

## Chapter 18

### Ingwe

Eku now frequently saw the beautiful Bwana female with the laza pendant at *iliwi-kelele*.

Always with her female friends.

Not sure of Bwana custom, he wasn't sure whether to approach her again.

But one day, Eku saw her wandering close to the walkway of logs.

Alone and glancing in his direction.

The beautiful Bwana female wore her usual zebra loincloth and necklace, but had pulled her long hair back in a bun to wrap tight against her head, so that from the front it appeared shorn, as though the perfect female had emerged from *shatsbeli-lambo* and cut her hair, just for him.

But that was silly.

Nevertheless, having built up confidence that he knew was fragile, Eku approached as she watched.

As he did the first time, Eku said hello in Bwana and Abantu, but again, the beautiful Bwana female with the laza pendant simply stared, as if waiting for something else.

Her eyes were so expressive.

Bright and pretty below perfect curved brows.

Eku felt the pulse of his heart in his ear.

How could she do that to him?

Reach through the air and touch his mind?

Somehow.

Freckles speckled her cheeks, something he hadn't noticed before.

More character to an already perfect face.

More perfect?

Was that even possible?

Her lips had parted slightly and the bottom edge of her upper teeth showed.

Eku almost shook his head.

Her beauty was so distracting!

But then, he noticed she stood with feet apart.

Knees slightly bent.

Arms hung loosely.

Frantically trying to think of something to say, Eku quickly grew frustrated, his mind gone blank in the most baffling way.

Why could he not think of a single word?

The beautiful Bwana female finally made a face and spun away from him to run off, just as before.

Crestfallen, Eku watched.

But this time she stopped.

A short distance away, she turned to face him and put hands to her hips in a way that Eku instantly adored.

Gave him a quizzical look.

Before he even realized, Eku was tearing after her.

Shrieking with delight, the beautiful Bwana female spun and began running again.

And she ran fast!

Eku was immediately breathing heavily, but diligently pushed after, knowing his body would adjust.

So focused was he on her agile form that Eku found he had raced straight into the Bwana encampment.

Quickly slowed.

Tall palm trees with naked trunks interspersed.

The giant huts loomed in the background.

*Waka-waka* people were all across the hard-packed dirt and certainly they were all staring at him!

Directly in front of Eku was a trestle hung with drying hides.

The stink from a fish pit for gutting and deboning wafted by.

Eku fought panic, knowing that if he lost the beautiful Bwana female, he would be all alone in the Bwana encampment.

Ah!—luckily, she also stopped.

Stood a few paces away, her pretty face flushed with excitement.

Not sure if he was bold or reckless, Eku charged and she took off, the squeal of her laughter telling him that she was pleased.

Making him forget the nervousness.

Eku raced past mothers with babies at the breast.

The beautiful Bwana female with the laza pendant was quick and Eku skidded around a group of young females carrying gourds for the water, a linwelewana amongst them, but even that wasn't going to slow him.

Bwana males of his own age stared at Eku as if he were a silly Abantu gone mad.

Well, maybe I am, he thought, no longer caring.

Eku was a leopard, focused only on the form of the beautiful female as she sped through the heart of the communal area.

He had gained a second wind.

Raced past mothers and young adults working cured skins.

A burst of speed closed distance and dirt from her heels sprayed off his shins.

Straining mightily, Eku drew within a pace.

Both at a full sprint and breathing hard.

Feet pounding.

Eku reached for her shoulder—oh but she was clever!

Darting away at the last instant, giggling as Eku went skidding, arms spinning, heels leaving dark streaks as he struggled to adjust.

Grabbing at the trunk of a tall palm, Eku managed to spin part-way around and recovered quickly, almost without losing a beat.

The beautiful Bwana female leaped over the outstretched legs of a Bwana male, lounging and twanging away at some kind of instrument of sinew that produced a musical note and Eku cut around the opposite side of the sinew plucking musician.

The beautiful Bwana female dashed through a shaded area where people lay in hammocks.

Now a tenacious mongoose, Eku dodged obstacles and followed.

Giggling, the beautiful Bwana female wheeled around a large fire pit and cut across racks hung with skins.

Eku skipped over a pile of gourds and leaped a seating log.

Surely the entire Bwana tribe watched them now.

Eku heard what sounded like a knowing laugh.

He also heard words he did not understand, but sounded like encouragement.

Confidence was growing.

This was a game he understood.

The beautiful Bwana female was fast, but Eku was proud and a good runner, not the fastest, but with excellent agility and stamina that only Yat and Dokuk can outlast.

Nobody close to his own age could outrun him for a long distance.

But the beautiful Bwana female was fast AND has stamina!

She dashed out of the communal area to the river, where this all started, slowing one last time and giving Eku another chance to think he might finally catch her, only to turn on the speed again.

When the beautiful Bwana female darted behind a patch of papyrus, Eku jumped in thinking he had her trapped, but she had disappeared, leaving him sweaty and panting, thinking only of her wonderful laughter.

Determined to chase her again.

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The following morning, Eku's first thought was the beautiful Bwana female.

Despite how the chase ended, he felt renewed confidence.

Instead of hunting down Tiuti or throwing his *ula-konto*, Eku paced with a purpose through the food preparation area, circumvented racks of pelts and sinew and circled fire pits covered by palm leaf tepees, before continuing down the well-trodden path that led across the clearing to *iliwi-kelele*.

Hiked along and across the rocks to an easy spot to drop into the *izik-kosa* work area, currently uninhabited.

Heading down the sloped earth for the dock just as a linwelewana ambled across the same spot where he had seen the beautiful Bwana female.

Eku stopped to watch just as he had the day before.

The beast held one of the excellent Bwana gourds securely against a hip, long fingers curled around the neck.

The opposite arm swinging with their curious, palm-out kind of way.

The linwelewana walked with rolling gait, reminding Eku of a recently weaned Abantu child; almost, but not quite ready for long distance.

He followed when the linwelewana ambled down the walkway of logs, glancing back once as Eku came after.

At the end of the walkway, the beast bent to a knee and shoved the gourd into the water so fluid began to gurgle in.

Eku approached cautiously, keenly feeling the rough logs beneath his feet, prepared for a quick pivot in the other direction; knowing that, while he could certainly not outclimb or outleap a linwelewana, he was confident of outrunning it.

Stopping at what he felt was a considerate distance, Eku figured that if the linwelewana showed any agitation, he would immediately retreat down the log walkway.

But the beast paid Eku no heed, content to watch water spill into the container, one hand clenched around the neck of the gourd, the other set on the logs, long fingers hairless and black, but with human looking knuckles and nails.

Eku more closely studied the beast.

Where an Abantu's head was block shaped and sat vertically on a slender neck, the linwelewana's head was egg-shaped and sat on a short and thick neck, as though tilted back.

The skin was dark and shiny, like a palm nut left in the sun with oil oozing.

The hair on the body was coarse and brown with hints of red around the face and groin.

Eyes deep-set below a heavy brow ridge that encircled each socket and continued partway down the cheekbone.

Flat nose with nostrils angled down, like a monkey's.

A robust jaw thrust forward.

The beast had strong shoulders, muscular arms and a round, hairless belly.

The legs were thin and shaped similar to his own, but the feet were hairy with the sturdy toes splayed out for grasping.

Most of the linwelewana's torso and upper legs were hairless.

Long hair clung to the spine, reddish and thick before fanning out and thinning above butt cheeks smooth and plump, like those of an Abantu baby.

Eku noted finer hair circled the head and neck, giving them a pretty look that made him think of how Yat said she felt an urge to stroke or pet them.

The beast turned and looked and Eku was shocked by how much the deep set eyes looked like his own.

The linwelewana set the full water gourd on the walkway and stood.

An adult male, full grown and a bit shorter than Eku.

The beast raised one of its extra-large hands and made a sing-song greeting with repetitive sounds, almost like grunts.

Eku said hello in Bwana and smiled nervously—aghast when the beast grimaced horribly, revealing large yellow teeth; though, he quickly realized the beast had merely smiled back.

The linwelewana nodded its head and said perfectly clear, "*ata*", which was the Bwana and Abantu word for freshwater, then emitted a torrent of squeaks and grunts, bent to lift the full gourd with its two strong hands and slipped past Eku to trudge back down the walkway of logs, balancing the container against its chest and belly.

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The linwelewana developed a commensalistic relationship with the humans of *ichi-Bwana*, which became something more due to catastrophic circumstances.

For generations, the two species knew of each other, particularly along the western-most enclaves of the salted sea.

They recognized their commonality and got along just fine—from a distance.

While food sources occasionally overlapped, it was never in a way that led to competition.

Humans were much larger and more aggressive and avoided; in fact, the secretive linwelewana made strenuous efforts to avoid contact with all large beasts.

The linwelewana inhabited a sprawling, freshwater delta, a humid mix of streams, marshes and bogs, with sporadic and hard to find dry islands, where they sheltered and raised families.

They ate a robust diet that included roots and fruit, eggs, birds, small animals and fish, but they were not hunters and did not use fire.

Most large beasts and therefore most predators dared not venture into the wetlands where the linwelewana thrived; though, water-tolerating leopards occasionally preyed upon them.

And then one day, the world changed radically.

A paradise turned terrifying.

In the midst of *sika-yaka*, the earth shook violently; soon after, water levels began to diminish, even as the rains continued.

When the dry season arrived, a calamity unfolded as huge portions of a vast wetland turned arid.

Streams went dry first.

Then the rivers.

Ponds emptied.

Bogs died and turned to rock.

Vast swamplands rotted and died the slowest.

The linwelewana were already starving when the bubinzwana descended from the northern highlands and began voraciously hunting them.

Unable to climb or hide because of leafless and dying trees, a last surviving clan fled eastward, able to find moist forests with large trees to the north of the salt lake.

From there, they watched the clash of two mighty species.

The linwelewana saw how the humans of the salt lake coalesced and forced the fearsome bubinzwana away, beasts the linwelewana considered all but invincible, far more terrible than even the leopards.

The linwelewana saw the Bwana as saviors.

The last surviving familial groups threw themselves at the mercy of the humans of the salt lake, living as close as possible, and eventually amongst them, a desperate act of survival in a world that had changed so dramatically.

In time, the linwelewana proved to be excellent helpers.

They procured and shared food with the humans and obeyed orders without protest, knowing that to remain near a Bwana encampment, was to remain alive.

When Uta led the new tribe east, a familial group of linwelewana tagged along.

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Eku has told Yathi all about the beautiful Bwana female with the laza pendant.

Of course, Yathi already knew who she was, having identified ALL of the Bwana females of an age similar to their own, at least by sight.

“She is tall and beautiful,” he agreed. Adding, “The Bwana females are all beautiful, but she is very beautiful.”

Yathi waved a hand to indicate the big hut side of *iliwi-kelele*, where they were currently heading, adding, “But I do not see her talking much. She’s not like Yat or Tar, who are always talking.”

“She does not talk much,” Eku agreed. “She is more like Maz. More watching than talking.”

Yathi smacked his arm. “I have seen the way you look at her.”

Eyes narrowing defensively, Eku snapped, “What do you mean?”

Yathi let his jaw go slack and lolled his tongue out; moaned and said, “How can she be so beautiful.”

Irritated, Eku said, “You are silly.” Looked at Yathi crossly and added, “And I do not do that. With the tongue, especially.”

The two wandered across the flat rock of *iliwi-kelele*, closer to the water, where the plateau was only a short hop to earth.

Eku jumped and made a beeline in the direction of the Bwana encampment.

Checked the log walkway.

The swim area.

Turned away from the river to look over the big hut.

Disappointed to not see any sign of the beautiful female with the laza pendant or even any of her friends.

Following Eku, Yathi continued a few steps in the direction of the Bwana encampment and said, “Maybe if we walk down there to see the big huts, you will see her. Find out who she is.”

He took a few more steps in the direction of the Bwana encampment. Gestured with both hands, adding, "See, we could just go down there now, by ourselves. Others do, all the time."

Eku, still looking past the big hut and down the length of *iliwi-kelele*, said, "Only adults."

"Not just adults," Yathi said. "Yat is over there all the time."

He walked over and smacked Eku in the arm again, feeling feisty. Ready to do something!

"Ouch! What?"

Yathi motioned with both hands through the oasis of papyrus and palm, toward the Bwana encampment, as though to indicate something big.

Arched his eyebrows and said, "You said you saw them!"

"What?"

"The big huts. I keep telling you, I want to see them too! Up close like you did."

Eku clicked yes and no. "I did not get a good look."

"Why not?"

"She was running too fast."

Yathi looked surprised and said, "You are fast."

Eku shrugged. "She is faster."

"But you must have seen something."

Eku shook his head in chagrin and said, "I almost fell over in their cooking area. I was just trying to not let her get away."

Fortuitously, as it would turn out, Dala and Longo happened to wander down the path from the Bwana encampment.

Yathi let out a happy squeal and said, "Maybe they can show us the big huts and you will see the beautiful Bwana female with the laza necklace you keep talking about."

Eku protested, "I do not keep talking...."

But Yathi was already hustling away, leaving Eku no choice but to follow.

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Dala and Longo have become great pals with Eku, Yathi, Goguk and Kolo.

The Bwana pair happened to be heading for *iliwi-kelele*, which had already become the gathering spot for all of the young people.

Trooping down the wide path along the river, wearing their usual zebra loincloths.



Dala was built slim, along the lines of Eku, while Longo was short and stout; prone to cracking jokes, similar in personality as Yathi.

Both Bwana males previously had long hair, now cut short like an Abantu.

Yathi ran up and shouted, "You cut your hair!"

"Many people are doing it," Longo said. "Especially with your sharp blades. And especially after Uta cut his hair."

Yathi said excitedly, "Can you take us to see the big huts?"

Dala and Longo quickly and enthusiastically agreed.

Coming up behind Yathi, Eku added, "If it is okay?"

Dala said, "People go see the big huts all the time. Everybody does. People walk in and out. They are for everybody. That is why Kafila only puts up skins for the inner chambers. So the people can come and go. You will see."

He pivoted to face the Bwana encampment and motioned, "Come with us."

Worriedly, Yathi said, "What about Uta and the nesibindi? They are always so stern."

Longo, still facing Eku and Yathi, said, "Sometimes Uta is there. Most of the time he is with Kafila or the nesibindi or the hunters."

The look of apprehension on both Yathi and Eku made him add, "Uta is only fierce to look upon. Do not be afraid. He is actually nice and likes to talk to children, but he is quiet much of the time, which makes him fierce to look upon. But do not worry, it is only his appearance."

Dala waved them forward, saying, "Come on. You must be respectful, that is all."

Both he and Longo started for the Bwana encampment.

Yathi and Eku shook off their momentary trepidation and followed eagerly; though, Eku had to admit he was nervous.

What would he do if he saw the beautiful Bwana female?

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The main trail along the river was flat and wide and they walked four abreast.

At the papyrus patch where she left him at the conclusion of their exhilarating chase, Eku said, "There is a female from your camp", which immediately got a click of approval from Yathi as well as the interest of the Bwana.

"Yes?" Dala asked.

"She is our age. This tall," and Eku held his hand slightly above his head as he walked.

Longo asked, "What does she look like?"

Ekus pondered for a stride or two, thinking of her wonderful eyes, the recently discovered freckles ... The way her laughter sounded so utterly joyous.

Ekus shrugged and blushed.

Seeing the look on his face, Longo smiled knowingly and said, "Oh! So she is beautiful."

Ekus nodded emphatically. "Yes. She is very beautiful. She wears a laza necklace."

Dala and Longo exchanged a quick glance, then looked at Eku, as though amused.

Longo smirked and said, "A polished rock with a color like the sky before nightfall?"

Nodding eagerly, Eku said, "Yes."

The four paused as young ones are prone to do, suddenly, in the center of the path, adults weaving around them in both directions, some with zebra loincloths, some wearing other skins.

Nearby, in a lone palm, a pair of green parakeets stood face to face on a cluster of fruit, bobbing and bantering.

Dala and Longo looked at each other again. Shrugged, as if sharing a secret.

Unnoticed by Eku, Yathi began to look worried.

The four resumed walking.

Ekus asked, "Do you know her name?"

"Ingwe," Longo said, as though it was something everyone knew.

"Well ... Ingwe is a very fast runner," was all Eku could think to say, and the Bwana burst into laughter.

Seeing Eku's look of embarrassment, Dala said, "Yes, Ingwe is the fastest. But that is not all. If you dare to chase her, good luck. You will need it."

The four followed the river into the Bwana communal area.

Ekus and Yathi trailed Dala and Longo past fire pits, around adults working skins, simmering stew, shooing away flies from cured meat and fish.

Ekus pondered what he learned.

Her name—Ingwe—spun like a shiny bauble in his mind.

Realized he was smiling, but couldn't help it.

The cleared encampment sprawled wide, gradually sloping up from the shoreline before leveling, where the three large huts stood imposingly amidst the tall palms.

Ekus's smile faded the more he looked around.

Fingered his springhare loincloth.

The Bwana were so impressive.

And he did not realize there were so many!

But then, none of the Bwana adults were paying them any heed.

“No one is looking at us,” he said to Yathi.

“That is good.”

“For sure.”

Yathi giggled. “Bwana adults ignore young people the same as Abantu adults—as long as chores are done!”

Ekus and Yathi began strutting with youthful exuberance, imagining themselves as important scouts from a far away land.

The big huts of the Bwana seemed to expand as they approached.

Distracted by so many strange faces and so much going on all around them, Eku nevertheless tried to give some attention to locating the female with the laza pendant.

There were groups of mothers in work clusters: working at cured skins or sinew; butchering small beasts; grinding seeds.

Young adults were gathered around the fishpit, hunched over the latest catch.

Suddenly, all Eku could see were the tall palms and then a great rise of roofing..

Yathi clicked rapidly in pure amazement and Eku reciprocated.

The big huts seemed to tower over the young Abantu.

There were many vertical poles and different sections of roofing; confusing, at first, as Eku had never seen a hut with more than a single room before.

From a distance, the huts gave both Yat and himself the impression of a spiraling conch, but up close, Eku saw the design was actually similar to the big hut of *iliwi-kelele*.

Instead of a removable tripod in the middle, a single tree served as a permanent, central beam, while the outside trees served as mooring, with hardwood poles hung horizontally as radial beams to a massive knot around the middle.

To give the enclosure multiple rooms, rafters of bamboo allowed skins of zebra, kudu and other antelope to hang and create different sections.

The foursome approached the largest, center hut, which stuck out toward the communal area more than the others, the largest at center and leading the others.

Ekus nervously looked up at the papyrus roofing as he approached the shaded area, rising so high overhead and underneath.

Gasped when Yathi clicked rapidly and he lowered his gaze to see rows of clay pots, lined up like people in formation.

How clever!

So many gourds!

And placed in a secure and dry place readily available for everyone to use!

Longo asked, "What do you think?"

"This is the best hut ever," Yathi breathed.

"For sure," Eku agreed.

The interior appeared deserted and they eagerly moved further under the upward sloped roof.

Because of so many hanging skins, and the large center trunk, Eku could not see the entirety of the enclosure and wondered what might be toward the back.

He and Yathi clicked rapidly, pointing out beautifully cured skins hanging from rafters.

Eku looked up, marvelling at the framework of rafters and central beams, from which hung the various tails of beasts and clusters of rotating feathers.

Catching movement from above, Eku looked up as a lone vervet monkey jumped from a lower rafter to a radial beam, where it climbed to the ponderously wrapped joint of the central mooring trunk.

Sat on a gnarled bunch of twisted cordage and looked down at Eku and Yathi, having recognized them as strangers.

Eku made a face and the vervet monkey showed its fangs.

Giggling, he smacked Yathi on the arm.

Yathi looked and Eku squinched his features into a funny face they both knew well. Pointed up at the monkey.

Yathi looked and giggled. Enthusiastic, he exclaimed, "Do it Eku! Show Dala and Longo. Do the monkey dance!"

The Bwana males had remained standing just inside the roofing, next to the rows of water gourds, enjoying their new friends' enjoyment of a hut that, while impressive, they saw every day.

Dala and Longo looked at Yathi and Eku curiously and stepped closer.

"This is funny," Yathi said. "Eku can be just like a vervet monkey. It is very funny."

He went to stand with Dala and Longo, giving Eku space.

Expectantly, the three looked at Eku, who smiled nervously.

"Go ahead," Yathi encouraged, waving his hands.

They were in the largest section of the big hut, open to the communal area sprawled behind them.

Hanging skins hid whatever was in back.

Comfortable with the amount of privacy, Eku settled into a crouch, knees splayed.

Rotated his head while his eyes darted side to side.

Lifted one knee high and dragged a foot, turning a tight circle with one arm stretched out as though tethered in the grip of another, like a juvenile monkey trying to escape its mother, contorting his body, showing agonized facial expressions.

Yathi, who has seen this act before, nevertheless bellows every time.

Eku's impression was so perfect, Dala and Longo instantly recognized what he was doing, vervet monkeys being universal comedy, after all.

Energized, Eku continued a well rehearsed routine.

With so much noise from so many people outside, he figured that no one else would pay attention.

Raised his voice, deciding this would be his best performance ever.

Looked for something interesting, which was easy to find in every direction.

Pointed and screamed shrilly at three zebra pelts hung overlapping.

Yathi, Dala and Longo bellowed laughter.

Eku made high-pitched chattering noises while spinning and frantically waving his arms.

More laughter.

When he observed a stack of grass baskets, such as those used for harvest, Eku bounced up and down, hooting loudly, as a vervet mother does when warning a little one.

Yathi, Dala and Longo held their stomachs and howled.

Eku stamped his feet and continued to hoot and squeak.

Shuffled for a closer look at hanging kudu pelts and there, behind the skins, previously hidden from view was the beautiful Bwana female with the laza pendant.

Ingwe lay on a grass mat, cheek rested on a palm, arm propped up by the elbow, waiting for Eku to see her.

And of course Eku froze, stuck in his silliest monkey face.

Ingwe sat up and made a face back; stood, and walked past the young males to exit for the community area, head held high.

Shocked, Eku remained standing where he was, but turned to watch her go.

Yathi looked at him worriedly, while Dala and Longo held hands over their mouths and tried to contain their laughter.

Perhaps, Eku might have been more embarrassed were it not for a combination of two things.

First, he was thrilled to see her, of course.

But second, was the indescribable feeling that came from having just learned that Ingwe's father was Uta, the tall and fierce and scarred nesibindi, leader of the Bwana tribe.