

Chapter 15

The Linwelewana

Strange beasts roamed the Bwana encampment.

Beasts that walked on two legs, like a human.

A few Abantu adults have seen them, but only a limited number of young people, including Yatyambo.

Driven by curiosity and competition, young people were frantic to be amongst the first to catch a glimpse of whatever the strange beasts were.

Kolo, adept at picking up the latest tribal gossip, verified that the beasts walked on two legs, but were not people.

The four wandered along the access point to the river, along the front of their community area, close to the water where a swath of cleared papyrus left stumps splintered and yellowed and dried and painful to step on.

Ulanga blazed, Ulayo pushed little air and the four of them were simply looking for something to do.

Shatsheli-lambo lay vast and placid and always enticing on a hot day, but at the moment, Eku was focused solely on where he placed his feet.

Kolo was right beside him, also carefully watching the ground.

Yathi and Goguk hovered nearby, wondering why their companions were purposefully putting their toes at risk among the splintered stumps, while they stood on perfectly cleared brown soil just a few paces away.

Eku asked, "You said they walk on two legs and look like people?"

Kolo, eyes to the ground on the side of Eku closer to the water, said, "I have not seen them. But that is what others say. More than one person, so I think it's true.

Goguk called out, "They say they are like a person, but they are not like an Abantu or a Mantel or a Bwana. Not a human. Something different."

Yathi asked, "They really walk on two legs, like we do?"

"Yes."

Eku stepped from the rough ground to stand by the others.

Turned and asked Kolo, "Like a person or a bird or a monkey?"

Kolo stepped away from the stumps.

Shrugged and said, "They walk like we do, I guess. But they are not big. They are the same size as us."

Eku thought of the odd looking creature he saw peeking over the rocks on the day they crossed *shatsbeli-lambo*.

Coming to a decision, he said, “We need to find out more.”

Kolo groaned and said, “But I have asked everybody. Only adults get to walk over there. Whenever they want. It is not fair.”

“It is not fair,” Yathi said. “We should be able to go over there. Dala and Longo already said they would take us.”

The four of them looked at each other, wide-eyed at the thought of doing such a bold thing.

Walk into the Bwana encampment?

Eku, still looking at Kolo, asked, “Did you ask my sister?”

Kolo shook no and Eku turned away, motioning with his hand and said, “Follow me.”

The four young males walked through the center of the community area, circumventing fire pit, racks and trestles to find Yat with Tar and Maz seated upon reed matts with the mothers Krele, Shona, Luvu and Nyama, chatting merrily while using the three-hole bone tool for weaving cordage.

They sat in a rough circle within the shade of the palms.

The mothers smiled and clicked greetings to Eku and his little posse.

The young males clicked politely back and Eku said, “We want to know about the strange beasts who walked on two legs, like a person. They live in the Bwana encampment.”

He glanced over the adults, but finished with his gaze on his sister.

Yat, because of her language proficiency, had been visiting the Bwana encampment more frequently—much to the envy of all the young people.

“I have seen them,” she said, looking smug.

“Tell us,” Goguk implored as Yathi called out, “What do they look like?”

Yat’s hands rolled and twisted the cylinder tool to twist three strips of sinew into a strong cord.

Her hair was loose and combed out to fall like a brown waterfall over her shoulders.

Eku noticed a new bracelet of Bwana design.

“They are silly,” she said, watching her hands, but lost in the memory. “And they make funny noises.”

“They have bodies like us, but are smaller and have more hair on their bodies.

“They are pretty, especially the females.

“They look like an Abantu and a monkey had a baby.”

Eku and Yathi looked horrified at each other, Eku again thinking of the odd creature he saw peeking over the rocks on the day they crossed *shatsheli-lambo*.

Goguk exclaimed, "Like an Abantu and a monkey had a baby?"

Yat clicked yes and said, "It is hard to describe, but you will see them. They are hairy, but have bare skin, like us. They are called *linwelewana*.

"In the Bwana language, linwelewana means the hairless climbers."

Eku asked, "They like to climb?"

"Yes. They are like monkeys, always hanging inside the big huts. But they walk around, too. They can do both."

Goguk asked, "Can they talk?"

Yat clicked no and said, "They understand Bwana words, but they definitely do not talk. They chatter like monkeys.

"They are very silly, but very clever. When I see them, I want to pet them. For some reason.

"And they are always doing chores.

"The linwelewana do whatever a Bwana tells them to do."

Unbeknownst to Eku, he would have the opportunity to observe the linwelewana soon.

A major project has been planned for *iliwi-kelele*.

The area all around *iliwi-kelele* was flat and cleared on both sides, but the Bwana side in particular was wide and flat with nothing but hard-packed dirt and seating rocks. Even better, the sheer side of the slab that began near the water rose to better than the height of an adult before leveling off and running flat to the forest.

Though the area on the Bwana side of the rocks was expansive, the long, wall-like cliff face provided a sense of privacy.

The land on the Bwana side of *iliwi-kelele* was flat and smooth and sloped gradually to the water. The walkway of logs bisected the shoreline, straight and pale and leading into the watery vastness of the river.

To the right of the walkway, the four rafts were dragged out of the water, yellowed and browned atop the dark earth, like big old turtles, basking in the sun.

Past the rafts on the way to the Bwana encampment was the swimming area, always busy with Bwana mothers and children.

The big project was a big hut that would sit back a ways from the water.

Where the land crested and flattened and where the *izik-kosa* had already arranged an impressive work area alongside the rockface.

The hut would be raised just outside of it.

The *izik-kosa* work area was set up in front of a smooth portion of the cliff face, amongst serendipitous rocks scattered half-buried and good for sitting.

Sturdy tripod frames for heating or cooking arranged along a long and deep fire pit.

Sharpening stones set next to vices.

Racks for curing skins and drying sinew.

The big round hut was being erected on the upriver side of the *izik-kosa* work area, more towards the center of the cleared area that separated *iliwi-kelele* from the oasis of land before the Bwana living area began.

Like all projects, once conceived, work on the big round hut began immediately.

On the downriver end of the Abantu encampment was a swampy area with a fringe of tall bamboo.

The young people gathered there as the *izik-kosa* began cutting down the perfectly straight culms.

Eku and Yathi planted one of the long and sturdy, but surprisingly light poles over a shoulder and hiked across their encampment to *iliwi-kelele*.

To avoid the higher drop, Eku and Yathi walked toward shore until the slab inclined enough for them to hop down.

They carried the bamboo pole back up along the rock to where the cliff face grew higher until leveling at the *izik-kosa* work area, where other bamboo poles lay side by side.

Impressed and enthused by all of the activity, Eku and Yathi unceremoniously dumped their pole next to the others and looked around.

“*Waka-waka* people,” Yathi exclaimed. “And look at all the people in the swimming area. We can go there, you know.”

Eku saw more pairs of bamboo pole lugging people striding along the rock face.

There were many people there.

Mothers and young adults mingled near the log walkway, where the rafts were parked.

Past the rafts, there were *waka-waka* young people frolicking in the water.

Eku was distracted when the next bamboo pole landed sharply on the pile.

Surprised to see Azik and Kizma.

They had long knives at their belts and carried a tree-cutting axe.

After depositing the culm, the two immediately went to sharpening stones.

Began moving the wedge-shaped blades of the tree-felling axes back and forth.

Yathi continued to stare at the river and the many people in the swimming area.

Heading up the incline along the rock wall, Eku saw Goguk and Kolo on opposite ends of a long bamboo pole.

“I want to talk to Kozik and Kizma to see what they are going to build,” he said, “But you can see if Goguk and Kolo want to go swimming.”

Yathi clicked his appreciation and began trotting toward the river, calling to Goguk and Kolo and pointing at the water.

“We will see you later,” he yelled back at Eku.

After Goguk and Kolo dashed off with Yathi, Eku watched the last of the bamboo arrive.

The culms were very long, but there were not that many.

He guessed the longest were about three times the height of a tall person.

Next to the bamboo pile, closer to the rock wall, was a much more substantial collection of papyrus.

The shoots were cut to equal lengths, wrapped in bundles and assembled into twisted stacks that reminded Eku of termite mounds.

Some of the stalks were dried and pale, others were light green and fresh.

Eku turned away from *iliwi-kelele*, to face the direction of the Bwana encampment.

The big hut would sit right in front of him.

The grove of tall palms that held the Bwana’s rounded huts was in the background.

Tall and vertical hardwood logs were arranged in a circle. The support poles for the big hut.

They looked strange, standing naked and alone, like palm trunks with no top.

Then he saw the poles had been planted into the laced into holes packed with rocks and dirt, looking strong enough for Eku to shimmy up.

The columnar supports were spaced evenly and he found the symmetry of the circular design pleasing to the eye.

The young people and izik-kosa brought the last of the bamboo poles.

Work was about to commence!

Eku stepped away from the izik-kosa work area and the big hut, now with Bwana craftsman gathering.

Being the only young person left in the vicinity, Eku hurriedly looked for a spot to get more out of the way.

He backed up against the rock wall.

He looked past the *izik-kosa* work area along the cliff face and saw Tiuti and Wutota approached.

The two old masters spent much time together.

Always talking.

One tall with short hair.

One short with long hair.

They stopped at the *izik-kosa* work area and Eku wished he could hear what they were saying.

When Wutota glanced his way and pointed, at first Eku thought he was pointing at him, but then he turned and looked down the length of *iliwi-kelele* to see more Bwana, having emerged from the treeline, carrying big logs over their shoulders.

Very big logs.

Big enough to require four sets of shoulders, two to each side.

Heading straight down the length of the rock slab, right where Eku was standing.

Where could he go?

He spun and checked the miniature cliff face in front of him.

Stepped belly up to the rock and went to his toes and stretched his arms over his head, but couldn't quite curl the ends of his fingers over the top edge.

Crouched and sprang up and managed to hook both hands solidly; then, pulling with his arms while pushing off the wall with his toes, hauled himself up, scraping his stomach and knee when he threw a leg over and tumbled onto the plateau.

Stood and adjusted his loincloth, wiping sand and grit off skin.

A few scratches was worth an excellent view!

Back on top of *iliwi-kelele*, Eku could see everything.

Three groups of Bwana had come out of the forest carrying the enormous logs.

As straight as bamboo, but hardwood, much sturdier.

They came along the length of *iliwe-kelele* and passed directly below Eku before swinging in front of the papyrus stacks, toward the circle of support poles.

Depositing the three long logs in the middle of the circle.

Eku settled onto his butt at the edge of the rock face, feet hanging over the side, palms on the rock.

More workers appeared carrying armloads of smaller logs, which they distributed around the ring of support poles.

Bwana and *izik-kosa* went in turn to each support pole, attaching the short logs from one support pole to the next, until a solid ring was built around the entire circumference.

Eku marveled at the diameter.

This would be a big hut indeed!

The three enormous logs inside the circle were notched and loosely bound at one end.

Several strong workers tackled each of the three logs and together, lifted and shimmied the enormous tripod into place at the center of the big hut.

Eku was impressed when a pair of Bwana, not much older than he was, climbed straight up a single leg pole to the top, where they used cordage to securely tie the three tripod poles together.

Once the climbers shimmied down, logs were placed horizontally between tripod legs, making a kind of ladder for others to more easily climb to the top.

Eku noted still more workers approached from the Bwana encampment and went tense with excitement.

Among them were two, distinct figures.

Walking upright, like people—but they were not people.

Eku had to admit that at first glance, a linwelewana did look like a monkey and a human had a baby.

He guessed the beasts were about his height, which made them adults.

Judging by their musculature and demeanor they did seem ... Mature.

Their skin was grayish with a hint of laza.

Fur was heavy around the groin and lower legs.

Too furry to see private parts, Eku guessed they were both male because of a lack of teats.

The legs and arms were of similar proportions to his own, but the hands and feet were enormous.

They walked with a funny-looking gait, hands stuck forward in a silly way; but then, Eku saw their shoulders were built differently, muscular and shaped in a way that held the arms with palms forward; whereas, the arms of an Abantu hung inward.

Eku realized the linwelewana were about to play some kind of a role in the construction.

The long bamboo poles that Eku and Yathi helped bring over became rafters.

The framing progressed at a rapid pace with so many people—and especially with the help of the linwelewana, who Eku thought were simply marvelous.

A pair of square platforms were dragged into place on the outside and inside of a support pole.

A system was already in place.

Each worker knew his or her role.

Bwana workers climbed atop the platform on each side, while others transported one of the bamboo poles, already cut to length.

The rafter was hefted up and muscled into place from the support pole to the top of the tripod.

That's when the linwelewana sprang into action.

A linwelewana grabbed a piece of quality rope from a Bwana.

The first time this act was performed, Eku was especially thrilled, as it took place at one of the support poles closest to where he was seated.

His heart pounded with excitement when the linwelewana backed toward him.

Eku could see the funnily shaped head.

Strange hair.

Heavy browline.

With a few, short and quick strides the linwelewana hopped forward in a funny, two-legged way that propelled the beast forward several paces before launching a tremendous leap upward.

Latching onto the bamboo rafter with one hand, the linwelewana acrobatically curled its torso to hand the rope to one of its grasping feet.

As the leg came down clutching the rope the linwelewana used the same motion swing its free hand forward to begin a swift, hand-over-hand ascent to the top.

The linwelewana hung from two hands and extended the leg holding the rope to a waiting Bwana worker.

As the tripod workers went to work securing the rafter at the top, the linwelewana swung back down the rafter.

In the meantime, workers on the ground moved the platforms to the next support pole.

Eku was amused.

Each time the descending linwelewana stopped halfway down and chatted at the other linwelewana, ready at the circle of support poles for the next rafter.

The beasts made squeaks and barks back and forth, noises not quite like anything Eku had heard.

Similar to a monkey, but more repetitive, like the extended song of a bird.

They are talking without words.

Above anything else, Eku marvelled at their grace and agility.

Moving into the rafters as a monkey would in a tree.

Then walking on the ground, like a human.

As soon as the next bamboo rafter was in place, the linwelewana on the ground went over to perform the transfer, while its hanging partner playfully slid down the remaining length of the rafter before letting go to land with a bouncing hop and then a tumbling roll out of the circle of support poles, springing to its feet to the joy of Eku and amusement of the Bwana, though they are familiar with the linwelewana's playful manners.

Thanks to the coordinated effort of humans and linwelewana, the entire skeleton of the hut came into place with marvelous speed.

With all of the rafters in place, the workers dismantled the center tripod and Eku was enthralled at the sight of the rafters, now all radially secured at a cone-like center, leaving the spectacular dome in place with a wondrous breadth of space underneath.

Yathi, Kolo and Goguk wandered up from the water to join Eku on the rocks, hooting with excitement at the sight of the completed frame and the linwelewana.

Kolo sat next to Eku and leaned against him and asked, "As good as watching monkeys fly?"

"Yes," Eku said. "But the linwelewana are not monkeys."