

## Chapter 14

### Tribes United

The Abantu graciously accepted the Bwana's offer to share their spectacular riverside location through the remainder of *lobo-yaka*.

The pilgrimage would resume once the heavy rains subsided.

The entire tribe was hard at work clearing land to the downriver side of the rock outcropping.

Away from the riverbank was forest, mostly mature broadleaf that allowed enough light to filter through for foxtail grass, as well as patches of the inevitable boxthorn.

At the far end of the encampment, a swampy section was skirted by tall bamboo, sure to come in handy during the construction of shelters and storage huts.

The *izik-kosa* were hard at work with their tree-felling axes.

All bush, saplings and smaller trees were cleared.

The largest trees would remain, but would be stripped of all lower boughs.

Bushwillow came down first.

The dense wood was favored for the sturdy poles used to make handles for tools and weapons, and was excellent firewood.

Stripped of bark and exposed to Ulanga, once dry, bushwillow logs burned long and slow and left a fine, white ash that when mixed with clay and mud, formed a paste useful for the construction of waterproof barriers.

An endless supply of papyrus, water reeds, palm trees and vines provided ample material for the construction of familial shelters.

Rounded dwellings popped up all across the encampment.

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Eku thought his family had an excellent shelter.

Krele and Shona directed the construction.

Flexible hardwood poles and papyrus for ribbing.

Water reeds for weaving into the sides and roofing.

Keeping the interior cozy during deluges, mud walls protected the base and a cap of palm fronds guided water away the top.

Roomy enough for four adults and three young people, as well as bedding, satchels and backpacks, grass baskets, bladders, tools and other personal belongings.

Almost like we're back home, Eku thought

Only Uwama was missing, though *shatesheli-lambo* was a magnificent substitute.

The encampment still needed work.

More branches and underbrush were cleared.

Normally, the Abantu simply burned boxthorn, but the Bwana encouraged the newcomers to add the spiked branches to a barricade being erected along the perimeter of camp.

Eku did not fully understand what the people of *ichi-Bwana* feared.

Dangerous beasts on the southern shores were given the harshest of lessons and quickly learned to avoid Abantu.

Barricades were rarely necessary.

Eku, like everyone, heard talk of the mysterious creatures called the bubinzwana.

Kolo told Eku that the Mantel believed the bubinzwana were the same beasts as the dreaded yolumkono.

The problem was, nobody seemed to know much about them.

When Eku had a moment with his father, he said, "Others say they walked on two legs, like a human. Is that true?"

Kaleni was hesitant, and answered, "We don't know much yet, Eku. Me and the other hunters have much to learn about these beasts."

"Are they dangerous?"

"The Bwana say they are like hyenas, but worse."

"That is scary."

"Yes, but they have not been seen in some time. The Bwana have had no sightings of the bubinzwana since they left their homeland."

Eku had always found hyenas a bit more intimidating than lions, particularly when their packs became very large.

Hyenas were overly curious, even for a predator, and once they had favorable numbers, a pack would be ruthless and relentless in an attack.

Regardless of how fearful the mysterious bubinzwana may or may not be, sagely advice from people who thrived on this land for generations was not to be ignored.

The mothers made it clear that all of the spiked branches within the encampment would be put to good use.

Eku and Yathi spent a miserable day hauling boxthorn to the edge of camp, where a formidable barrier was erected.

Stinging from scratches, Yat came to their rescue, treating them with poultices to take away the sting and keep the cuts from festering.

The last and perhaps most important trees to come down were called *aza-enji-umthi*.

Yat explained that in the Bwana language, *aza-enji-umthi* meant a transformation of leaves from deep green during *lobo-yaka*, to fiery orange during *sika-yaka*.

More importantly, the Bwana showed the mothers how to remove the heavy, outer bark, then carefully peel away the inner bark to boil into a solution used for the softening of hides.

An incredibly valuable substitute for brains!

No wonder the Bwana had such fabulous skins to wear.

Krele conjured a rousing and funny song the other mothers and females instantly adopted:

*happiness for aza-enji-umthi*

*miraculous after boiling*

*a replacement for the brains*

*brought by the hunters*

*always in short supply*

*and small to begin with*

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Smoke wafted through the trees.

The thump of ax heads impacting wood prevailed.

Another day of hauling brush.

Eku wiped watery eyes with a free hand, the other clasped around the base of leafy stalks he pulled toward the burning area.

Miserable and scratchy work.

“I wish we were still on the journey,” Yathi said, pulling his own set of branches. “I want to go swimming.”

“We can go swimming when we’re done. And we’re still on a journey.”

“You know what I mean. Overnight camps were better.”

Eku could not resist a bit of chiding and said, “When we were traveling, you complained all the time about that.”

“Only when we were hiking,” Yathi corrected.

Eku clicked and smiled despite the labor.

The two dragged branches beneath mopane boughs grown heavy with leafage, despite the efforts of the caterpillars.

With all branches cleared to the height an *izik-kosa* could swing an axe, a ceiling of light green hung across the encampment.

Eku could see far in every direction, even to the downriver end, where a well-trod path pointed to the area designated for emptying bowels and bladders.

The heart of camp was almost entirely clear, with only a few of the tall palms left standing for shade.

The ground in the food preparation area was hard-packed and swept daily.

Inspired by the Bwana, the Abantu built storage huts amongst clusters of tall pines, copying how the Bwana used naked trunks as pillars.

By tying bamboo to the trunks as beams and rafters, they used papyrus for roofing.

Knee-high walls of mud on three sides protected what was underneath from seepage and splatter.

A perfect place for food supplies, as well as people seeking shelter during the daily storms.

Eku and Yathi dragged their branches past familial huts, down worn pathways and into an open band of trampled foxtail grass, where the extra brush was burned between the outermost shelters and the linearly mounded barricade that stretched across the backside of the encampment.

Ahead of them, young Abantu heaved their branches onto smoldering piles, while *izik-kosa* and hunters converged with burnables from other areas of camp.

A group of young people began running away from the smoke, toward Eku and Yathi.

Tuve, Dokuk and Odi raced past, Dokuk hollering, "Time to go swimming!"

Kolo and Goguk raced by next, shouting at Eku and Yathi to hurry up.

Yathi bellowed with enthusiasm, lifted his knees and charged forward, pulling the branches so fast the leaves hissed.

Eku followed, doubling his effort, knowing that if he didn't, the miraculously energized Yathi might pick him up and haul him to the river himself.

The steady work continued for several more days, during which Eku and Yathi helped dig fire pits and gather *layit-umlilo* to store under the roofs of the community shelters.

Finally, the Abantu had a fully functional village.

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During *lobo-yaka* Ulayo faithfully delivered a storm down *shatsheli-lambo*.

As the Abantu were prone to do, they turned a daily task into an adventure.

At the first raindrops, the Abantu stopped what they were doing and raced for the communal area shelters.

Young Abantu ran especially hard, as they competed for limited space.

Competition is fierce.

Not everyone can fit under the central shelters amongst the tall palms at the center of camp, now considered to be the most excellent place to hang out during *vulu-ula-alu*.

If you are a young person.

There was only so much room to stand underneath; thus, the young people fiercely contest to be amongst those who reach the shelters before space fills up.

The sloped roofs are made of matted papyrus.

The firm and hollow stalks become dry in the heat and the first fat drops pop explosively.

The drumbeat of rain grows louder and by now those who do not make it in time are scrambling to find shelter elsewhere ... Or simply get wet.

Many choose to get wet because they still get to sing.

That's what the contest is really about.

As the rain-driven percussion increases in tempo, the different shelters take up songs and the young raise their voices.

Opposing shelters contest with each other.

A battle based solely on volume.

The frenetic drumming of the rain reminds Eku of cicadas, the way they ramp up faster and faster; only, unlike the cicadas, the rain reaches its crescendo and stays there!

At least for a little while.

The singing falters when the thunder arrives and the young people wait for the booming to end.

Yat was the first Abantu to call the daily storms *vulu-ula-alu*, a combination of Abantu and Bwana words that means a time for singing in the rain.

Now, at the first sight of clouds, someone cries *vulu-ula-alu* and the race is on.

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While the daily deluges remained predictable, Eku looked forward to something new everyday.

He still began each morning with *keso-elanisa*, either *ula-konto* or *ibe-bonakalio* practice.

Sometimes both, if he had extra time.

Once Yathi roused from sleep and filled his belly, Eku dragged him to the central rock outcropping, where the hunters met in the cool of the morning to share knowledge of traps and snares.

Afterwards, Yathi remained relentlessly enthusiastic at any opportunity to fish in *shatsheli-lambo* (which of course, meant unlimited swimming) and Eku often found himself by the river.

*Shatsbeli-lambo* was loaded with catfish, but even better, was a fish the Bwana called *gwe-lanzi*, revered for its flesh.

The swift swimming predator made daily migrations up and down the river.

Luckily, *gwe-lanzi* only preyed upon other fish, as they had a full jaw of teeth and grew to the weight of a human child.

When the fish cruised by in search of prey, Abantu, Mantel and Bwana held competitions over who would catch the largest prize with the most fearsome fangs.

When Lume captured the day's most spectacular specimen, Eku snatched the skull away during butchering to secret aside and clean meticulously.

Set the bones out to bleach white under Ulanga.

Surprised Yathi with the gift and he squealed like a bushpig in appreciation.

The fierce white skull with gaping eye holes and a jaw full of needle sharp fangs now hung from a string inside their familial shelter.

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The mopane trees around the encampment were inundated with fat caterpillars.

A grove of mature trees was under constant surveillance.

Eku and Yathi, like all of the young people, were obligated to spend time shooing away birds and beasts.

Generally, the interval each person spent watching over the mopane was minimal; though, when Yathi was caught peeing for a second time in an area he was not supposed to, both he and Eku—being his *ikanabe*—were punished with extra mopane duty.

Eku didn't really think of it as punishment (though Yathi certainly did), because the mopane grove was a terrific place to practice with his *ula-konto*.

Helping to ease Yathi's pain, Goguk and Kolo tagged along, just for something to do.

The mature grove lay beyond the barrier of thorns, but continuous traffic by adults to and from the forest kept the area safe for young people to be left to themselves.

While Yathi morosely patrolled the trees, on the lookout for birds and the occasionally bold troop of monkeys, Eku prowled with his *ula-konto*.

First, he stalked and speared a tuft of grass that was a bush pig.

Then he crept below a low hanging mopane limb to spring up and launch a three-step-three throw into an acacia bush that his mind transformed into an impala.

Eku retrieved the *ula-konto* and spotted a brush pile that was a charging hyena.

Whirled and matched the motion of a three-step throw by shifting his weight and using his torso instead of stepping, able to release the spear quickly, but with good velocity.

Pleased at another direct hit.

Eku then found an open area where he could bundle tufted grass into a target that would protect the barbed end during more disciplined practice.

When his arm grew tired, he took a break and found Yathi on his haunches, back against a mopane trunk, Kolo and Gokuk climbing in the canopy above.

“Try not to squish too many caterpillars,” Yathi called as Eku knelt on the grass beside him.

Grumpily, he said, “All I did was pee once outside the shelter.”

“You have to go where everyone else does,” Eku said. “And you did it twice.”

“The first time was the first night and I did not remember where to go.”

“It still counts. We live in a village again, you know.”

Yathi grimaced, “You are right. I do not want to go back to hiking every day, but it was better to just stop and squat.”

“For sure.”

Goguk and Kolo dropped out of the tree beside them.

Yathi, feeling the need to demonstrate, stood and lifted his loincloth to show his naked butt and demonstrated an exaggerated act of defecation, replete with groaning, robust farting noises and a pained facial expression.

The four young males laughed and ran off to check another area of trees.

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The rock outcropping that jutted from shatsheli-lambo was now the place for people to commingle. Along the Bwana side in particular.

The bedrock slab ran perpendicularly from the river to the forest, remarkably straight and flat across the top.

On the Abantu side the rock rose like a ramp from the earth, rising gradually to the plateau-like crest.

The Bwana side was much different.

On the upriver side the plateau did not slope gradually to the earth; instead, rose vertically to form a miniature cliff face.

Like a wall, smooth, undulating gently down the length, though not enough to interfere with the straight path it led from river to forest.

Scattered about the ground along the base of the rock wall were half-buried boulders, now rainworn and smooth, as though Uwama nudged them into place to serve as natural seating and benching.

The area was officially designated *iliwi-kelele*, a combination of Abantu and Bwana words that meant a place by the big rock for serious talking.

The tribes held daily meetings at *iliwi-kelele*, sharing hunting skills, braiding techniques for cordage, weaving styles for baskets and how to attach colored dyes to the skins of beasts.

The mothers pooled their knowledge of the mosses and plants they used in poultices for pain relief, for upset digestion and other ailments.

Members of each tribe proved particularly talented at picking up the language of the other and began teaching members of their own tribe.

Yat was remarkable at learning new words and phrases, which she enthusiastically shared with Eku and Yathi, who taught them to Kolo and Goguk.

Shy, at first, young Abantu and Bwana began to engage in fun and games and friendships formed.

Dala and Longo were Bwana males of the same age as Eku and Yathi.

Dala desired to be nesibindi in the same way Eku wanted to be a hunter and a natural bond was formed.

Eku's foursome now had a pair of Bwana males to go on adventures with.