gestured at fire pits and cured skins, speaking their language while the Bwana did the same.

They pointed at the curing hides and then to each other's loincloths and there was laughter and feelings of comradery as common items were recognized again and again.

There was no doubt their ancestors had once spoken.

A growing sense of excitement prevailed.

Young children prowled wide-eyed for the chance to see the strange beings from across the river.

The Abantu were shocked into silence when they realized what lay beyond the food preparation area.

Three magnificent huts rose side by side amidst a grouping of tall palms, by far the largest and most impressive dwellings any of them had ever seen.

Both the Abantu and Mantel were marvelously talented at the quick assemblage of huts and shelters, but they rarely bothered with any kind of dwelling larger than family sized.

As long as there was some combination of saplings and brush or palm and sturdy water reeds, or even just heavy swamp grass, in a short amount of time, any Abantu or Mantel could set up a dwelling that kept a family dry and warm.

During *lobo-yaka*, when the Abantu lived in large villages, they built bigger, more durable huts using saplings as ribbing and water reeds to weave into walls and roofing.

In the areas close to the beach best for feasting and celebrating, the *izik-kosa* constructed pavilions using wood poles and bamboo and palm leaves.

The Abantu and Mantel have never seen anything like the Bwana huts.

The appearance of the structures reminded Kaleni of the spiraling shells of snails that attached so fiercely to rocks.

Reeds of papyrus were threaded across rafters to form sweeping planes from a center trunk to a circle of support trunks, giving the huts a conical appearance.

Even during the fiercest rain, water would cascade away in all directions!

As the Bwana led the Abantu through the rest of the community area to the big huts, Kaleni had a brief moment where he could see past the large dwellings.

The encampment expanded well beyond their current, dirt-packed area.

Kaleni saw smaller shelters, rounded and familial sized, a more familiar style, which caused Kaleni to smile.

But then, farther beyond the spread of huts, Kaleni saw what appeared to be an enormous pile of brush.

Odd the way it suddenly rose with an organized feel, despite being a mish-mash of branches.

As they approached the big hut the view to what was behind was blocked again, but not before Kaleni saw there were larger branches and sticks, placed in a purposeful way.

Beyond the living area the Bwana had built a barricade.

Bwana and Abantu gathered in front of the center hut, which was nearly twice the size as the huts to either side.

In front of the center hut was a platform of woven papyrus.

The structure seemed to float above the dark soil.

Hovering?

Kaleni, Nibamaz and the other Abantu clicked in shared curiosity.

The papyrus was woven tightly in a criss-crossing pattern that was pleasing to the eye. Becoming slightly yellowed when dry and hard, the weaving formed a flat, rectangular shape about knee high.

The hovering appearance was a result of hardwood legs underneath, giving the platform the initial impression of floating.

Using hand gestures, the Bwana directed the Abantu to assemble on one side of the platform, while they gathered on the other.

Following Uta's lead, several Bwana sat cross-legged on the dirt to one side of the platform.

The Abantu, clumsy at first, shuffled around to find a suitable order on the other side.

Finally, Kaleni and Nibamaz sat at the center of the platform, with Lume, Juka and Lopi to the sides.

Bwana and Abantu filled in behind those at the platform.

Finally it seemed that everyone of importance was gathered around the platform.

Kaleni and Nibamaz clicked positively, liking the arrangement.

Many people could sit around the same, flat surface.

An excellent place to converse.

A new and marvelous way to use papyrus or sturdy water reeds for weaving!

"This is like a tribal council, only small," Lume said to one side of Kaleni.

Nibamaz clicked his agreement.

Kaleni said nothing; instead, his eyes rested on the female directly in front of him, sitting next to Uta.

She was very beautiful.

Adorned in the fine skins Kaleni had ever seen. Colored beautifully with orange and yellow.

Kaleni thought there was something of the Mantel in her appearance.

Her nose was long and narrow and her colored skins gave her own skin a reddish sheen.

Her hair was wavy and not coiled, gathered atop her head with bleached bone needles and strings adorned with beads to hold it in place.

Kaleni learned her name was Kafila and that she was mated to Uta.

As with Uta, the other Bwana seemed to treat Kafila with a special level of respect.

To the other side of Uta was a male with white whiskers, reminding Kaleni of Tiuti, being the only elder amongst the Bwana.

Unlike Tiuti, he was short, but his skin had the same plethora of wrinkles and his hair, though long, was white.

When he caught Kaleni looking his way, the elder Bwana offered a smile and showed an impressive set of teeth, still intact.

Kaleni almost clicked in response, but then offered a nod in return.

The elder Bwana nodded back.

Kaleni had a silly, but heartfelt moment where he wished for Krele to see through his eyes.

If only she could.

He looked at Kafila again, sitting beside Uta.

He recognized they had the same level of trust.

Krele was always steady.

Practical.

In difficult times, she did not let her emotions interfere with good judgement.

Kaleni looked at the remaining Bwana. Males and females, all young adults.

He noted that several of the males had impressive physiques and wore necklaces of carved talons and fangs similar to Uta's, though not as elaborate.

Who were these people?

How had they come to this same spot on the river, as both the Abantu and Mantel?

The Bwana brought heaps of food.

Fruit and nuts and cakes were set upon the platform.

A turtle shell bowl loaded with sizzling zebra steaks arrived.

The Abantu offered a fermented juice to drink from the horn of a buffalo.

The drink tasted horrible, but made their heads buzz nicely.

The people ate and drank.

Natural human curiosity and pantomiming led to a level of rapport.

The two tribes began a dialogue.

Surprisingly—and to their mutual delight—they found similar words.

Fascinated with each other, the Abantu and Bwana began labored discussions that improved as the day went on.

So enthused were they to learn of each other the discussion lasted through the night.

Fires were kept burning and more food was consumed.

Their commonality was astonishing.

Both tribes built rafts in a similar way.

They used ostrich eggs and colorful shells to expertly shape and drill tiny holes to make beads for decorations.

They made spears and axes in similar ways, each tribe using knapped quartzite to make blades attached to wooden shafts secured with sinew wraps and glue.

As impressed as the Abantu had been by the big huts, the Bwana were equally awed by the Abantu weapons.

Never had they seen such blades on beautifully crafted knives, axes and spears.

The two tribes discovered that each had left an established homeland that bordered a great body of saltwater.

Becoming truly nomadic, in search of something greater.

The friendships ignited on that day would transform their tribes in ways they could not yet imagine.

By dawn, Uta offered the use of the Bwana fishing rafts to help transport the Abantu across the river.

Though neither of the tribes realized it at the time, the Bwana would join the Abantu and Mantel on their pilgrimage to the land of legend.