

Chapter 24

Tiuti

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

Waka-waka cycles of debris formed a thick platform.

The top-most layer was dried and crumbled to softness, not unlike real feathers, having accumulated 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 evening, Ekū 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.

Yat was right. As always.

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

Ulanga was high!

Began rubbing sleep from his face.

He never slept in!

Ekū looked across the enclosure.

Palm trunks interspersed like black pillars connected a grayed out floor of slumbering human bodies to the green-glow of the ceiling.

Checked his sister and Yathi, still sleeping.

Stood and crept across the soft flooring, weaving past dark pillars and stepping between bodies.

Found his way to the tunnel-like exit.

Squinting when he emerged into the bright day.

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 Ekū to come his way.

Excitement and apprehension were twin companions as he hustled forward.

Tiuti had always been a powerful presence.

Krele told Ekū that before he was even weaned or taking part in harvest, he 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.

The Abantu revered their elders, after all.

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

Krele said that it was part of *isipo-kee!*, explaining that in Eku's case, they suspected her grandfather was sneaking into the living world to visit an old friend.

Krele's grandfather was named Jeko.

Jeko and Tiuti were ikanabe.

Jeko died before Eku came into the living world.

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 in a clearing of tall grass 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, like the savannah.

One grassy island after another on an ocean of grass.

And palm. The gently rolling hills that textured Umawa were flecked with clusters of the bladed leafed variety.

Ahead of them, there were finally signs of change. The distant ridgelines that straddled either side of the water were converging upstream, where the river flowed between two hills, like a spear slicing a fruit into halves.

Ekue eyed a group of ducks flying ahead in a v-shape, headed for the gap.

Thought of his father telling him that to face north, point your right shoulder at Ulanga as soon as he rises.

Ekue looked right.

Ulanga's yellow face was rising over the opposite ridgeline.

In front of him, a lone gray heron, long and narrow with feet straight behind glided in from the north, 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 two-leggeds left a roost, there were interesting and tasty items left behind.

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

Ekue recognized the shape, but continued to watch until he caught a glimpse of the white head.

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 Ekue 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, Ekue quickly responded, "More than anything."

"More than anything?"

Ekue recalled Kotuta using a similar phrase at the waterfall.

Well aware of the feelings he had for Ingwe (how could he not be?), Ekue 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.

Ekue 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.

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 offered 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? Any reason?"

The two walked.

Eku stared straight ahead and used his mind furiously.

Why would Tiuti want him to provide a reason the big lizards lived here?

That was silly.

No, of course it was not silly.

It was a good question.

What Tiuti really wanted was for 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 going to be easy, loving Eku the way he did.

But Tiuti knew the greatness within this child 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.

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 once more and looked where Ulanga rose over the ridgeline.

His face, always pensive, was extra-heavy with the burden of being an *izik-ikiz*.

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.

Softly, so that only Ulayo could hear, Tiuti whispered, “My child, I miss you. 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 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 a 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 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 more, trying to quell his frustration.

His age weighed heavily and he 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, watching Tiuti solemnly, nodded.

He momentarily set aside his angst, worried because Tiuti, of all people, was struggling for words.

The old master gave a slight shake of his head.

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.

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

Eku said, “I want to be a hunter.”

Tiuti clicked in a dismissive way.

“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.”

Eku fought hard, but quickly lost the battle.

The tears fell.

He was confused.

Angry.

He did not know what to say. Or even think.

“Look around you,” Tiuti commanded.

Eku reluctantly looked around.

The heron stalked the shallows.

The crows circled.

The ducks were mere specks.

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 he would not answer—and that Eku’s question was inappropriate.

Eku understood.

Because for an Abantu, the answer was clear.

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, 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 the movement and laid a hand gently upon Eku's shoulder.

"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 Tiuti was waiting.

He 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 protegee; 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 leading the party that was in search of the land of legend, the 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 all too well informing Yat and Eku that their family was chosen for this great pilgrimage.

While Yat peppered her with a flood of inquiries, 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.

Finally, the land began to change.

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

The large lizards were gone.

Eku did spot the small ones darting to and from thickets of boxthorn.

There were familiar plants and beasts.

Hunters went into the bush to quickly 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; instead, he entertained himself and Eku with a never-ending list of reasons why they should have stayed longer at such a perfect place for eating, swimming and sleeping.

“Those are the three most important things, after all,” he liked to say. “Besides females.”

While Eku remained sad, something began 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 really intended—that together with Wutota, they wanted to teach Eku to be *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 and 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 and Bwana 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 wondered what lay within that forbidding, but enticing wall of pale trunks and spiked green crowns.

Only to feel a painful sense of loss.

How could he explore if he was not a hunter?

At least for the time being, that did not matter.

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

A rule to be enforced by all the families.

Eku found it curious that such strict rules were necessary.

The tribe had marched through plenty of dangerous lands.

If anything, this land appeared more tame than most.

There were no sightings of large predators.

No unknown 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.

Mothers and *benzi-kusela* kept the young people extra 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.