

Part 3

Land of Legend

Skulls of beasts glared from the cliffside.

Row after row of skulls placed upon ledges striated across a sheer wall of rock.

Set there as a warning for unwitting trespassers.

Elephant skulls, like pale boulders, the tusks curved from the rock face.

Hippo skulls, jaws propped agape to expose the wicked fangs.

Skulls of the mighty buffalo, dark horns curved forward like conjoined crescent moons.

And other kinds of elephants, with skulls square across the top, fat tusks protruding from the bottom of the jaw, tapered to a sharp point, like enormous spikes.

The old alpha stood upon a silted shore at the base of the wall.

Bent and turned so the sabertooth pendant dangled from his neck as he watched the younger males climb to inspect the awe-inspiring display.

The skulls were arranged here many cycles ago, as it turned out; some of the bones were crumbling to dust, but no doubt put here to mark the hunting grounds of a once mighty clan.

The old alpha almost felt joy.

His kind would rule here again; place fresh skulls upon these walls of rock.

But first, there was hunting to do.

The clan continued upriver, leaving the cliff of skulls untouched, out of respect.

Traveling, always difficult, has been tedious.

Young males, impatient by default, are overly aggressive.

There are not enough females.

The Alpha has forbidden fighting, not even to relieve tension between rival packs.

Their numbers are dangerously low.

All of the females had bellies with little ones, which was good, but that meant limited options for sex and procreating, which was bad.

At least food was plentiful.

And finally, mountains in every direction.

The clan could settle here; be content, having at last found a place similar to home.

But the problem of too few females would persist.

Typically, in a healthy clan, females outnumbered the males; sometimes, the ratio skewed more when an Alpha was killed and the males schemed and battled to establish a new, ruling alliance.

If numbers shifted too far one way, fighting over access to females would not abate.

If numbers shifted too far the other way, they would be raided by a rival clan, intent on taking the females they could not protect.

Every clan member instinctively knew that a proper balance was necessary for its survival.

While crossing the rotting wetlands, the old alpha watched helplessly as many died.

And when the flat faces surprised them by viciously attacking back, their numbers—especially the females—were reduced more critically.

Making matters worse, successful births were rare since leaving the land of the forebears.

The females were unambiguous in the need for permanent caves for that to change.

While the young males wanted more females.

The new land overflowed with prey.

The nearby mountains would surely have caves.

The remaining problem would be solved by doing what came naturally to a bubinzwana—raiding another clan and taking some of its females.

The flat face clan so irritatingly following them up the river would fortuitously become prey.

Flat face females grew large and funny looking, but would suffice for the time being, if for nothing else than sex.

They would raid the flat face clan of its young females and escape into the mountains.

But the old alpha was wary of the plan.

He wanted revenge, of course, but taking females would motivate the flat faces.

And that worried the old alpha.

For most of his life, the old alpha was anchored in the belief that all creatures were either prey or predator.

Only his kind was the greatest predator.

The supreme predator!

But the flat faces changed the rules.

Acting as prey when left alone, but once attacked, continued to behave as a herd—only to change into a single, mighty predator, as amazingly as a caterpillar transformed to a butterfly.

The old alpha urged caution, but the young alpha knew the clan was desperate.

Chapter 22

Waterfalls and Danger

The tectonic upwelling of the African continent is pronounced across the eastern plateau.

The result is a vast area of earth much higher than its surroundings.

The surface level of the great lake for which the migrating Abantu were destined rests over 500 meters above sea level.

A single river drains the enormous body of water, exiting from the southern tip to flow sluggishly across an elevated plain.

The river continues south, descending an escarpment canyon, along the way, tearing through gorges to arrive at a narrow plain, where the river widens and calms and eventually joins the Zambezi.

The people have journeyed the length of the narrow plain, a land the Abantu committed to song as the forest of the elephants.

Before the new tribe rose hills and then mountains, where the land of legend beckoned.

The south flowing river carved a path to reveal the way.

The land was different, the river as well.

Frothy white flanks formed wherever rocks protruded from the swift center channel, the movement of gray water creating a constant, wet hiss, leading Yathi to say out loud what Eku was thinking: "I keep thinking I hear rain."

Eku said, "Uwama is calling her water home."

"She must be saying hurry. The water is moving too fast. I do not want to swim here."

"For sure."

Eku marveled at how the fast-moving water chewed away Umawa's soft spots, exposing a chute of bedrock and smashed stone.

The flow of deep time molded sediment, silt and other material into banks and terraced levees along canyon walls.

Boulders battered into rounded shapes crowded the shoreline, the gaps filled with smaller stones and sand-like sediment.

To either side of the main chute, the outer floodplain yielded a fringe of soil, where twisted trees, bushes and vines battled over every scrap of dirt, forming a barrier too dense for humans; thus, the tribe followed the contours of the inner floodplain, careful to avoid the turbulent main channel.

Eku and Yathi picked their way through a jumbled barrier of crumbled rock and bush, padded across soft silted shores and waded through shallow pools, following the path set by the lead hunters.

Above a tangled margin of green, the canyon rose steeply on each side, rough and forbidding with sharp-angled boulders and puffy, pale green bushes that Eku thought looked like full bladders, sure to tumble at the first, hearty puff from Ulayo.

He and Yathi were hardened from travel; nevertheless, trekking such rugged land took a toll.

The steeper inclines required that legs and arms were put equally to work.

Eku stuck his fingers into cracks in the bedrock and tugged at seemingly indestructible tufts of bristle grass, tenaciously clinging to miniature fault lines.

Yat and Eku and Yathi took turns pushing each other's butts, grabbing hands and wrists, hauling each other over the debris piles left from the most recent flooding.

When the slope temporarily leveled, slabs of flat bedrock worn smooth from water and time and warmed from Ulanga's fire offered a pleasant texture for their feet.

The easy parts did not last.

The price of progress could be painful.

A slip meant a crack to the shin, a bruised knee, a swollen elbow; thus, the tribe stopped frequently for rests, sharing snacks of fruit pulp and cured flesh.

While the center channel remained dangerous, side chutes formed deeper pools, cool and refreshing, with a taste that reminded Eku of the rivers of home.

Such a difficult environment left the canyon free of large beasts. The danger level was minimal and the tribe became strung out in small groups.

When the hunters led them across a broad terrace of open bedrock, the tribe stopped to rest and regroup.

The terrace was wide and flat, split into two levels.

The river flowed exclusively through a fissure on the far side of the canyon.

Eku marvelled at how the pull of Uwama and the shape of the fractured bedrock turned the channel into a narrow and powerful force.

He and Yathi stepped as close as they dared, looking over a jagged edge of stone at white water roaring past with furious wetness.

Spray tickled their faces and bodies and they stepped nervously back.

Away from the path of the water was only flat bedrock, nothing but cracks in the caprock and scattered pebbles before the desiccated remains of too-bold vines announced the beginning of the green border.

Though wide open, the area was crowded and Eku saw the terrace above remained largely unoccupied, once they surmounted the separating riser.

He urged Yathi forward and at the same time, spotted his mother.

Krele occupied the path they wanted, hands on hips, feet planted wide, standing with leg muscles tense in front of a group of nesibindi, including a young and stalwart male with a wrapped leg.

When Krele's voice rose shrill—even above the tumult of the water—Eku turned to share a worried look with Yathi.

Eku's mother was *always* soft spoken, but on the rare occasions that her voice rose—look out!

Krele used the few Bwana words that she knew (as well as a few choice Abantu ones) to admonish the muscular warrior in front of his comrades.

The injured nesibindi towered over Krele and bowed his head.

Shuffled to sit on a nearby boulder and stretched the injured leg out, grimacing as he did so, as Krele nodded knowingly.

The leg was swollen and wrapped with poultices that she knelt to remove and freshen while the nesibindi sat perfectly still, the look of rebuke on his face one that Eku was all too familiar with.

As Yathi and Eku trod past, Krele looked up and smiled.

Eku automatically smiled back, as always, finding his mother's swift transformation from the most terrifying to the most loving person unnerving.

There was a brief, but steep climb before them.

Eku went down on all fours, sealskin satchel, bed mat and *ula-konto* strapped securely to his back.

Clambered around a pile of stone dumped from the last deluge and up a short, but steep incline, the chute of the river hissing to the left.

Behind him, Krele continued to scold the nesibindi for being too proud to allow his comrades to carry him over the difficult parts so that his wound would heal faster.

Eku looked opposite the water and saw green pigeons with red stripes on wings and tail, bobbing along the flat, but steep incline, equidistant between the hard-working humans and the tangle of green.

The birds walked easily, and seemed to mock Eku with their head-bobbing-forward strut.

He said, "You are wondering where we are going."

Down on all fours behind him, Yathi answered, "I have been wondering since we left home. This is as bad as the jungle."

"For sure," Eku said, though he was kind of enjoying the challenge.

Higher up the escarpment, the climb became steeper, the terrain more rugged, the chute more narrow.

Eku marveled at the power of Umawa, so distant, yet able to call her water home so powerfully.

The river surged down the slope with a hiss comparable to the pounding of her waves during storm

The shorelines of sediment vanished, leaving enormous rocks that made Eku think of teeth along a jawline.

Boulders bulged like cracked molars along each side of the swiftly moving water; some collapsed into the channel to create standing waves that splashed upward with frothy fingers; Eku became fascinated at how the water trapped so much of Ulayo's breath inside, becoming vibrantly alive, an opaque and white beast flowing swiftly past.

Like Ulayo and her mother were having fun together, Eku thought.

He imagined the ravine as the resting place of an ancient and enormous *ir-hamka*, a giant that died and left a trail of pale and crumbling vertebrae, teeth and other bones through which the white river flowed.

He told Yathi his idea and he said, "Maybe the rocks are the bones of an *ir-hamka*, like a giant snake? A giant snake that lived before the terrible times and then died."

"For sure," Eku said. "Like a giant jungle snake, but waka bigger."

"*Waka-waka* bigger. Like this silly mountain."

The young males bumped shoulders when forced to a stop.

Eku's jaw dropped.

Yathi gasped.

The tribe was a long parade of people strung out along the rocky river bed.

Ahead of them, on either side, vertical walls of rock.

A deep gorge from which the river emerged with even more, violent turbulence.

Impassable.

As the tribe settled, Kaleni and Nibamaz led a group of hunters up a canyon wall to determine what to do next.

The original tribes mingled as they marched, but generally remained in familiar, familial groups.

Eku gazed longingly down the escarpment, knowing that Bwana families marched close to the nesibindi, who trailed behind his group, led by Abantu hunters.

Yathi clicked to Eku and used his eyes to show where he spotted Yat, Tar and Maz, ahead of them, on an opportune, gentle slope of exposed bedrock, using their sacks and bed mats as backrests.

Yathi started forward and Eku followed.

Wearing only loincloths, the older females had long legs stretched out on the flat rock, enjoying the warmth of Ulanga from above and below.

Yat, Tar and Maz were originally part of an enormous *laba-ini* on the southern shores.

Tar was the daughter of Nyama and Nibamaz.

Maz was the daughter of Sulu and Juka.

Eku realized he once had a crush on Maz; only now, having met Ingwe, he knew that falling in love was an overwhelmingly more powerful experience.

Besides, Maz was so much older.

Her eyes and thighs were still lovely and he thought of her with affection ... Just different now.

Like Yat, Maz and Tar still had long hair.

Eku clicked and Yat clicked back that it was okay to be near their opportune spot.

He and Yathi gratefully set down satchels and settled comfortably upon the warm rock, close to the older females—but not too close.

Dokuk and Odi approached, sharing silly smiles.

Dokuk confidently sat next to Yat, but Tar clicked at Odi in a way that said *scram* and Maz simply rolled her eyes to show she was not interested.

Odi, despite the heat of the canyon, still wore his vest with the beads and tails.

Disappointed, he sat next to Eku and Yathi.

There were people all around, planted on rocks, squatting on the ground, standing and sharing snacks.

Adults clustered next to a calm, off-channel pool, drinking or filling bladders or bathing.

Ulanga was warm, but Ulayo's breath was enough to make the heat comforting.

The steady passage of the river soothed, washing away all other sound; and soon, the young Abantu eyes were closed, but for Eku's.

He gazed over great slabs of exposed bedrock, people scattered everywhere.

Looked up the escarpment, trying to see past the gorge and knew there was still much to climb.

Sighed, feeling suddenly very comfy on the warm rock.

This was nice.

They had plenty of water.

The hunters would figure out what to do next.

The scent of the warm air was similar to open stretches of savannah, but baked bland by the stone, without the richness of foxtail grass.

There were the comforting scents of his tribemates.

Smells of Uwama himself emanated from the rock, but whitewashed, devoid of any character, the way the noise of the river hushed other sound.

Ekus eyes were finally beginning to droop when the hunters returned.

The mothers announced a demanding climb awaited.

Rather than pause, the hunters encouraged speed as cloud cover appeared, and was fast thickening.

Getting away from a river in a canyon with rain approaching was probably a wise idea.

Winding along a path cut through the bramble of the floodplain, Eku and Yathi found the terrain barren, almost exclusively rock.

Very steep.

Yathi said, "This is like the beaches of Uwama, where the sand is gone."

"For sure," Eku said.

Yathi was thinking of the beaches back home, with shorelines of rock rather than sand.

The rocks of the escarpment ranged from miniature mountains to boulders, but there was enough scattered stone with pointy spots to make the placement of feet a delicate matter.

Even the smooth, puffs of green Eku saw from below proved an attestation to the harsh landscape, becoming up close, wind-bent snarls of boxthorn so dense with spines one would not dare grab on for purchase.

Ekus and Yathi spent most of the climb on all fours, testing each foothold before planting and shifting.

Some adults were forced to stop and put protective coverings of hide and sinew on their feet.

A pair of young adults stayed close to Tiuti, helping him to surmount the difficult incline.

Having scaled the canyon, the people wound single file through wind-warped junipers that somehow managed to gain purchase in the cracks and fissures along the top of the gorge.

Ekus and Yathi held hands and crept to the edge to look down.

Clicked rapidly back and forth.

Awed at the vertical walls of rock and the frothy white path of water below.

Like white blood pulsing through a vein, Eku thought.

Found the churning of the water hypnotic and wanted to stay and watch, but a steady rain began to fall.

The tribe kept moving.

Though not hard, the rain was steady.

Ulaya became mischievous, paying brief visits to fling stinging sheets against their skin so that even burly Yathi began to complain from the cold.

The people marched across rock slabs with little soil to absorb the rainwater, treading carefully where the water pooled.

Such unforgiving land was not conducive for camping and the tribe continued into the night.

Eventually the rain stopped and sore feet begged for a halt.

Yanga emerged as a bright crescent, casting eerie illumination upon a bleak landscape of bedrock and boulders.

Wherever a gap or fissure offered purchase, rugged junipers formed jaggedy rows of twisted branches that seemed to claw at the sky.

Ulayo's breath chilled for the first time in *waka-waka* days.

With few hides for warmth and all of them soaked by rain, the people huddled close.

Wedged between Yat and Yathi in a half seated position, back propped against a wet mound of satchels and sacks, Eku did not expect to sleep, but nodded off.

And dreamed.

He and Yathi were alone in a dense, green jungle.

Shouting for help, but the thick vegetation absorbed all sound.

They struggle to push past giant ferns with pinnules thick and prickly.

Eku checked to see if blood was drawn.

Too dark to see, he reached for Yathi, feeling the strength of the muscles in his back.

Together, they emerge onto a plateau of rock and the jungle faded mysteriously behind.

Ulayo's breath was strong and Eku leaned his slight frame into the fast moving air.

A sound rose.

A buzzing, easily heard over the whistle Ulayo made in his ears.

A column of water flowed across the top of the rock, near where he stood with Yathi.

The buzzing came from the water, which followed a controlled path as a river does, but impossibly through the air.

Like the water down a gorge, but without needing walls for support.

Maybe this is what Tiuti means, Eku thought.

When he talks of a place of only rock and water.

No life.

Umawa and Uwama, at their purest.

As though he spoke out loud, Yathi replied, "But the water is trapped here."

Ekü was suddenly exhilarated!

They are going the wrong way.

They have been all along!

He should have known.

Excited, he turned to tell Yathi, but ... He cannot speak!

Yathi was looking away, at people.

Their tribe or another tribe.

Too far away to tell.

Yathi walked toward the people.

Ekü went to follow, but his movements were slow.

In fact, he could barely lift his foot off the ground!

He cannot talk or move!

Straining mightily, Ekü took a single, agonizingly slow step that took so long that Yathi and the people disappeared into the jungle.

And now the jungle vanished.

Again!

Ekü was ... ALONE!

With only rock and the wrong flowing water.

As if the situation could get worse, Ekü realized he was unable to breathe.

Yet ... Not suffocating?

Impossible.

He whipped his head in all directions.

To find Yathi.

To find anyone.

But Ekü was alone on the rock with the wrong flowing water.

He tried to remember where he was.

Landmarks.

Beaches and rock escarpments.

The fantastic jungle trees.

Endless locations memorized every day, a habit drilled into Eku since weaning.

But there was only rock.

And water.

He knew he needed to breathe, but there was no air.

The world began to spin and everything went black.

Terrified, Eku opened his eyes to realize he was dreaming.

Felt strange, being warm where he was pressed against Yat and Yathi, but cold everywhere skin was exposed.

Ulayo had pushed the clouds away.

The endless space above Uwama was a dark blanket overlayed by infinite stars.

Yanga offered a pure slice of white from the edge of his nightly world, casting shadows long with sharp edges.

Eku looked at his mother, pressed against Yat.

Her arm was draped protectively over his sister's upper body.

Both of their eyes were closed tightly.

They looked uncomfortable.

Troubled.

He wondered if mother and Yat were also having bad dreams.

Rotated his head to look past Yathi, past Aunt Shona and Uncle Lume and then *waka-waka* tribemates.

An otherwise bleak landscape, but the angle of Yanga's light over interwoven limbs and smooth skin offered inky shadows of human symmetry.

Eku wondered where his father was, but knew very well that the most experienced hunters do not rest during times of struggle.

They were out ensuring the next stage of this difficult passage was safe.

A hunter always found the way.

A gray sky swiftly changed to laza.

The people rose stiff and sore and bleary eyed, but Ulanga grew warm and sore joints loosened.

Water bladders were passed around and dried fruit and meat shared.

Eku told Yathi of his dream as they moved amidst the parade of people, making their way gingerly across terrain savaged by geologic activity.

Yathi looked thoughtful for a moment, then said with a faith that inspired and humbled Eku, "You could find us the way home."

"I do not know."

"You could."

"I would not want to have to."

"For sure. But the first thing you should do is find something to eat. That is what we should be doing now. Except there is nothing on all these rocks except nasty trees."

"They are nasty, for sure."

"Even an elephant would not eat them, probably," Yathi grumbled. "Where are we going, anyway?"

No doubt the enduring question, Eku thought, peering ahead.

A long line of people walked no more than two or three abreast, winding across indestructible caprock, where only Umawa's most powerful squeeze could create the narrow fissures necessary for caches of debris and soil and thus, the indestructible junipers.

Luckily, the tribe did not have to remain above the river much longer.

Once clear of the gorge, the canyon walls became less steep and the chute widened.

Further up the canyon, Eku saw fringes of forest growing outside the cross-bedded layers of the floodplain.

The people descended to the chute of the river and continued ascending the escarpment.

Eku thought the river had become like a great stairway.

Each tread was a settled area, slow moving with deep pools.

Each riser, a series of falls over rocks stacked like the scutes of a turtle shell, but without the spacial perfection, white water cascading through the fractures.

Ulanga burned hot, making the previous night seem like a bad dream.

The tribe frequently stopped for rest and snacks.

Eku and Yathi, like many of the young people, ignored the chance to rest; instead, scrambled to slide down gushing chutes, dunked each other in plunge pools, and ducked under miniature waterfalls.

The grade of the slope continued to ease and the wooded areas along the river broadened.

There were sightings of plant eaters, including duiker and bushbuck and small monkeys in the trees.

When the lead hunters came upon a spectacular waterfall that fell into a beautiful plunge pool, they stopped to replenish.

A wide and vertical face of granite resulted in a stunning waterfall.

The river flowed thick over the top and spread horizontally as it tumbled down.

About halfway, where the erosional forces of cascading water undercut the softer rock below, the cliff steepened and the water became a solid sheet of white, plunging straight down to a bubbling froth.

The impact of the water created a vibrant hum that sent a pulse through Umawa to the soft spots of Eku's feet.

The center of the basin was deep, a gradient of light to dark laza, like the iris and pupil of a misshapen eye.

Boulders marbled tan and gray enclosed the pool, crowned by bright green moss.

Bushes encircled the rocky shoreline, healthy from the constant moisture, with fat green leaves and long, tubular pink flowers.

No sooner had the decision been made to settle, when Yathi, Eku and other young Abantu began leaping into the water.

The adults made no effort to stop them.

Abantu were raised as swimmers and divers and the enticement of such a beautiful setting was simply too much.

Young Bwana and Mantel more tentatively followed.

Centuries of erosional forces hollowed the base of the cliff and a cave-like space behind the waterfall was quickly discovered.

Eku, Yathi, Dokuk, Odi and Yat and Tar and Maz and Sisi—eventually all of the young Abantu were soon weaving along the shoreline to disappear behind the waterfall, only to come hurtling through the wall of water for an exhilarating, but safe pummeling.

Many people floated around a spacious swimming area.

The top half of the waterfall had ledges to picnic across and familial groups fanned out around and above the beautiful pool.

Eku and Yathi bobbed in the water.

Using arms to paddle and legs to kick, Eku kept his head high and looked around.

Spotted his mother along the shore, tending to the wounded nesibindi.

Aunt Shona was nearby, with Luvu and Nyama, calling for anyone not swimming to come explore beyond the shoreside for anything worth harvesting.

Making Eku wonder if it might be worth leaving the water and grabbing his *ula-konto* to tag along.
But then he spotted Ingwe amongst a group of Bwana females headed their way.

Eku and Yathi swam around the base of the waterfall.

Watching the Bwana females.

Eku has seen the females of his tribe naked countless times, but when Ingwe removed her loincloth and let down her hair and entered the water, he felt a new kind of thrill.

This was something different.

For sure.

A loincloth did not really hide anything to begin with, but the removal signified another level of intimacy between the tribes.

Her body was perfect, Eku thought.

Limbs long and supple and strong.

The amount of hair between her legs showed Ingwe was maturing a bit faster than him, but she still had some growing to do.

Like himself.

Unexpectedly, Eku felt his penis stir and frantically tried to think of something else.

Impossible, once those things started.

Ingwe saw Eku staring and waved.

Eku smiled and blushed and waved and his penis calmed down, for which he was enormously relieved.

He and Yathi were nearly as indefatigable in water as on land and stuck to the deeper area, swimming close to the waterfall with some of the “older” young people, including Tuve, Dokuk and Odi, Yat, Tar and Maz.

Yathi clicked at Eku with delight when Sisi and Kat swam over, but clicked with disappointment when he saw Bot determinedly trailing.

Everyone was diving to see who could touch the bottom, when Ingwe suddenly bobbed beside Eku, having swam over while he was underwater.

Eku was pleased to see that Ingwe was a good swimmer, even for an Abantu (yet another reason she was perfect).

The two grinned themselves silly and swam away from the sound of the waterfall, so they could more easily talk.

Reached a place so their feet touched bottom.

Stood, still grinning, the shoreline showing dark rocks, bright green bushes and pink flowers.

Ingwe was tall enough to remind Eku that all she wore was the necklace.

Ulanga's fire made the wet pendant sparkle between her breasts and Eku blurted, "Your necklace is very beautiful."

"My father had this made special for the mother of my brothers. He found the stone and Wutota made it shine.

"After she died, he kept it for a long time. He gave it to me after I was born and not little anymore.

"It is very important to me. And very important to my father."

Moved and feeling the need to respond, Eku said, "My father's necklace has four talons of the fish eagle."

"I am told that is special. My father talks of your father often. He likes him very much."

Eku's smile broadened. He had not known that and found it pleasing.

"A necklace with an eagle talon, that is what I have always wanted," he said, talking quickly again, like he had lost control of his mouth. "To be a hunter and wear a fish eagle necklace."

The smile vanished as he hurriedly added, "But there are other things I want. Very much."

Ingwe, also unable to stop smiling, said, "I know. I want things. When you get the fish eagle talon necklace, then we will both have a special necklace."

Eku laughed.

They continued to stare and smile and talk.

The power of the waterfall reminded Eku of the awesome power of Uwama; though, he knew firsthand that no river, not even *shatsbeli-lambo*—not anything in the world!—could compare to the power of the mother of them all.

But then, Eku realized that somehow, Ingwe held a piece of that power.

The way that females do.

There was something about Ingwe—despite having never known her until so recently—that inspired him to ... Well, maybe to do anything.

At least anything he was capable of.

Whatever that meant.

There were people all around, but Ingwe and Eku only had eyes for each other.

When they reentered the water, they playfully wrestled and feelings coursed through Eku's body.

When they went into the deeper water and became entwined, her skin sent frantic signals, forcing him to swim away, embarrassed by another erection.

One that did not want to go away so quickly.

Eku knows what is happening.

For an Abantu, sexual activity was forbidden until a female was ready, which she indicated by cutting her hair.

Eku had no idea if either he or Ingwe was ready, which surely meant they were not.

Besides, he only knows Abantu customs.

When a male and female are interested in each other, there is a period similar to having an ikanabe, such as Yat and Dokuk were going through, before sexual activity begins.

And as far as sex went, there was *always* sexual activity going on in a camp or village, especially one as large as they were in now.

People were discreet, but sex was not a mystery at any age.

Eku figured he knew the basics.

Besides, after listening to Yat and Yathi blab about it all the time, Eku preferred not to hear anything more about the sex stuff.

For now.

The only thing he knew with absolute certainty—the same way he knew he wanted to be a hunter—is that Ingwe was the female with whom he wanted the sex to happen.

Telling her he had to pee, Eku swam to the far side of the pool, downstream and away from everyone, where the water was cooler.

A permissible place to pee, which helped things calm down.

When Eku returned, he swam close to Ingwe, but not too close.

Later, as he clambered from the water, Ingwe's older, twin brothers separated from a group of nesibindi and moved purposefully toward him.

Naked and self conscious, Eku was relieved—and a bit proud—that a good amount of hair had finally grown around his penis.

Managed to quickly find his loincloth and tie it around his waist as they waited, looking tall and muscular like their father, and painfully polite.

While the shape of the brothers' faces were identical, and they had both kept long hair, currently braided in similar ponytails, there were subtle differences in countenance.

Ingwe talked of them often, so Eku knew that Tokuta was stern and teased, while Kotuta was quiet and sweet, but in competitions amongst the nesibindi, competed fiercely and was often champion.

"Eku, I am Tokuta," the closer twin said.

"I am Kotuta," the other brother said.

Ekutu realized something and smiled, a bit embarrassed, saying slowly, to separate the sounds his mouth was making, "Tok-uta and Kot-uta. Your father is Uta."

"Ah," Kotuta said with a smile. He looked at his twin and said, "They say this one pays attention."

Eyes only on Eku, Tokuta said, "I hear you want to be a hunter, like your father."

Ekutu stood up as tall as possible.

Smiled.

"Yes. More than anything."

Tokuta asked, "More than anything," and flicked his eyes toward the water, where Ingwe swam with her friends.

Ekutu found the question stymied him; though, he knew he was just thinking the exact same question.

Watched Ingwe with her friends for a moment and said, "I have always wanted to be a hunter. But I do want other things."

Looked back at Tokuta and Kotuta. Shrugged and said, "To be a hunter is my oldest dream."

Kotuta said, somewhat sarcastically, "Your oldest, eh?" Grinning, after he said it.

Ekutu smiled, embarrassed.

He joked because Eku was young, but he knew why the twins were there, talking to him.

To let him know they are watching him with Ingwe.

Ekutu had no idea whether that was good or bad.

Probably both.

Others also watched.

From higher up the escarpment, a trio of bubinzwana observed the flat faces.

Lying flat on their bellies upon the smooth bedrock of another waterfall-bearing cliff; though, not nearly as majestic as the one below.

Peering over the ledge, careful to place their shaggy-haired heads next to projections, so there was no chance to be seen.

The bubinzwana were disciplined.

They did not move.

Eyes remaining focused.

Breathing through robust noses with large round nostrils.

Occasionally, they communicated with low sounds, barely heard over the gurgles of the river.

The bubinzwana focused on what happened down the rocks, through the gap of leafy branches, which framed the flat faces gathered at the bottom.

Frolicking.

Unaware.

So tempting.

But the bubinzwana are under strict orders.

Reconnaissance only.

The Alpha made it clear that disobedience would result in a most unpleasant death.

Besides, the Alpha assured them that hunting the flat faces would come later.

Wind blew pleasantly up the chute of the canyon.

The sound of the river's passage was pleasing.

The bubinzwana breathed deep the scents wafting up from below.

Relishing the scent of so many young females.