

Chapter 19

Gathering the Worms

A great feast was planned.

That was the good news.

When the mothers announced four straight days of harvest, Yathi howled in protest, while Eku grew only more excited.

The first day was grass day.

Alongside the boxthorn barrier, additional land was cleared of small trees and underbrush.

Being too close to the human encampment for antelope or zebras to tolerate, a thick carpet of ungrazed foxtail grass was ripe and ready for plundering.

Ulanga shone bright in a near cloudless sky.

The people moved in oscillating waves through waist high grass, stalks nodding over with amber bristles, hoppers taking flight before them with blurred wings, the air buzzing with their passage.

The seeded heads snapped off easily, Eku rubbing and bending the husks to coax millet into the basket hanging over his shoulder.

After gathering *waka-waka* bushels, the people marched below leafy mopane crawling with colorful caterpillars to where the bamboo patch rose, at the side of the encampment opposite *iliwi-kelele*.

In front of the bamboo grew a swath of sorghum, now higher than Eku was tall.

He and Yathi moved methodically through green stalks with flat bladed leaves, the spikelets at the top clustered with red seeds.

Slicing off the heads to drop into baskets.

The second day of harvest was in the water, downriver from the bamboo patch.

Eku and Yathi remained side by side, along with many others, wading into water grass with purplish thistles.

The mature reeds formed dense stands along the margins of *shatsbeli-lambo*, as well as bristly islands wherever the river ran shallow.

Further along the river from where the Abantu labored, elephants gathered, the adults wading into water halfway up to their bellies, using their trunks to yank up wads of reeds to cram into their mouths.

The people stayed well clear of where the elephants gorged.

Eku and Yathi slogged through muddied water up to the groin.

Ulanga felt hot.

Pesky river flies bounced off skin.

Purple-thistled water grass sprouted from the bottom, the stalks yellowish and thick at the base, separating at the surface into green leaf blades wrapped around a slender shoot that rose to a furry top.

Pulling up the main stem demanded a firm grip on a slippery stalk and Eku dunked his entire body underwater, wrapping both hands around the base before pushing off the bottom with the legs.

The dunking was a good way to stay cool and be rid of crawling bugs.

And the energy expenditure was worthwhile.

At this time of the year, the fat base of each stalk was loaded with sugary sap.

The root tubers would be boiled and pounded to soften and then ground to mix with sugar and make sweet cakes.

But first, the stalks had to be pulled from the muck and hauled to shore for chopping and soaking to separate the tubers and sugar.

Eku remained focused on getting the work done, while Yathi earned a periodic scolding from Yat, who had an uncanny ability to catch him every time he jammed a thick stalk between his teeth to frantically gnaw and suck in an attempt to get at the sweet juice inside.

The third day of harvest kept all of the young people at the center of the encampment, below the tall palms of the communal area.

Grinding seeds and mashing tubers gathered the previous days.

Eku and Yathi were not adept at mortar and pestle and performed cleanup duty, carting away detritus from the preparation area, moving bowls and baskets into place; keeping the communal area swept clean and handling requests from the mothers and *benzi-kusela*.

That was until Yat grabbed the two of them.

She and Tar and Maz and several other older females, led Eku and Yathi to a section along the river where different plants converged to wage madcap competition over limited, but robustly fertile growing areas.

Papyrus rose in a hedge parallel to the purple-thistled water reeds, next to a tangle of bushes and small trees, made more dense by a covering of vines that criss-crossed in every direction, now dripping with slender green pods.

Eku and Yathi joined the older females using knives to cut through the entangled vegetation, swatting insects, watching for snakes, snapping off the recurved pods with delicious round peas inside.

They dumped the pods into satchels and traced the vines to the ground to pull out the tubers, peeling the skin to reveal creamy flesh, which also went into the satchels.

The final day of harvest was the one that everyone looked forward to—the gathering of the worms.

“At last,” Yathi said. “A harvest that I like.”

“*Waka-waka* worms,” Eku said.

“*Waka-waka-waka* worms,” Yathi answered.

For the entirety of *lobo-yaka*, the mopane trees around camp have been under watch: bats and birds, monkeys and even elephants were kept away.

The trees were now loaded with engorged caterpillars.

The adults threw ropes and pulled heavily leafed boughs to the ground and the young people swarmed.

Every branch was a contest.

The caterpillars were finger length with plump segments, each segment nearly identical: vertical bands of yellow to white to yellow, speckled with black dots with an orange slash through the center.

Eku imagined his fingers were the beak of a black starling, snatching worm after worm after worm, careful not to squeeze too hard.

Yathi was equally enthusiastic, but not as dextrous and soon, green caterpillar guts splattered hands and arms.

The bountiful harvest kept a steady line of adults moving from to and from the food preparation area and the mopane, dumping full baskets of worms and rushing back with the empties.

Before long, piles of still squirming worms waited back at the center of the encampment.

Once again, the Abantu assembled in the communal area, under the tall palms.

Clean and shorn pelts and grass mats were spread anywhere Ulanga shined unobstructed.

The young people gathered in the shade, arranging themselves into groups, sitting or kneeling on the dirt in rough circles.

Eku sat next to Yatyambo.

Next to Yat were Maz and Tar, and then Sisi and Kat, who grew up in the same *laba-ini*.

Next to Eku were Yathi, Dokuk, Odi and Goguk.

The adults brought bushels of worms and turtle shells filled with water to each group of young people.

The process was simple: pluck a worm from a basket; pinch off the head; squeeze bright green guts onto the ground; toss the thick tube of the worm body into a turtle bowl for rinsing.

Soon, everyone began contesting with whoever sat closest.

Yathi made a bold challenge to the females over who could accumulate the bigger pile of caterpillar guts.

A mistake, Eku knew, but did not care because contests were fun.

Yat, Tar and Maz had amazingly nimble fingers and the females quickly assembled a small mountain of goo.

Adults weaved merrily in and out amongst the caterpillar-butchered young people, providing a steady supply of worms and replacing fresh turtle bowls.

Again, the enthusiasm of the young people made the process go quickly and piles of worm tubes fit for a feast soon glistened under Ulanga.

Everyone pinching and squeezing had green goop covering their hands and wrists.

And everyone had accumulated an impressive pile of caterpillar guts.

Unlike everyone else, Yathi managed to splatter green goo over a good portion of his young, but impressively proportioned body.

With the work done, all of the young people came to their feet, groaning after staying in the same position during the frantic competition.

Eku reached hands over his head to stretch.

Looked at Yathi doing the same and began laughing.

Arms in the air, Yathi offered a questioning look.

Giggling, Eku pointed at a dismembered caterpillar head plowing a path down the green sludge coating Yathi's belly.

In a moment of inspiration, Yathi bent, gathered a handful of caterpillar goo off the ground and hurled it at Eku.

A direct hit, splattering across Eku's face and torso.

Yat pointed at Eku and began to laugh hysterically, only to have Yathi promptly splatter her with an even larger handful.

And the mayhem began.

The adults ran away laughing as caterpillar guts began flying in every direction.

Soon, everyone had gobs of green slime hanging from hair, faces and bodies and once the grossness level exceeded tolerance, all of the young Abantu raced to be first into the river.

The day before the feast, the Abantu used rocks and shells and sticks to mark a path through camp.

Tree branches were decorated with dried mosses, bird nests, flowers and feathers.

As Ulanga disappeared in the direction upriver, Eku and Yathi gleefully raced through camp with other young people, helping to light the many small campfires along the pathway.

The entire tribe gathered along the route; Eku and Yathi settling at a good place to sit with Kolo and Goguk.

Tremendous shouting and chanting arose from *iliwi-kelele*, where the Bwana were gathered.

The Abantu clapped and cheered as the entire Bwana tribe marched along the set pathway.

Many wore brilliant costumes.

Mothers adorned in beautiful robes of feathers, much like the Abantu crafted in their homeland.

Flowing white herons, the rare yellow of a long-beaked ibis, and of course, the reds and pinks of flamingos.

Bwana males wore the skins of beasts: zebras and leopards and even a male lion, replete with furred mane.

Young Bwana wore masks such as the Abantu had never seen—elaborate combinations of skins and feathers, constructed to look like the head of a bird or beast.

Eku felt as though his heart would burst from his chest when he saw Ingwe.

She skipped along smiling and laughing with other Bwana females of her age.

Yathi hooted enthusiastically, as they were all beautiful, but Eku only had eyes for Ingwe.

She wore a short robe over her back, feathers of a unique, shimmering lavender, making him wonder what magnificent bird produced such plumage.

Eku followed Ingwe with his eyes until she danced from sight, yet another image implanted in his mind.

Forever.

The Abantu mothers no longer had their beloved feathered robes.

There has barely been time to keep up with new vests and loincloths, let alone the long days of leisure required to properly craft shells and ostrich beads into jewelry.

There are soft vests and wraps for the mothers, but nothing fancy.

The Abantu gathered silently at *iliwi-kelele* and marched to the Bwana village.

Assembling quietly in the open area in front of the big huts.

The Bwana also remain silent, out of respect.

They have made strong efforts to welcome their guests.

Many small fires burned bright.

Across the front of the big huts were enchanting displays of bone and shells and feathers and beads.

The feathered robes hang with other finery hung along the front beams.

The Abantu form an enormous, but compact crowd organized behind the mothers and benzi-kusela.

There was a moment of quiet anticipation amongst the Bwana.

And then, the Abantu began to sing.

Starting with the song they all first heard hummed by their mothers while in the womb, and then as they suckled.

They sang songs of harvest and the hunt.

Some songs started soft and rose in volume.

Others were slow and full of emotion.

Sometimes, the song changed suddenly in rhythm and tempo, and the Bwana spontaneously clapped and stomped their hands in enthusiastic participation.

But when all of the Abantu sang together, the simultaneous sound of their voices was pleasing in a way the Bwana have never experienced.

The voices of the Abantu echoed across *shatsbeli-lambo* and carried upriver to newly formed, cavernous gorges.

Eku and Yathi, like all of the people, belted out words with gusto.

Singing was as natural a part of their culture as breathing.

In front of Eku, the normally reserved Yat threw her head and sang with passion.

Her hair was combed and flowed down her back like a waterfall.

Eku noticed Bwana males gestured to Yat and touched above their hearts with a small bow.

He thinks maybe he will do that the next time he sees Ingwe.

Yathi was beside himself, convinced they were about to partake in the greatest feast in the history of the world.

“This really is the greatest feast,” he said to everyone.

“How could there ever be one bigger? Surely this is the biggest. For sure.”

Having heard the declaration enough, Eku said, “We had feasts at home.”

Yathi harrumphed. “But did we have Bwana sweet cakes before coming here?”

Eku clicked in a way that made Yathi grin and admitted, “They are my new favorite.”

When darkness fell, the entire population gathered at *Iliwi-kelele*.

There were people everywhere; in fact, Eku realized this might be the largest gathering he had ever participated in.

Mingling in the area along the water, across the flat of the rock slab, all across the work area of the *iziki-kosa*, and around the open area next to the big hut.

Fire pits were built to either side of the *zoba-upay* and light flickered and fluttered across the miniature cliff face.

Eku and Yathi went to see the latest updates.

Wutota used the Bwana's clever dyes to bring the display alive.

Painting inside and around the U-shaped outline that Tiuti scratched.

Better bringing to life the picture of their known world.

Wutota used a pale paste to paint wavy lines on three sides to show the vastness of Uwama. Used the same paste to draw in the large rivers which crossed Umawa to enter Uwama as the tribe moved up the coastline.

Shatsheli-lambo was by far the heaviest line, traversing nearly all the way across Uwama, veering north of the roundish shape at the heart of the drawing, filled with the same pale paste and wavy lines as Uwama—*ichi-Bwana*.

While the puddle-like representation of *ichi-Bwana* and the thick line of *shatsheli-lambo* dominated the zuba-upay, Eku knew that the easy-to-miss pale line that stretched vertically at the very top of the zuba-upay had become the focal point of the drawing: the south-flowing river that connected *shatsheli-lambo* to the endless lake of freshwater, painted in as a pale spot near the top of the cliff face.

Perhaps, because of the flicker of the firelight, Eku thought the *zoba-upay* at times seemed to hover in front of the rock, becoming separate somehow, as though floating.

An image rising from the rock of Umawa to show the entirety of their known world.

Festivities officially began with a presentation in front of the *zoba-upay*.

The new tribes first young mothers are announced, their babies introduced to the new tribe all together for the first time.

There were five new Abantu babies, including Doagu's male child, named Pume.

There was a newborn amongst the Mantel and three more from the Bwana.

A total of nine births to extol.

Once the introductions were over, Eku and Yathi got in the long line with everyone officially greeting the new babies into the tribe, giving blessings.

Doagu, smiling, looked tall and proud and happy.

She wore her cap with the spiraling design and a vest of soft and supple skin, decorated with feathers of white.

Yathi, now a proud uncle, called out “Pume,” and the tiny baby pulled away to look at the familiar voice, Doagu’s nipple popping from its mouth and dribbling.

Many people—especially the females—took turns holding the babies.

Amongst the Abantu newborns were three males and two females.

The females would be members of the first *laba-ini*, which was set to rapidly expand as *waka-waka* young females showed pregnant bellies.

An odd number of males might have left Pume without an *ikanabe*, but a Bwana mother named Gakila had befriended Doago.

Upon learning of the Abantu tradition, Gakila offered her newborn male named Takila to Doagu and Pume; thus, the pair were the first Abantu and Bwana males to become *ikanabe*.

The first Bwana and Abantu to merge as one family.

The feast exceeded even Yathi’s wildest expectations.

Mopane worms were the main course.

Worms coated with beast grease and sprinkled with tangy spices.

Worms mixed with fresh fruit.

Worms minced and spread as a bed for roasted fish, antelope and hagu.

And most importantly, more sweet cakes than even Yathi could eat.

Cakes of ground nuts mixed with honey; ground tubers mixed with the sweetest nectar and rolled into balls; mashed nuts mixed with sugar from the river grass and rolled into flat pieces and dried to a crunchy, delicious crust.

There were gourds of fermented juice that made Eku’s head feel funny, but nice; and soon, Eku, Yathi, Goguk and Kolo—all of the young people, could not stop laughing.

Or stop eating.

A bonfire was lit in the flat area between the big hut and the water.

Hollowed logs were rolled into place.

A pounding rhythm began that reminded Eku of many hooves running.

Despite full bellies, the vigorous drumming has people on their feet.

The pounding has a visceral effect, the beat travels through the air and into Eku’s stomach and chest to fill his body and quicken his heartbeat in a way that makes him feel strong, indefatigable.

Flames from the bonfire soar even higher than the big hut.

A thick bundle of dried papyrus, mounted at top with long and dry fronds, became an explosion of white flames and sparks whooshing upward.

Rattles and shakers were brought forth and Eku and Yathi joined a wave of young people dancing around the bonfire.

Goguk and Kolo joined them and the young people threw their arms in the air and bounced.

Eku spotted Ingwe, cavorting with her friends and felt a burst of longing.

He left Yathi and the others to move outside the circle of dancing to watch.

Ingwe dancing was the most beautiful thing he has ever seen.

Her eyes, as always, seemed to sparkle and her skin glowed in the firelight.

Unlike the Abantu, the Bwana had no restrictions for males dancing with females, and when Ingwe danced with others, including Dala and Longo, Eku felt jealous.

Scolded himself for feeling that way.

Inka, naked and dancing at the beach feast came to mind.

Ingwe had the same kind of beauty.

Somehow even more so.

Fuel was piled onto the fire and the flames roared again, rising in a way as though to reach for bloated Yanga, now arcing across the water.

Eku tried to forget about Ingwe and rejoined Yathi, Goguk and Kolo.

He bounced and shook shakers with his tribemates and began to have fun again.

But then he spotted Yat dancing with Ingwe and grew terribly envious.

Eku scolded himself.

Yat was his sister and he loved her ... But Eku could not help the barrage of feelings cascading through his mind.

He found he could not stand to see Ingwe standing close to anyone else.

Eku did not like the way that made him feel and remained on the periphery of the dancing.

Yathi, overjoyed by so much food and dancing and so many females could only stare perplexed when Eku wandered away to be by himself.

But when Yathi saw the way Eku stood alone and watched Ingwe and understood.

Unfortunately, Yathi also noticed *waka-waka* other young males watching Ingwe.

Both Bwana and Abantu.

Many were the same age as Dokuk.

Some were even older.

Ingwe was a prize above all others.

Yathi figured that many males would consider her unattainable ... While others would not.

When the drummers took a break there was a rush for the water by the young people, while many adults snuck off in the opposite direction.

Yathi went to get Eku, only to find him angry and sad.

In no mood to swim, Eku shooed Yathi away, knowing he needed to put his sweaty body in the river water.

When Yathi hesitated, despite sweat all over his face and body, Eku said, “Go find Kolo and Goguk. I will see you after.”

“For sure?”

Eku clicked yes.

Yathi clicked that he was skeptical, but turned and ran for the river.

Eku sat in the dirt and stared at the fire.

Adults continued to sneak away in pairs and he wondered how many new babies would be made tonight.

Wonders if Ingwe noticed him.

Maybe the chase—so triumphant and memorable for Eku—was simply something for her to do at that particular moment.

Relieve temporary boredom.

Forgetting about him as soon as it was over.

Eku vowed to spend the entirety of the next day throwing his *ula-konto*.

Told himself that nothing else mattered.

He would practice *ibe-bonakalio*.

He would throw his *ula-konto*.

He would become a hunter.

Forget about Ingwe.

When the drummers took a break, Ingwe raced across the hard-packed dirt slope with many others.

She loved running.

Everyone said she was fast, which was nice, but it was fun to simply run and feel the breath of Ulayo, no matter if you were the fastest.

Nevertheless, Ingwe was among the first to reach the swimming area.

Splashed into warm water up to her thighs.

There were so many people!

Her friends were suddenly all around and they laughed and splashed together.

After a moment, Ingwe drifted away, the way she liked to sometimes.

To have a moment to herself.

The bonfire glowed yellow and orange a short distance up the embankment.

Yanga floated large in the center of the sky, about a half circle. The night was clear enough to show the details of his one side.

Waist deep in the water, Ingwe looked across an ever-changing reflection of black and silver shimmer, pierced by the silhouettes of human heads and torsos.

Studying the different shapes to eventually frown.

Dunked under again, relishing the feel of sweat washing from skin.

Shatsbeli-lambo was warm, but felt wonderful after so much dancing.

Dancing to drums and shakers was one of her favorite things to do.

Along with running, of course.

Ingwe was especially happy to have danced with the Abantu female named Yatyambo.

Though Yat was older, Ingwe felt that she knew her in a way that females know things without having to talk.

Because Ingwe has noticed Eku.

Very much so.

The attraction between them was spontaneous and overwhelming and only growing stronger.

Ingwe knew that Yat was Eku's sister and purposefully sought her out.

Ingwe has for some time felt the gaze of young males upon her, but none of them were interesting.

Well, not *that* much.

Maybe for an occasional chase.

If they were up to it.

And they are always afraid, because of her father.

Eku was not afraid and he almost caught her on the best chase ever!

The Abantu male was persistent. For sure.

And he was interesting!

Nervous. Often silly, the way young males can be.

And Ingwe *likes* the way he looks.

She can't help it.

Eku was bright and attentive.

She felt something different when she saw him now.

Something powerful, settling in her belly.

Ingwe told her mother about Eku.

Kafila only listened and smiled and told Ingwe to take her time and make the young male work a little.

Ingwe noticed Eku talking with the tall, wise one named Tiuti, the one her mother and father and especially Wutota held in such esteem.

Tiuti talked to Eku like he was already an adult.

Ingwe has also noticed the way that others of his own age act around Eku.

She guesses that he will be a leader someday, like her father; though, he probably doesn't know it yet.

Ingwe fingered the pendant once worn by the mother of her older, twin brothers.

She looked for Eku once more, but did not see him and was disappointed.

Ingwe desperately wants to talk to Eku, but has not allowed it.

Not yet.

She is the child of Kafila and Uta.

Eku must prove himself.