

Chapter 13

Short and Long Spears

Kaleni, Nibamaz, Juka and Lopi set back across the river at first light.

The bulk of the Abantu remained as guests.

The four hunters would pole the *isiga-wila* back across, while teams of Bwana would pilot three, similar rafts, also built with the sturdy and ultra-buoyant papyrus.

On the advice of the Bwana, who used their rafts for fishing and transporting bulk items—and had become quite familiar with the river in the process—the Abantu drifted a bit downstream, being told the depth was better suited to pole the entire distance.

Instinctively, the Abantu worked hard to ensure their raft would maintain the lead, saying little until they established a line the others would follow.

Despite being early, the air was heavy with heat.

Ulanga blazed.

Kaleni and the hunters were desperate for rest.

They had full bellies and no opportunity to sleep since leaving the opposite shore the day before.

Nevertheless, the excitement of all they had learned was enough to inspire them to their purpose.

They would be first to tell everyone else of a new tribe?

Kaleni, Nibamaz, Juka and Lopi were lifelong friends, used to working together.

They goaded or encouraged, as was necessary to keep the raft moving steadily.

The suggestion made by the Bwana to start further downstream proved wise, making the crossing much easier.

Able to poll the entire distance across shallower water, despite their fatigue, the pace of progress was actually better the second time around.

Two hunters worked the poles while two rested.

Water sloshed against the sides of the raft and progress remained steady.

Able to gain enough distance from the Bwana rafts to talk, the Abantu agreed, somewhat proudly, that the Bwana had impressive weapons and tools, but well below the standards of an *izik-kosa*.

“But I have never seen such huts,” Nibamaz said reverently. “Who would have thought building in such a manner would be possible.”

Lopi exclaimed, “Everyone can fit under if it rains.”

“The skins they wear and the necklace of Uta,” Juka said with unabashed admiration. “What until the other *izik-kosa* see.”

Lopi asked, “Uta, he is impressive, like a hunter, but also like Tiuti, no? *Izik-ikiz*?”

Kaleni, like Nibamaz, rested on one knee. He clicked disagreement and said, “The other Bwana, named Wutota, I think he is like an *izik-ikiz*, but I think Uta is something else.”

Juka said, “Uta is not an elder, but he is wise in the way of someone who has seen many things in life. Like an *izik-ikiz*.

“Yes,” Nibamaz mused. “And Kafilu, she was given the same respect as Uta. They must have done great things to earn such respect from the others.”

Kaleni and the others clicked agreement.

“His face?” Lopi asked. “Does anyone know what happened?”

There were clicks of no.

Lopi, like Juka, wore three talons. He shook his head, saying, “It must have been a terrible wound.”

He stood at the back of the raft with the pole horizontal in both hands.

When Juka began to pull his pole from the water, Lopi flipped his pole vertically and thrust down into the water as though it were a spear, quickly moving his hands to force the pole down until it hit bottom, when he leaned and his body weight to provide thrust.

Turning his neck to look at Kaleni and Nibamaz, Lopi called, “Lions follow a single male or sometimes two or three brothers. And hyenas follow a single female.”

“So you are saying they are like predators,” Nibamaz said. “He is like the leader of a pride and wears the necklace as a mane.”

“But people live differently than predators,” Kaleni said. “We are not as simple as hyenas or lions. It does not make sense for an Abantu to listen to one person for all things.”

Lopi began pulling his pole from the water.

He was very tired.

Nibamaz stood and motioned at Lopi for his pole, saying, “Uta listens to the others, especially Kafilu.”

Lopi used both hands to hand the log sapling over to Nibamaz.

He hefted the long pole and changed positions with Lopi, while Kaleni switched poles and positions with Juka.

Nibamaz jammed his pole into the water, pushing hand over hand until it impacted the bottom.

Changed his grip on the pole and spread his feet to lean.

Juka, now kneeling where Kaleni had been, said, “I think we could trust Uta and the nesibindi on a hunt, though I do not know for sure why I say that.”

Kaleni clicked his agreement and asked, “But did you notice all the weapons stacked in the center of camp?”

Nibamaz and Lopi clicked negative, but Juka clicked affirmation and said, “Why so many? Maybe they were about to go for a hunt? Like a harvest?”

“Maybe,” Kaleni replied.

He lifted his pole vertically, prepared to plunge it into the water as Nibamaz pulled his pole out of the water.

Raising his arms high he thrust the spear down until it hit bottom. Leaned to push.

Lopi, Nibamaz and Juka wearily eyed Kaleni.

After he pulled the pole hand over hand, he held it horizontal again.

Looked at the others, still watching him and said, “The Bwana spears are short. And there were *waka-waka* of them. All around. Set on racks. Far more than you would need to go on a hunt.

“And they built a barrier along the edge of their camp.”

“I saw,” said Juka.

The fatigued hunters could see the tribemates waiting on the shore ahead of them.

The excitement they had held was now tempered a bit.

Not only by their fatigue, but with shared concern.

Long spears, like the Abantu preferred, were for hunting.

The short and sturdy spears favored by the Bwana were better for stabbing and protection.

For fighting in close quarters.

Which made the need for so many weapons and a barricade that much more ominous.

When the rafts set off for the opposite shore, Uta ensured his remaining guests were comfortable, then met with Kafila and several others, including his adult children, the male twins Tokuta and Kotuta.

The Bwana leadership gathered in a loose circle near the platform where they sat so long with the Abantu.

Everyone was tired, but not ready for rest.

Many Bwana roamed the community area in front of the platform where they were seated on the dirt.

There was a continued fascination with the strangers, who rested comfortably beneath the shade of the tall palms next to the food preparation area.

A muscular nesibindi named Hoju bowed to Uta and said, “They made an excellent raft.”

Tokuta asked, "How many of them can there be?"

Huju shook his head. "Difficult to tell. I think their numbers match ours. Perhaps more."

"More," Tokuta said, voice grim. Adding, "You saw their weapons."

Huju said. "I have never seen such craftsmanship."

As though on cue, everyone looked at Wutota.

The Bwana elder took the time to nod to everyone before saying, "Those blades are from a stone I have never seen."

He shook his head in a way to express admiration, adding with a note of wonder, "I have only been able to imagine such weapons in my mind, but have never been able to make them."

He pointed at the impressive necklace around Uta's neck. "They have learned to flake and grind stone and bone as effectively as we carve a piece of wood or ivory."

Tokuta exclaimed, "Did you see the long spears they brought on the raft? Magnificent! We could use such weapons."

Huju puffed out his broad chest and said, "We should not let them cross. Especially if there are more of them than us."

Uta said, "Perhaps. But then they will cross somewhere else."

"They are Bwana, like us," Kafila said, matter of factly. "Just not *ichi-Bwana*. They come from another salted mother."

She smiled whimsically. "All of the males have short hair. I wonder about the females?"

Kafila paused.

The others waited as she contemplated.

After a brief thought, she nodded with confidence and finished, "We will welcome them and learn their ways."

Wutota readily agreed, looking excited, despite his age and the fatigue.

"That is what is important," he said. "They are Bwana. Humans. And some of their words are like ours."

"There are so many stories, after all. Of times from long ago, when people of other lands traded with the Bwana of *ichi-Bwana*."

Uta gazed thoughtfully at the older male, then looked at Kafila, who offered him the barest of smiles.

He looked around at his most trusted people and said what they were all thinking, "I do not know if they have encountered the *bubinzwana*."

"That is what I would have asked first," Tokuta said, still with a scowl on his face.

Uta smiled, a strange effect with such a terrible scar.

“Patience, Tokuta,” he said. “They do not know our language, nor us theirs.”

Kafila said with an edge to her voice, “Yes, once we know them better, we can ask if they have encountered the bubinzwana in the lands where they come from.”

Several days and many raft trips were required to get everyone across *shatsheli-lambo*.

Young adults crossed in manageable groups, accompanied by one or more rafts.

Anyone pregnant or ill or injured, or for any reason physically unable to swim, got to ride on a raft the entire distance.

Some of the young adults and soon-to-be adults took the crossing as a challenge and swam the whole way, including Yat and Dokuk, who made the swim together.

Eku, Yathi and Goguk waited three, agonizing days with their mothers and other young people, impatient for their turn to cross; yet, not looking forward to such grueling, physical work.

When their turn finally came, all of their possessions were piled on a raft.

Eku, Yathi and Goguk swam together, with other young people, including Tar, Maz, Kat and Sisi.

The mothers would do the polling.

For Eku, it seemed the shore receded impossibly slow.

He swam with a sidestroke or flat on his back, two styles of relaxed swimming that he could maintain for as long as necessary, alternating from one to the other.

The middle part was terrifying; something he did not expect, the sight of land so distant in every direction, forcing him to quell feelings of panic.

Eku felt proud he did not have to climb on top of the raft, but he did take periodic breaks, clinging to the side and kicking.

His mother, aunt Shona, Luvu and Nyama expertly handled the poles.

Halfway across, Goguk became exhausted and was light enough to become a permanent passenger.

Yathi was at home in the water and a tireless swimmer. He spent much of the crossing floating on his back, kicking and rowing, chatting at Eku to keep his mind off the task at hand.

Gradually, the far side grew closer.

The shoreline took form.

Mostly smooth dirt, but a curious strip of lighter colored rock jutted from the midpoint where they were heading, like a tooth or bone jutted from the earth at the edge of the water.

Eku focused on the pale protrusion as they methodically grew closer.

He actually groaned out loud in relief when his feet touched a muddy bottom.

Even Yathi yelped with pleasure, exclaiming “Oh but that does feel good.”

There was still a good distance to solid land, but Eku and Yathi were content to bounce off the bottom rather than continue swimming.

Eventually, they were able to walk as the raft floated in on their right, a mother at each corner, Goguk kneeling atop the pile of supplies in the middle.

A wide and smoothly sloped bank waited.

The pale rock Eku had seen from a distance proved to be an enormous uplift of flat bedrock, much larger now that he was close.

Rising with the embankment before flattening to run perpendicular to the ground in a straight line back for the forest. Both sides of the rock slab were cleared of vegetation.

Abantu and Mantel swarmed across the open ground to the right of the rock.

Across the surface of the bedrock itself were *other* people.

Bwana!

Waka-waka individuals were gathered across the flat surface, a bit higher and separate from the Abantu and Mantel.

Still not close enough for a good look, Eku was distracted by something in the water.

As he and the others continued to slog forward, Eku saw that that past where the bedrock slab emerged from the river, a narrow structure was built of wood logs to extend from shore.

Eku pointed and said, “Yathi, look at that.”

Yathi followed his finger and exclaimed, “What can it be?”

“I do not know. It is made of logs.

“How is it floating out there? And so straight?”

Eku could tell that logs had been chopped to uniform lengths, then tied and fit together to form a straight, wooden path that appeared to be floating.

But then, closer to shore where the walkway of logs emerged, Eku saw that other logs rose vertically from the water, like stout legs to support the walkway.

The water was shallow in that section of the shoreline.

Beyond the walkway of logs appeared to be a swimming area.

Many young Bwana were playing and swimming, but they were too far away to see any details.

Yathi yelped, having caught sight of his father among the swarm of people.

Always able to find strength when motivated, Yathi raised his knees and splashed toward shore.
Eku wearily followed.

Yathi charged into the belly of his father with a joyous, wet splat.
Stepping onto dry land, Eku was enormously relieved to be out of the water.
No more swimming today!
He looked along a wide embankment of dark sedimentary soil.
It seemed the entire tribe was here, but for the final river crossers.
The shoreline was muddy from traffic and Umawa squished between Eku's toes, a welcome feeling after spending what felt like half a day in the water.
The great slab of bedrock dominated the shoreside.
A creamy tan surface rolled away flat, slightly uneven, worn smooth from the rain of deep time.
More like an old warped bone than a pathway.
Dotted with clusters of people.
Waka-waka strangers sitting or standing in groups.
All watching in Eku's direction.
Eku had heard all about the zebra loincloths, but was fascinated to see them.
Zebra loincloths?
Who could have imagined such a thing?
Eku fingered the soft skin of springhare hanging in front of his genital area.
Turned and saw the raft they swam over on was already heading back across, with new riders handling the poles.
He scanned the crowd for his mother's distinct features or Yat's poof, but saw either.
Curious, he walked up the river bank, not sure what direction to go in.
To his left was the rock slab and the strange, log walkway.
Past the swimming area, Eku saw something strange poking from the tree line.
At first, he thought some kind of a giant shell sat amongst tall palms, but realized he was looking at the sun-bleached tops of the magnificent huts that he had also heard so much about.
Zebra loincloths and wondrous huts?
Who were these people?

Ekus immediately formed an impression of the Bwana being a very clever tribe.

He took another look at the individuals scattered across the rocky plateau.

Like the Abantu, the Bwana tribe consisted mostly of young adults; though, Eku saw males and females who appeared between his and Yatyambo's ages.

Yathi suddenly grabbed his hand and pulled.

Lurching after, Eku blurted, "Yathi, this is kind of like home."

"For sure," he said, also excited. "Like during feasts and celebrations during *lobo-yaka*!"

Ekus motioned with his free hand toward the rocks and said, "Look at all the Bwana sitting there. The males have long hair."

"I guess they like long hair!"

"And they have the zebra loincloths!"

Yathi let go of Eku's hand and said, "They look like a herd."

Ekus laughed.

Despite so much swimming, the two were re-invigorated.

They delved into the many people wandering about the shoreline, seemingly with little to do other than wait for more river crossers.

Ekus spotted Yat's poof.

She was with Dokuk, Odi, Gokuk and Kolo.

Ekus and Yatho approached and Yat said, "Well done little brother. Both of you."

Ekus clicked his thanks and Yathi simply looked surprised when Yat said anything nice.

Ekus pointed where all the Bwana were seated on the rocky plateau and asked, "Does anyone want to see the Bwana village and the giant huts? From that giant rock where the people are seated, we should be able to see."

Everyone had been standing around and looking for something to do.

With confidence in numbers, the young Abantu headed over to the rock formation.

Approaching from higher up the shoreline Ekus realized the rocky outcropping was more like a river of stone.

As though a tributary one time drained into the river and turned to rock.

The bedrock merged seamlessly into dark soil.

Nervously, under the scrutiny of the nearest Bwana, the young Abantu climbed the where the flattened peak of the slab.

Yat was quickest to see over the further edge and let out a gasp.

Dokuk and Eku arrived close behind and were similarly amazed.

On the other side of the rock outcropping, just a bit upriver from where they stood, was the most incredible village any of them had ever seen.

Dominating the encampment were three rounded huts of great height, the spire of the tallest, center hut no doubt being what Eku spotted earlier while coming to shore.

The huts were wall-less, but too far away for Eku to see what was inside. He could tell the shelters made use of *waka-waka* tree trunks as both surrounding and central pillars, to create a series of pitched roofs.

The roofing material formed smooth slopes of light yellow.

Between the big huts and the river was an expansive communal area, busy with fire pits, racks of stretched hides and trestles of drying fish and the carcass of beasts waiting to be butchered.

There were lean-to shelters with stacks of burning fuel, clay pots and other miscellaneous items.

“How did they build those huts,” Eku said with wonder.

“The roofs are like the top of a conch shell,” Yat exclaimed with wonder. “But they are not actually round. They are flat on many sides to form a cone. How did they do that?”

“They used the tall palm trees as support,” Eku said.

“They must be very good hut builders,” Yathi said.

“I cannot wait to see their village up close,” Yat said.

Eku looked around.

The bedrock was like a long and narrow plateau.

Extraordinarily flat; though it looked like the Bwana side dropped more steeply than the side that sloped toward the gathering of Abantu.

The stone was mottled pale with gentle undulations and ridges, but none deep or sharp enough to take away from the remarkable flatness.

Making the pale tone of the plateau stand out more, the Bwana had cleared every scrap of vegetation for a good distance, leaving the rich and dark soil bare.

There was a small section of the original shoreline that remained.

Between the open area next to the bedrock and the Bwana village, the ground subsided.

An oval oasis was left untouched: tall grass, papyrus and small palm, some of which interfered with Eku’s view of the Bwana village.

He took a few steps in the direction of the water for a better look at the village and glanced at the Bwana seated closest.

Uh-oh!

Eku felt like a bug being stared at.

Every set of Bwana eyes was on him and his group!

He quickly looked away.

Found himself looking where his toes gripped the warm rock.

Felt embarrassed, for some reason.

To avoid making eye contact again, Eku turned his neck to look in the direction of the forest.

A short distance from where he and the others stood, the plateau had a lone, high point.

Almost like the bedrock grew a dorsal fin there, Eku thought.

There was a slender spire that rose in the middle.

Someone had climbed to the top and was now peeking from behind, so only the head and a single hand showed.

The Bwana must be very good rock climbers, was Eku's initial thought.

But no!

The head and hand belonged to something else entirely.

Clicking loud and instinctively, Yat and Yathi followed the direction of his eyes and Yat exclaimed, "Is that a Bwana?"

Sensing their scrutiny, whatever Eku had seen quickly ducked out of sight.

"What was that?" Yathi asked, having only caught a glimpse of movement.

A bit flustered, Eku said, "A person or a monkey."

All of the young people turned at the sound of Krele, calling from the edge of the slab, where they had just climbed up from.

"Yatyambo and Eku. All of you. Come down," she said. "There is work to do."