

Chapter 23

Tiuti

Eku woke later than normal, probably because sleep within the feathery palms was so peaceful.

Endless cycles of debris formed a thick platform.

The top-most layer was dried and crumbled to softness, not unlike real feathers, over a network of roots that formed a springy base.

There was only so much sleeping space available within the comfy confines and the mothers and young people were awarded all of the prime locations.

The previous night, Eku at first tried to get Yathi to sleep outside, to be close to the hunters, but Yat quickly talked them into taking advantage of the grove.

She was right. As always.

Still sleepy, Eku was startled into wakefulness when he realized slivers of light showed through gaps in the leaflets.

Ulanga was already high!

Rubbed sleep from his face.

He never slept in!

Eyes well-adjusted to the low-light, he could see clearly across the enclosure, the trunks of the trees were dark poles amidst a grayed out interior with a floor of slumbering humans.

Checked his sister and Yathi, still sleeping.

Stood and crept across the soft flooring, weaving past the dark pillar of a tree trunk and stepping between bodies.

Found his way to the tunnel-like exit.

Emerging into bright light.

The river spread enormously before him, though the laza sky was even bigger.

There was a reversal to the normal plot line that morning.

Tiuti stood near the grove exit, obviously waiting.

He motioned for Eku to come his way.

Excitement and apprehension were twin companions as he hustled forward.

Tiuti was always a powerful presence.

Krele told him that before he was even weaned or taking part in harvest, Eku was already following Tiuti around.

Being so young, Eku could not remember.

Visiting Tiuti at least once each day was just something he had always done.

Eku figured that made sense enough.

Abantu revered their elders, after all.

Nevertheless, while most young people were terrified of Tiuti, Eku was drawn to the old master.

Krele explained that it was *isipo-kee!*, and that it was her grandfather, sneaking into the living world to visit an old friend through Eku.

Krele's grandfather was named Jeko.

Jeko died before Eku came into the living world.

Jeko and Tiuti were *ikanabe*.

The elders of the southern shores often said that Tiuti and Jeko not only shared the special bond of *ikanabe*, but also shared the same brilliance of the mind.

Tiuti stood tall in the early morning light, wearing only his loincloth and necklace of small bones, skin weathered and sagged the way that elders' did; though, his long limbs were lean with muscle, forearms heavily veined.

Eku said respectfully, "*Ikiz-izik* Tiuti."

"We will talk."

Worry was written all over Eku's face as Tiuti strode away.

Jogged to catch up and fell into stride.

Tiuti paced them to the periphery of the encampment.

Glancing back, Eku saw huts clumped together, as though giant shellfish climbed from the water to slumber beside a grove of feathered palms.

Ulayo changed the direction of her breath and Eku caught a whiff of the dung pit.

There were a lot of people here, for sure.

Excused himself and scampered over to a designated area to empty bowel and bladder as Tiuti patiently waited.

The two continued patrolling the camp's circumference.

Almost like hunters, Eku thought.

Except real hunters patrolled outside the encampment, ensuring that nothing in the surrounding territory posed a danger.

The land around them felt unusually expansive.

Endless.

One grassy island after another on an ocean of grass.

And palm.

The gently rolling hills were flecked with clusters of the bladed leafed trees, but not enough to qualify as a forest.

Though finally, ahead of them, the sequence of dark hills that had followed the horizon of grass was finally changing.

The ridgelines that straddled either side of the water from a distance were converging, and appeared to grow taller upstream, where the river flowed between two peaks like a spear slicing a fruit into halves.

Eku eyed a group of ducks flying ahead in a v-shape, headed for the gap and thought of his father telling him that to face north, point your right shoulder at Ulanga as soon as he rises.

A lone gray heron, long and narrow with feet straight behind, glided from the northern horizon, slanted downward for a water landing.

The strange crows that lived in this land circled the Abantu encampment, no doubt having quickly learned that as soon as the large land-dwelling two-leggeds left a roost, there were interesting and tasty items left behind.

Auspiciously, a fish eagle soared above all the other birds.

Eku recognized the shape, of course, but watched until he caught a glimpse of the white head.

He had to stifle a yelp when he accidentally brushed against a clump of the tall grass.

Thankfully, most plants in this part of Umawa were not dangerous; whereas, brush up against the wrong bush in the Abantu homeland, you were likely penalized by a nasty scratch or sting.

Being nervous made Eku clumsy.

He took a deep breath and let it out.

Sensing he was ready, Tiuti said, “You want to be a hunter, yes?”

Wary of such a pointed question, Eku quickly responded, “More than anything.”

“More than anything?”

Eku recalled Kotuta using a similar phrase at the waterfall.

Well aware of the feelings he had for Ingwe (how could he not be?), Eku relished the fact that, despite her hold over him—or perhaps even more because of it!—he desired to be a hunter.

Which of course, made meeting Ingwe all the more spectacular.

Ever more perfect.

Eku could not stop daydreaming of a time when his eagle talon and her laza pendant would become entwined as they lay on top of each other and....

Tiuti allowed himself a brief smile as he looked fondly at the top of Eku's closely shorn head.

Adopted a mock frown and snapped, "Eku, give me a reason why the giant lizards live here."

A sharp move of the head and Eku looked up.

Caught off guard, he shrugged.

Tiuti scowled and snapped, "I want a reason. Give me one."

Confused, Eku clicked he did not know.

Tiuti clicked back several times, sharp and rapid.

"This is their land," Eku blurted. "Where they live. We never saw them before we came here."

Now Tiuti gave him a look of disdain.

"Oh, you want to be a hunter, but you cannot even give me a single reason why the giant lizards live here and not anywhere else? Any reason?"

The two of them walked.

Eku used his mind furiously.

Why would Tiuti want him to provide a reason the big lizards lived in this land?

That was silly.

No, of course it was not silly.

Any reason?

No, he wanted Eku to calm down.

To use his mind instead of walking into things.

You must learn to put aside your nervousness to allow the mind to work properly, his father told him many times.

Focus.

"There are no lions," Eku said. "Or hyenas or leopards."

"Much better. That is a reason. Your father and I are sure there are other reasons."

Tiuti shook his head and looked around with worry. "But we do not understand them, yet."

Sounding skeptical, Eku asked, "Did the lizards make the lions and hyenas go away?"

"No. Something else kept the lions and hyenas out."

Eku recoiled, knowing that could only mean another predator.

But a predator more powerful than lions and hyenas were together?

“That is scary.”

“Yes, that is scary.”

And thinking of things that were scary, Eku said, “I want to be a hunter, more than anything.”

“What if the tribe asks you to be something else?”

Eku slowed and stopped.

Tiuti stepped past; stopped.

The old master turned and looked at Eku, who would not meet his gaze.

Sighed.

This was not easy for him, loving Eku the way he did.

But Tiuti knew the greatness within Eku was without limits.

And he knew he was doing the right thing.

The grassy plain stretched all around.

Purple bristle grass rose along the water and along with it, the rasp and hiss of rubbers and shakers.

Eku felt something hot and heavy in his chest.

One of those silly lumps rose.

But he hadn’t cried in a long time.

Swallowed the lump down and scolded himself.

Whatever was going on, he needed to keep his wits about him.

Be strong.

Clever.

Like everyone always said he was.

Tiuti waited patiently.

Perhaps, were it not for constant exposure to the daily dance of Ulanga and Ulayo, his countenance would not seem so severe.

The old master sighed and looked to where Ulanga had risen over the ridgeline.

The sky was pale laza, clear of clouds, but above the tallest and symmetrically rounded hill of green, lonely, cumulus wafts gathered like a halo, iridescent, with glimpses of yellow and orange.

So that only Ulayo could hear, Tiuti whispered, “My child, what beckoned you here?”

Eku caught up and stood at Tiuti’s side.

Studied the old master’s profile, trying to figure out what was happening.

Tiuti, once so impossibly tall, was not anymore.

Krele and Shona had recently corralled him and cut his hair so it curled thin and white off the scalp.

The angle of light emphasized his wrinkles: crevices sloped from the corners of his mouth; furrows feathering from each eye; deep forehead lines above crazy curling eyebrows of white.

Why was Tiuti waiting for him this morning?

Still looking at the direction from which Ulanga rose, Tiuti said, “Eku kaleni-yana, you have followed me around like a pesky bug since you could walk.

“I know where your heart lies. I have heard you talk of being a hunter since you could not even mouth the words properly.”

Tiuti looked at Eku, staring back at him, eyes wide and fearful.

Fearful, because Tiuti understood that amongst Eku’s many gifts, this was the rare child growing into an adult who truly feared nothing—other than letting down the people he loved.

“Eku, we Abantu are special above all other beasts. You know that. We take food from both Uwama and Umawa. We benefit from both. We go where we want. Eat what we need. No other creature does that.”

He offered a rare, voluntary smile, adding, “Not even old seals who bask too long under the burning eye of Ulanga.”

Eku’s eyes widened and Tiuti chuckled.

Eku was thoughtful for a moment, then said, “The fish eagle takes prey from both water and land.”

Tiuti nodded and looked at Eku fondly.

“You have always wanted to be a hunter? Yes. Of course. Like your father. And you have always been clever.”

The old master shook his head, as though unsure of what to say or how to say it.

“Your father was a hunter, Eku. But then he became something more. And I think that is your destiny, only ... Something different. Even greater.”

Tiuti shook his head once again, trying to quell his frustration.

Lately he had felt his age weigh heavily, like never before.

Tiuti knew his remaining days were limited.

“Eku, Wutota and I have learned so much from each other in a short time. With the tribes together now.”

Eku watched Tiuti solemnly and nodded.

Having momentarily set aside his angst, he was intrigued ... And worried.

Why was Tiuti, of all people, struggling for words?

The old master gave a slight shake of his head and sighed.

Said in a way both dismissive and kind, “Responsibility, Eku. As your father learned. Not just to be a hunter.

“You are still young. You have time, but I do not.

“And there is so much more for us to learn. This journey has led us through places more wondrous than I ever could have imagined.”

Ekusaid, “I want to be a hunter.”

Tiuti made a dismissive snort.

Waved long fingers toward Ulanga, but said nothing more.

Ekusaid, “You mean you want me to be like a *izik-kosa* or *benzi-kusela*?”

“No Eku. This is a new land. We are a new tribe. A very large and very powerful tribe. You are to be something different. Perhaps something that does not even have a proper name yet.”

Ekusought hard, but quickly lost the battle and the tears fell.

He was confused.

Angry.

He didn’t know what to say.

“Look around you, Eku,” Tiuti commanded.

Ekureluctantly looked around.

Stopped crying.

Paid attention.

The heron stalked the shallows.

The crows circled.

The ducks were mere specks.

But the fish eagle had disappeared.

Tiuti’s voice was not harsh in tone, but the words felt that way.

“Eku, the tribe is going to ask you to be something other than a hunter.”

“What do you mean?”

Tiuti clicked flat, a way of saying no, but with special emphasis.

Ekunderstood why he would not answer such a question.

Because for an Abantu, the answer was obvious.

You serve the tribe first.

Always.

But Eku was desperate.

No other future was imaginable; yet, Tiuti, of all people, was going to ask him to be something other than a hunter?

Distraught, unable to stop more warm tears from spilling down his face, Eku said, "What other honor is greater than wearing the talons of a fish eagle?"

"To serve the tribe," Tiuti said firmly.

Unconsciously, Eku put a hand to his chest.

Tiuti saw and understood the gesture.

Laid a hand gently upon Eku's shoulder and said, "Eku kaleni-yana, you will have a necklace that befits you one day."

Krele lay awake, trying to figure out whether she actually enjoyed the rangy smell of the palm grove.

Thick and hearty.

Curiously though, this piece of Umawa's earth remained devoid of life.

No termites or beetles or even ants!

Many flies and bees buzzed, but only above, where the leafage began.

Beneath the shelter and calm of the palms, sleep was undisturbed through the entire night.

Such a splendid shelter with dry and comfortable bedding without doing any work!

No unexpected visits from crawling creatures that happened all too frequently when camping in unfamiliar territory.

Putting such fascinating thoughts aside, Krele began to plot travel preparations for the upcoming day, when Eku rose to disappear outside.

Krele sat up.

Looked across the shadowed interior to the tunnel-like entrance where her child exited, knowing who would be waiting.

Tiuti had finally asked Krele for permission to make Eku his apprentice.

Something she and Kaleni had felt for some time was coming.

Becoming *izik-ikiz* was perhaps the single, greatest honor for an Abantu.

The training was very demanding.

Tiuti intended to impart all that he had learned upon Eku in a short amount of time.

The old master was a legend across the southern shores.

During his extraordinarily long life, the wisdom of Tiuti and his inventions touched and improved the lives of *waka-waka-waka* people.

He once had a mate and they had a good and long life together, raising two children to adulthood, both female.

Kreki, the second born, was now *isipo-bomi*, a revered, elder mother, happy on the southern shores with adult children providing *waka-waka* grandchildren.

Tiuti was hard pressed to remain home, to spend his last days near Kreki and her brood, but chose to leave on the pilgrimage.

Yikuti was Tiuti's firstborn.

There was a time that Tiuti hoped that Yikuti would be his protege; instead, she became something nearly as rare: *zi-iz-kusela*, a female who was a hunter.

Yikuti gained prestigious second and third talons while still young and became a scout, but disappeared with the party that was in search of the land of legend a generation prior to Kaleni's scouting party.

The elders said that since Yikuti's disappearance, Tiuti was never the same.

Many of the elders thought Tiuti's real motivation to join the pilgrimage was not to see the land of legend, but in the hope of finding a last connection to his lost child.

Krele crept through the thicket tunnel to emerge from the palm grove.

Looked around to locate where Tiuti and Eku walked.

Krele knew that Tiuti loved Eku as if he were his own child; nevertheless, she worried over his motivation.

Typical of strong males, Tiuti was blind to the power of his influence.

More importantly, nobody knew Eku better than his mother.

Krele remembered when informing Yat and Eku that their family was chosen for this great pilgrimage, Yat had peppered her with a flood of inquiries, while Eku's only question was whether he could still be a hunter.

When she told him yes, he was fine with everything else.

In the coming days, Krele would keep an extra close eye on her youngest child.

After meeting with Tiuti, Eku's heart was heavy with sadness.

Returning from his morning walk, Eku was surprised to learn the tribe was not lingering at the spectacular location; instead, the encampment was cleared after the first meal and the people paraded on.

Not long after they started, Eku got a better look at where the opposing ridges converged ahead of them.

The hills along either side of the river did not actually join; instead, the two sides formed the exit point through which the river departed the endless lake of freshwater.

Where they would enter the land of legend.

Once again the land changed.

Hardwood forest encroached the water, the trees reminding Eku of those encountered when traveling inland during *sika-yaka*.

The large lizards were gone; though, Eku spotted the small ones darting to and from thickets of boxthorn.

He saw familiar plants and beasts.

Hunters disappeared into the bush to return with fresh antelope and fowl.

Quiet and introspective throughout the early part of the day, Eku walked next to Yathi, who, having recognized his mood, knew best to wait and find out what was bothering him later.

He would be ready to talk when Eku was ready.

While Eku remained sad, something had begun growing.

Curiosity, as always, provided the seedling.

After talking with Tiuti, he was terribly distraught and raced back to his mother.

Krele comforted Eku, clarifying what Tiuti intended—that together with Wutota, they intended to make Eku an *izik-ikiz* for the entire tribe.

Such an honor was difficult for Eku to perceive, while the crushing disappointment of not wearing the talon of a fish eagle was all too real.

Never in his life had Eku felt such sadness.

Not even when father was away.

Throughout the early part of the day, Eku remained quiet.

He did not say anything to Yathi or Ingwe.

Not yet.

The time had to be appropriate.

Low on supplies, the tribe set up a temporary encampment.

Fishing remained easy to the point of silliness.

Giant catfish simply drifted into the shallows to be speared by a javelin.

The young people jumped in to push and tug the enormous carcasses onto land for butchering.

The Mantel hunters used the ever-improved *guka-ombe* with equally efficient results.

Putting feathers on the tiny spears made them accurate over a much longer distance.

Making the weapon truly formidable, the *izik-kosa* knapped off shards of *isipo-gazi*, then shaped and fitted the wickedly sharp barbs to the tiny spears, inspiring the Mantel to make more powerful stringed bows.

The Mantel hunters returned with waterbirds good for eating as quickly as the Abantu pulled fish from the river.

The tribe stopped to make camp on a flatland spread between the river and a low-rising ridge forested by bladed-leaf palms.

Eku couldn't help but wonder what lay within the forbidding, but enticing wall of pale trunks and spiked green crowns, only to feel a painful sense of loss that he may never get the chance to explore such places as a hunter.

Whether or not he was to become a hunter, this place was not an opportunity for adventure.

Unfortunately, no chances for *keso-clanisa*.

As soon as camp borders were established, Krele and Shona told Yat, Eku and Yathi that in no uncertain terms was anyone to slip outside the encampment.

A rule to be enforced by all the families.

The tribe had marched through plenty of dangerous lands.

Eku found it curious that such strict rules were necessary here.

If anything, this land appeared more tame than most.

There had been no sightings of large predators.

No unseen beasts to worry about such as in the jungle or deep forest.

Yet, there was no mistaking a serious change in demeanor amongst the adults.

Even more than normal, mothers and *benzi-kusela* kept young people busy.

Hunters and nesibindi patrolled the periphery.

Eku knew his father and Nibamaz were somewhere within the forest of bladed palms.

Ibe-bonakalio.

What were they looking for?

Probably whatever was making the mothers and *benzi-kusela* behave so nervously.

At one time, Eku could fortify himself with a patience that came from knowing that one day it would be him guarding the periphery, like his father.

But now?

What did his future hold?

At least for the moment—chores.