

Chapter 23

Grass and Palm

The climbing finally ended.

Clear of the escarpment, the land leveled and the river broadened.

The land rippled with hillocks and riverine forest, but only briefly.

The people followed a gradual slope to where the land flattened and reformed.

The change was jarring.

For a short stretch, long dead trees reached for the sky with branches bare and bone-like, while at ground level, abandoned termite mounds formed miniature ridgelines, now crumbled and patched by sprouted grass and wiry bushes.

The fossilized land ended where a grassy plain expanded in every direction.

The tribe paused briefly on the last rise for some distance.

The flatland before them was encircled by chains of hills.

Eku thought it was as though an ancient and monstrous elephant set a padded foot down to leave a footprint where an ocean of grass now grew, the river slicing through the center and reflecting the sky.

“Grass again,” Yathi said with resignation.

“There are some palm trees,” Eku noted.

Yathi clicked with disgust. “But they are not the good kind, with sweet dates. I can tell.”

“Maybe there will be other interesting things?”

“We will find out,” Yathi said with resignation.

The tribe was already moving again.

Marching across the plain of grass was difficult to start, as the people sometimes struggled to distinguish where water and land merged.

Treacherous swamps and mud pools were everywhere, but Eku and Yathi learned to distinguish the subtle changes in grass that indicated sucking bogs from firm footing.

For the first few days, at least, there were occasional elephant trails, but the beasts had an agenda of their own; whereas, the people charted a path next to the river.

North.

Thanks to the hard work of the hunters, Eku and Yathi—most of the tribe—paraded along a route already well trampled.

Travel was slow and exotic birds were everywhere.

Eku relished the opportunity to observe each new species and tended to walk as close to the water as their line of travel offered.

Black ducks with stripes of red on the wings were especially common.

Bursting from ponds with much quacking to quickly merge into a tight flock, accelerating away at top speed, only to quickly turn back to perform acrobatic twists and turns before tightening circles landed them at a nearby spot ... As though each short journey had to include a bit of fun.

Black-headed herons rose from bristle-topped reeds, laboring mightily with huge dark wings with primary feathers startlingly pale from below, to eventually gain altitude and glide with long legs straight behind.

Along the muddied areas of shoreline, fast-running plovers with red beaks and red eye rings raced to disappear into thickets of grass.

Jacanas darted in and out of reeds, pausing briefly each time, as though having dashed out on a dare to stare at the humans.

They don't know what we are, Eku thought.

He found the Jacanas pretty.

Agile with reddish-brown bodies and bright, white necks and heads, enormous feet with splayed claws, which allowed them to stride through the watery mud without slowing.

Enamored by the birds, Eku realized there were no herd beasts sighted in some time.

"Why do you think there are no herds," he said to Yathi, who walked ahead, satchel secure across his back.

Yathi turned and the lip stuck out.

He gazed over the heads of the people to his left.

Shrugged and said, "This grass is different. It is not like foxtail grass."

"There are no vubu, either," Eku said, moving up so they could pace side by side, adding, "Or antelope."

"There are elephants. Back where we were before."

"Not that many. And we only saw their trails. Like they are staying away from us."

Yathi stuck the lip out again.

"There are lizards."

Eku grimaced. "I do not like them."

“Me neither. They are worse than wenya.”

Two types of lizards proliferated in the land of grass and palm.

Similar in shape, but much different in size.

The smaller variety reminded Eku of a beast at home called *kazi-wenya-anda*, which meant a lizard that eats crocodile eggs.

Needless to say, they are fast and sneaky.

Kazi-wenya-anda grew no larger than a small child on the southern shores, and Eku saw none of the local variety growing any larger; however, the second type of lizard was a different story.

A predator to be wary of.

Eku guessed the big ones were heavy as a good-sized human.

Fearsome to look upon.

Gray with raggedy black stripes across a heavy armor of scales.

Clawed feet with black talons and a powerful tail twice as long as the body, reminding Eku of a wenya, but more upright, with longer legs and less armor.

The snout was rounded and blunt, making Eku think of a frog of all things, which was silly, because no frog mouth ever had such teeth.

Basking in small groups along the water, the large lizards appeared torpid under Ulanga, until the hunters approached close, when they sprang up to disappear into the tall grass with side-to-side strides of violent quickness.

When the tribe arrived at the first healthy grove of palm since reaching the grassland, the people gathered on a wide, flat spot near the water.

Camp was established.

Brush and grass cut back and piled around the perimeter.

Before long, some of the large lizards crept from the tall grass.

Approached slowly to the line of demarcation.

A number of hunters were ready, watching the big lizard's encroachment.

Further back, Eku and other young people gathered at a safe distance to jeer and yell.

“They are disgusting,” Kolo said.

From each heavily toothed snout, a long and dark tongue slid in and out, easily the length of a forearm, emerging from between fearsome teeth like an awful, two-pronged snake.

“They are even more disgusting than vubu,” Kolo continued. “Why do they do that with such a disgusting tongue?”

“It is how they sniff,” Eku said, wishing he had his *ula-konto*.

“That is disgusting,” Kolo repeated.

Eku and Kolo stood with Yathi and Goguk.

Dala and Longo approached with some of the Bwana and each tribe took turns using the most colorful and vulgar language possible to describe the large lizards.

While everyone laughed, Eku kept a keen eye on the hunters.

Two groups had formed and fanned out, about waka young hunters in each.

Behind them were his father and Nibamaz, with Juka and Lopi.

A confrontation was no doubt about to happen.

Obviously, the big lizards had never encountered Abantu.

Perhaps emboldened by their numbers, or more likely overwhelmed by the smell of so much exotic food, the largest and most aggressive took charge and moved to the front.

“Look at all the little ones,” Kolo said.

“The little ones are also disgusting,” Goguk said, lingering to the back.

Smaller lizards had also crept from the tall grass, forming a second line based on species and size.

A single, giant lizard now occupied the front.

No doubt the strongest.

Cautious, because whatever smelled so tempting remained beyond its visual range.

“I do not like lizards,” Goguk said. “Their skin looks like flesh that is cooked too long. I have never seen a mouth with so many teeth.”

“More like a fish,” Yathi said.

“Like a *gwe-lanzi*,” Longo offered.

Disagreeing, Kolo remained fixated, saying, “Maybe teeth like a fish, but the tongue? That tongue is the most disgusting thing I have ever seen!”

“I hope the hunters cut it off,” Goguk said, which made Kolo and others giggle.

The lead lizard was enormous with four bowed legs.

The long tail dragged at center, but the elongated whiplike end stuck into the air.

The giant lizard twisted its thick torso to one side and raised a menacingly clawed foot, pausing in midair, as though to wave hello.

Stretched its neck to better angle the heavily toothed snout, thick tongue sliding in and out.

The clawed foot came down and the back foot on the same side came forward and the lizard twisted the opposite way, raising the other front claw in a similar wave.

The young hunters approached slowly from two sides.

They all wore a single talon.

Ekus saw Kozik, Ingwabi and Iti amongst them.

This was a training opportunity and Eku made sure his mind recorded every detail.

Kaleni and Nibamaz, Lopi and Juka remained in the back, occasionally clicking.

All of the children had gathered to watch.

Behind them, across the remainder of the encampment, the mothers and most adults remained busy, ignoring or uninterested in what was going on.

The giant lizard brought down the next, clawed foot, rear leg coming forward.

Twisted the torso and began raising the other.

Juka stepped away from Kaleni, Nibamaz and Lopi.

The young hunters to either side were spread out as staggered pairs to either side of the lizard.

Juka walked directly at the beast.

Once Juka entered the lizard's visual range, its posture changed.

Pointing its heavily toothed snout at Juka, the lizard increased the speed and rhythm of tongue thrusts.

All four legs were tense and the long curved claws gripped into the grass and dirt.

The long tail twitched.

Juka held his javelin with both hands, horizontally to the front, a position and grip that told Eku he was not prepared to stab or throw, but balanced, prepared to move laterally.

Juka held the javelin out parallel to the ground and undulated the spear.

The lizard's long tongue poked even faster.

There was clicking between the two sides of young hunters and they struck simultaneously.

Focused only on Juka, the huge lizard was simply confused or unprepared or unaware and died instantly as multiple hunters leaped forward to send the long and deadly blades deep into the neck and stomach areas.

The other large lizards trampled the little lizards in a hasty retreat.

The young hunters pulled their javelins free of the large lizard carcass, leaving it, Eku figured, as a warning.

Despite being trampled by their much bigger cousins, the smaller variety of lizards remained.

Eku watched in horror as the hunters moved away.

The small lizards charged forward, more of them emerging from the grass to swarm over the body of their brethren, yanking and ripping at the corpse until they could each carry away a chunk of flesh hanging from their mouth.

The next day, at the next camp, in a similar fashion, the young hunters killed another large lizard.

And at the next camp.

Eventually, the big lizards learned that to approach two-leggeds that smelled like food was to become food for the little lizards.

The river had become like a long and narrow lake.

Land that at first appeared flat from a distance, included low-slung ridgelines that allowed the path of the river to meander.

Bright green river grass announced a flat and shallow shoreline with easy access to water.

Dense stands of tan water reeds announced a more difficult shoreline, curved with miniature inlets and peninsulas with deeper water.

Away from the river grew fields of a dark, thick bladed grass peculiar to this land.

In some areas, Eku saw the earth was laid bare and blackened, as though once scorched.

Grass did grow on the dark earth, but was sparse and stunted, leaving patches bare, like burned spots.

He wondered what would make Umawa produce such a color and remembered what Tiuti told him of the black *isipo-gazi* found by his father.

Was there a relationship?

Tiuti assured him the block rock was harder than quartzite and hoped it would prove knapable, like *isipo-gazi*.

Where the earth was not blackened, the grass grew thick and nearly as tall as Eku; though, at this stage of *sika-yaka*, there were many yellow and brown stalks bent over, giving the grassland an over-ripened feel.

The land of grass and palm included only two types of trees, both palms.

Palms that grew close to the water had slender trunks and long, feathery leaves that surged upward and down in a weeping pattern, reminding Eku of the odd, but delicious *unwe-umthi* trees.

Unfortunately, the intersection between trunk and each feathery leaf yielded plenty of looping vines, but as always-hungry Yathi predicted, the nuts were not edible.

When the elevation rose above the floodplain a second type of palm held jurisdiction. The trunks were fat and smooth with crowns of huge leaves that had many leaflets shaped like the long blades of a javelin.

Yellow and orange nuts hung in heavy clusters at the top of the trunk, the mature, individual fruits bigger than Eku's fist.

Unfortunately, those nuts were also not good for human consumption.

But at least the palm groves attracted other food sources and provided opportune spots to make camp.

When the people came upon a spectacular grove of feathery palm growing next to the water, the location was ideal for replenishing.

A temporary camp was established.

The unusually large grove of feathery palm was shaped like a half marula nut, draped around a flattened shoreline overlaid by knee-high grass.

As though to protect the palms from entry, a dense network of low-to-the-ground bushes formed an impressive barricade around the entire grove.

Curious, the tribe gathered to watch the *izik-kosa* use their long knives and axes to chop through.

When the mothers went inside for inspection, they emerged with considerable excitement.

A truly spectacular place to shelter!

Below the feathery palms, the ground was entirely clear to a height well above the height of an Abantu.

The expansive, cave-like space was surprisingly well lit, once the eyes adjusted; in fact, the initial gloom was replaced by a comforting glow, evenly distributed through striations of green leaves.

But what made the enclosure truly spectacular was the flooring.

Weeping palms rooted only on bogs.

The trees formed dense canopies that once mature, fused to form dome-like exteriors, where eventually, nothing grew inside.

The bogs upon which the palm grew were flooded during *lobo-yaka* and underwater for much of the cycle; but now, being the later stage of *sika-yaka*, water level was at its lowest.

During this brief respite, the surface underneath the palms became completely dry; however, the main root system plunged deep to keep the plants healthy.

The grove was now a perfectly prepared room of enormous size and comfort for *waka-waka* people to sleep in!

Mothers and young people were awarded the opportune sleeping spots.

Yat showed Eku and Yathi where to leave bed mats and supplies, then led them back outside toward the water.

They strode past young adults busy erecting rounded shelters. There was limited space inside the grove and some would have to remain outside, with the hunters and nesibindi.

At the moment, Eku knew his father was scouting the ridgeline behind the encampment.

He wished he could be with the hunters, but it was time for chores and Yat led him and Yathi in the opposite direction, toward the river.

There were adults fishing, Abantu, Mantel and Bwana in different locations of the river.

Yathi groaned and Eku offered a comforting click.

Yat, already with the ears of a mother, quipped, “No complaining. You get to fish all you want when you become an adult.”

Yathi stuck out his tongue.

Eku didn’t really care what they did during harvest.

All that really mattered was whether he got to use his keri stick or *ula-konto*; otherwise, food was food.

Hunting was the only thing that made harvest more interesting.

For some reason.

Eku and Yathi followed Yat to the water, where *waka-waka* people were hunched in the shallows, up to their knees, bent over water cabbage.

The thick, soft leaves formed a rosette on the surface with a brilliant, yellow flower in the center.

Eku was familiar with the routine.

Bend over, tug a fat green pad with one hand, use the other hand to slice with a cutter and deposit the green chunk in an over-the-shoulder satchel.

And repeat.

The plump leaves would be pounded and then chopped and then boiled to thicken stew.

Seeing the young ones approach, his Aunt Shona stood and hollered, “Buffalo nuts!”

She pointed upriver, toward a singular patch of reeds that ended with thickly bladed leaves, but no bristles.

Maz, Tar, Sisi and Kat were already ankle deep in the muck, pulling up the fat shoots.

Yat clicked for him and Yathi to follow, who, seeing Sisi, eagerly stepped ahead of Eku.

Their toes squished in the mud as they trooped along the edge of the water.

Yat explained, “The Bwana showed us this plant at *shatsbeli-lambo*. They call it *yenkomo-gomane*, which means a male buffalo sack.”

She turned around and smiled at Eku’s look of horror while Yathi giggled.

As it turned out, the tubular reeds grew almost as tall as Eku, but separately, not tightly bunched like water reeds.

The thick stems had shallow roots, easy to pluck from the mucky soil.

Attached to the roots were nicely rounded corms, plump and growing in pairs.

The corms had a crisp, white flesh that proved crunchy and delicious.

With no need to build shelters and harvest taken care of, Eku was thrilled to see Ulanga still peaked over the ridgeline of bladed palms.

Plenty of light left to explore!

Well, at least within the encampment.

He retrieved his *ula-konto* from beneath the grove.

Accompanied by Yathi, Goguk and Kolo, Eku happily set out to prowl the perimeter of camp.

The foursome circled the palm grove, headed for the side opposite the river.

The thick grass spread everywhere, many of the stalks browned and bent over.

The grass grew in bunches, leaving patches of ground layered with decomposing leaves.

Eku found the terrain offered a curious feel, a bit loose underfoot, but still good and grippy.

Good for traction, making him want to dig in and throw his *ula-konto*.

The four young males paced along the backside of the grove.

“I can hear people in there.” Yathi said, pointing at the palm grove to his left.

They stopped and went silent.

Before them was a thicket of bush, barely taller than they were, but dense and impenetrable, like boxthorn without the barbs.

Behind the protective barrier, the feathered palms rose compact, like a ridge of small mountains.

Kolo giggled.

“I hear them,” he said.

Disembodied voices seemed to emanate from within the dense thicket.

Murmurings filtering out from a world within the green dome.

“We can listen to people talking,” Goguk said.

“Just the mothers are in there,” Yathi said.

The foursome moved away from the grove, parallel to the river.

The grass that grows here was not tall and they can see far across the flatlands.

Just grass and palm and water.

Around them, dragonflies hovered or shot back and forth between the grass and water.

Laced wing flies billowed in mating clouds.

Ulayo blew gently in the same direction as the flow of the water and carried the scent of old vegetation.

Scattered across the field of grass were peculiar mounds, which turned out to be the same grass, but having gone through some kind of frenzied growth to form dense, bale-like bundles.

Eku discovered the bales were excellent targets for his *ula-konto*, as the tightly packed sprouts safely netted the killing end.

Grinding dried bone required precise tools and was time consuming; nevertheless, an *ula-konto* must be practiced with.

Eku was fastidious over preserving the killing barb as much as possible, so as not to bother uncle Lume with unnecessary sharpenings or adjustments.

“This is a strange land,” Eku said, studying a fat clump of grass sprouts that his mind transformed into a bushpig.

He stepped away for a more challenging distance.

Adjusted his grip on the *ula-konto* to his throwing side.

Checked his footing and performed a quick, three-step throw, the pale shaft speeding along, hardly making an arc before slicing into the heart of the grass-clump-bushpig quarry with a satisfying hiss-thump.

Eku grinned at Yathi’s click of approval, while Goguk and Kolo gawked in admiration.

Eku’s throwing had become very impressive.

Kolo carried a sturdy and mostly straight stick with a fire-hardened tip.

He swatted at a mound of the thick-bladed grass and said, “I have never seen land like this. Grass, but not foxtail grass, as on the savannah. And no forest trees.”

Yathi said, “This land is like where the rivers empty into Uwama, at home.”

He turned in a circle.

Gestured with his hands and added, “The blades of grass are flat, not round. And there is no Uwama. No salted water.”

“Like the freshwater is trapped,” Eku said, thinking of his dream as he pulled the *ula-konto* free.

“For sure,” Yathi said. “Because of all the hills and mountains.”

Kolo tried to throw his spear the same way that Eku had, but it glided sideways and landed flat.

Goguk scampered over and tried a throw, similarly unsuccessful.

Watching, Eku said, “I can teach you. But first, we have to return to a forest, where I can find a good sapling to make a properly balanced throwing spear.”

Proudly, he added, “My uncle taught me how to carve.”

Kolo squinted and looked mischievous. “A spear like yours?”

“No!”

Eku raised the *ula-konto* over his head with one hand and shouted, “This is *izik-kosa*!”

Lowered the spear and smiled, saying, “I can make you a good, wooden spear. And then you learn *keso-elanisa*.”

“What is that?”

“How you make good throws. And maybe become a hunter.”

“But what do you mean?”

“*Keso-elanisa* really means two things: first, a master who will teach you, but then it is up to you to practice.

“To become good at throwing, you must practice and practice and practice and prove that you can make good throws before you can even ask an *izik-kosa* to carve a proper *ula-konto*.”

Eku gazed fondly at his weapon.

Father made it clear that Eku would not dare to approach his uncle without first being able to hit targets the size of his hand from waka paces.

Every throw!

Amazingly, Eku did just that, gaining accuracy so quickly that everyone was amazed—even his father; though, Eku always found his progress agonizingly slow.

“When you ask, the *izik-kosa* will probably say no,” Eku added. “At first. So you have to keep practicing until they do.

“I can carve you a wood spear with good balance and teach you how to throw. Then it is up to you to practice. To find your *keso-elanisa*.”

Kolo and Goguk both nodded eagerly.

Yathi, looking at the main body of the river, said, “It is flat here, so Uwama’s call is not so strong. The river does not move fast enough to carry all the water away. Not fast like in the mountains. Because it is flat.”

“For sure,” Kolo said, sounding more and more like an Abantu.

Looking for another target to impale, something caught the periphery of Eku’s vision.

Pale and out of place.

Instinctively, he clicked sharp and rapid.

Yathi and Goguk went rigid.

Eku motioned them over using only the tilt of his head and angle of his eyes.

Kolo, observing, mimicked the Abantu’s behavior.

The four went back to back, using their ears and noses and eyes to explore the field of grass.

The feathery palm grove where they camped was plainly in view.

Plenty of adults mingled by the huts out front.

Nevertheless, their collective imaginations made the moment tense and exciting.

Eku held the *ula-konto* to his right side, left arm crossed to maintain a strong, stabbing grip.

Crouched to keep his knees bent and feet balanced.

Stayed on the balls of his feet and cautiously approached what lay partially hidden in the grass, Yathi, Goguk and Kolo hovering behind.

Eku straightened.

Relaxed, holding the *ula-konto* in one hand at his side

A large skeleton lay in the grass.

The bones were separated, but not enough to betray the shape of the body: a buffalo, but a buffalo nearly as big as an elephant.

Yathi and Goguk both muttered, “*Ir-hamka*.”

Kolo asked, “What kind of giant beast was this?”

“Maybe the buffalo my father sang about,” Eku said. “They are giant in the land of legend.”

“*Ir-hamka*,” Kolo echoed.

Eku looked thoughtfully over the bones.

They were very old and partly obscured by *waka-waka* cycles of grass.

The small bones were long gone, but there were no hyenas here, so the large bones remained intact.

He realized the skull was missing just as Yathi said, “Where is the head?”

Sounding doubtful, Kolo asked, “Maybe another beast dragged it away?”