

Chapter 26

Beyond the Cliff of Skulls

Beyond the cliff of skulls the ridgeline veered away from the river, which continued in a straight line north.

The center channel had grown wide so the opposite shore was but a faded, greenish line, the opposing hills mounded gray shadows.

The people marched into an old inlet shaped like one side of an antelope print, the land level from a time the water rose higher; now overgrown by hardwood saplings and grassy islands of palm.

The wide and flat shoreline was enriched by the runoff of the forested hills, resulting in dark soil speckled by pale stones.

Grass grew in a furry green margin along the shallows to where the center channel deepened.

As the ridgeline continued to angle away from the river, the hills rose higher.

A lone massif stood out, maybe tall enough to be a mountain and forbiddingly forested.

At the end of the inlet, the people came across a field of sturdy water reeds, making the decision to establish camp an easy one.

A steady rain fell, rare for this stage of the cycle.

Establishing camp was like harvest: every able bodied person participated.

The *izik-kosa* attacked a grove of saplings on the downriver side of the old inlet, where the ridgeline sloped closest to the water.

The slender trees were stripped of crowns to make flexible poles, which Eku and Yathi helped transport to the center of camp.

They returned to where the saplings were harvested to separate vines useful for construction, then dragged the excess brush to barriers being raised at each end of camp.

All of the young people followed the *izik-kosa* to the upriver side, where the swamp reeds grew in tall, thick rows.

Eku and Yathi took their places in a procession that transferred bundle after bundle of reeds across camp, to where the mothers and *benzi-kusela* attached the reeds to rounded frames made of the flexible saplings.

Hunters dug fire pits along the periphery of the encampment and slashed overhead limbs to enhance visibility.

Eku and Yathi dragged still more brush to the barriers along the water.

The barriers had already grown large enough so that if any beast were to approach the encampment from either direction, it would be forced to circumvent the barrier and enter the camp along an arc of fire pits.

Waka-waka young people swarmed across the surrounding area, collecting dead branches, browned palm leaves, stacks of brittle water reeds and any other burnable material to add to piles of *layit-umlilo*, now lying beneath a covering of palm leaves to avoid more soaking.

Camp had been nicely established and the work unusually demanding; yet, there was still much to do. Luckily, good fortune continued with harvest.

Enormous catfish drifted into the shallows where they were easily speared.

Yathi, who generally enjoyed all things fishing, was unhappy when the only work for him and Eku was to haul a carcass downstream for gutting and deboning—and do the gutting and deboning.

“The fish here are silly,” Yathi kept saying.

“For sure,” Eku mumbled, pensive and lost in thought.

He and Yathi squatted in the shallows, ankle deep in trampled water grass, hunched over a giant catfish.

Other young people were scattered around them, doing the same thing: using fish-gutting tools and tossing entrails toward the open water to drift away.

A fish-gutting tool had a sturdy, thick haft with two useful ends.

The narrow end conjoined to a blade of *isipo-gazi* for cutting through scales and separating flesh; the other end held a flat edge ground sharp for scraping away entrails.

Setting the tool down in muddy water, Yathi used both hands to yank a squishy and colorless intestine.

Grimaced and said, “Why do these giant fish just swim up to where we can spear them? That is silly.”

Eku leaned back.

Wiped the bone tool in the water with one hand, while tugging his muddy loincloth with the other.

Remained on his haunches and bent his torso to lean closer to the gutted fish, bending his neck to peer along the smooth gray skin, to a gill he could fit his hand through, and then the eye, large and round.

Big eyes, Eku thought, for seeing in the dark water of this river.

He watched raindrops splatter off the thin, but incredibly strong transparent layer of tissue that protected the eye.

Probably the same type of tissue that protects the eyes of all fish and beasts, he thought.

Even humans.

Invisible, so that we can see through.

A part of our flesh that became truly *ibe-bonakalio*.

Somehow.

He considered Yathi's question.

Set a hand down in the muddy water and leaned closer.

The shadow of his head dimmed the glint of an otherwise invisible covering of the enormous eye.

Eku wished he could see what lay behind the pupil.

"There are no Abantu here," he said. "Nor other predators that hunt from shore. So they have not learned to fear us."

Once again the land changed dynamically; this time in favor of the people's palette.

Surrounding the encampment were fig trees, tasty berries and bushes with yellow *sek-unda*.

Such a wealthy harvest would normally lead to spontaneous feasting, but the people worked silently, knowing no such frivolity awaited.

Mothers snapped off commands in voices brittle with stress.

Unsure of what to do, Eku and Yathi tagged along with Yat, Tar and Maz.

Like everyone else in camp, they noted the select Abantu and Mantel hunters going in and out of the forest, in the direction of the mountain.

There was an over abundance of food, so they were not hunting.

Eku and Yathi followed the older females toward the downriver end of camp.

The ground swelled at the start of the rideline, where *izik-kosa* razed the saplings, leaving the dark earth speckled with pale stumps.

Left untouched was a boundary of bushes that included tasty berries.

As the young people got to picking, somewhere in the hills above, Eku heard monkey screams like never before.

Certainly a new species and from the depth and volume of the sounds, they were physically large.

He wondered what Yat and Yathi thought, but no one seemed to have paid attention.

Yathi was a notoriously slow berry picker—normally unable to stop eating more berries than he collected—but today, he was downright miserable, accomplishing little.

Not even snacking; instead, clicked nervously whenever his gaze wandered to the mountain, rising ominously over their right shoulders.

Yat, who generally took advantage of any opportunity to chastise Yathi, remained silent, plucking berries to deposit in a basket.

When Yathi kept clicking, she finally snapped, "Try not to worry!"

But then she noticed Tar, looking in the same direction, also frightened.

Tar asked, "What are they doing?"

Tar's father was Nibamaz, so she knew very well what he and Kaleni were doing.

Knowing she was afraid, Yat said, trying to sound gentle, "You know. Our fathers are out watching for the bubinzwana."

"I know, but why?"

Ekusaid, "The ones going in the forest are the most skilled scouts. As good as father and Nibamaz."

He darted a glance at Maz, adding, "And Juka and Lopi."

Maz winked at Eku and said, "They are keeping track of where the beasts are."

"So we know if they get too close," Eku added.

Yathi protested, "But they are just beasts!"

"They are clever," Yat said. "As dangerous and smart as a leopard in the forest. That is what my father said."

"They are like us," Maz said. "But they are beasts."

"Yolumkono," Eku said with an emphasis on his voice that he hoped conveyed humor.

Yat and Maz smiled, but Tar and Yathi only looked more worried.

The rounded shelters were finished.

Water reeds tightly woven across the ribs.

Palm leaves laid across the top for waterproofing.

Built in a tight group, dotted across a flat area in front of the river.

The encampment sprawled wide and deep enough so there was a margin of open area between the shelters and the barricades at either end.

The barricades now spilled over the grass coated shallows, a solid-looking mash of brush and branches, fortified with limbs sharpened into spikes.

After so much physical work, the entire tribe was voracious.

Coverings of palm were erected over cook pits, which, once lighted, filled the camp with fog-like smoke.

The rain had lightened to a steady mist.

Ulayo roamed elsewhere.

A mix of moist air and smoke hung like a gray roof over the encampment.

As Ulanga slipped behind the mountain, leaving deepening shadows, young people scoured the perimeter for a final gathering of *layit-umlilo*.

Food fit for a feast was ready.

Eku and Yathi helped themselves to roasted duiker heaped on boiled corms and tubers, sweetened with figs and berries.

A communal stew was brewed in a pit lined with clay and leaves.

Eku and Yathi helped themselves to catfish and *sek-unda*, along with an assortment of tasty morsels gathered from a bounteous land.

Comradery and good food were the perfect solution after the most physically strenuous day of the pilgrimage.

The people gathered across the center of the encampment, in front of the shelters.

Eku, Yathi and Kolo settled with Dala and Longo amidst *waka-waka* young people, cross-legged, with bowls of stew on their laps.

The misty rain was tolerable for the humans, but enough to keep flying and biting insects under cover.

Everyone sat looking damp, but content, bellies already full and knowing that dry and comfortable shelters awaited.

“What is this?”

A curious look on his face, Dala held up an eating stick: stabbed on the end, a yellowish, dripping blob.

Eku, seated next to him, leaned to peer close and said, “*Gongthwana*. But that is very big.”

Dala pursed his lips and looked concerned and Eku added, “They grow into beetles.”

Relieved, Dala said the Bwana word for grubs, then agreed with Eku, saying, “It is very big.”

“For sure,” Yathi said from the other side of Eku. “The gongthwana we eat at home live in the forest—they do not grow by the ocean. We eat them all the time, but they are not as big as that one.”

Kolo said with some enthusiasm, “That gongthwana? It grows into a beetle as big as my fist.”

Held up a hand and made a fist, squinted with one eye and pondered before adding, “Actually, bigger. They make a loud noise when they fly.”

Eku could not help but smile and said, “Maz likes gongthwana. She is good at finding them and is always digging them up and putting them into stew, but then she tries to find them before anyone else does.”

Yathi was quick to offer, “If you do not want to eat it, I will.”

But Dala’s jaw was already at work; though, he enthusiastically managed to exclaim through a mouthful, “Chewy!”

Dusk was balmy, but pleasant.

The rain stopped and voracious mosquitos emerged.

The people coated themselves with a protective paste that muddied their skin.

Despite such an enormous tribe packed into one area, the people and their temporary roost of shelters blended into the forested background as though a natural part of the shoreline.

Ulayo blew steadily from the great lake to the north, as though to send her mother a kiss along with the excess water.

Above, puffy clouds whisked along the same route.

When Ulanga disappeared somewhere beyond the mountain, nightfall was swift.

Large fires close to the barriers at each end of camp were kept burning.

Fire pits, previously dug and packed with *layit-umlilo* and kept under cover from the rain, formed an arc along the periphery.

Flames were added and smoke billowed.

The people covered their faces and mouths, not minding the momentary inconvenience, as the smoke discouraged the emerging insects.

Once again a dense layer settled over the rounded shelters, until suddenly, Ulayo visited, her breath pulling a long tongue of smoke into darkness.

When the outer moisture of the *layit-umlilo* burned away, the flames of the fire pits turned yellow and the smoke was only smell and memory.

While the large fires that flanked each of the barricades would be kept burning yellow all night, the fire pits that formed an arc along the periphery were allowed to settle into orange coals.

But would also be maintained through the night.

On most evenings, young people ate in two shifts.

First, a quick filling for an energy boost to send everyone into a frenzy of playing, before another go-round filled bellies for sleep.

Tonight, there was no running or playing.

Besides, after so much physical work, young people were happy to relax and nibble on the excess food.

Everyone was required to remain at the heart of the encampment.

Adults grouped themselves around the shelters, along the periphery, and close to the large fires at either end.

The three former tribes now functioned as one, but in separate groups based on age and corresponding skill sets.

Older adults watched the children with concern.

Younger, mated adults without children watched the forest with concern.

Eku, Yathi, Kolo, Dala and Longo were arranged in a tight circle, facing each other, sitting cross-legged.

The outer ring of fire pits shed little light, but the large fires at either end of the encampment glowed and the ambient light of night was enough for them to see features.

Eku's group was surrounded by other young people, including a large female section that included Maz, Tar, Sisi and Kat.

Yat was not in their group, making Eku wonder.

Yathi, sitting beside Eku, was holding a melon husk that held pieces of catfish in one hand.

He motioned with his free hand toward the forest and said, "Why are the scouts still going in there?"

"They are watching the bubinzwana," Kolo said.

He plucked a fig berry from the sack of hide on his lap and popped it into his mouth.

Pointed with the same hand in the same direction as Yathi, past the arc of fires toward the mountain.

"Over there. On the mountain."

They all looked.

Throughout the day, the bubinzwana were the topic of conversation.

Everyone felt a certain level of anxiety, but for the young people, the depth of fear felt by the adults had not taken root.

Not yet, anyway.

Eku's group sat a bit closer to the upriver barrier.

He sat with feet stretched out, facing the forest side and noticed a sudden brightening of leafage.

Turned to look across the rounded tops of the shelters to see Yanga's pale face snuck over a black hill.

Eku turned back and the encampment came into more detail.

Hunters and nesibindi stood in groups along the arc of fire pits, his father and Nibamaz amongst them, side by side with Uta and Kafil.

Beyond the encampment, Yanga's fresh light brought individual trees to form.

As though waiting for the same signal, cicadas and crickets ramped up their efforts; likewise, the stands of water grass and swamp reeds began a disharmonious serenade of whistlers and croakers.

Waka-waka-waka wing rubbers and body shakers added a buzz to the din.

Ulayo blew softly on the palms of the floodplain, making the bladed leaves scissor.

As stars emerged from the black above, the contours of the mountain were exposed.

Eku watched his father.

Talking with Uta and Kafil.

What about?

He wondered about his mother and quickly scanned the elder mothers seated in their familiar groups.

Krele was nowhere to be seen.

The same as Yat.

Eku's attention snapped back to his immediate group when Yathi exclaimed, "We are all staying in the same shelter!"

"Oh yes," said Dala, seated next to Longo, across from Eku. "Some of our friends and some of yours."

Enthusiastic, Longo leaned his shoulder against Dala, adding, "We get to stay together all night! But we have to stay in the same shelter. No moving around."

"This is good," Yathi exclaimed, sharing the enthusiasm, but then his face slackened and the lower lip stuck out.

"We cannot leave even to find a snack?"

"There will be snacks in the huts because we harvested so much," Longo said.

He was a big eater like Yathi and offered a reassuring nod, adding, "My mother said not to worry. She will make sure our shelter has plenty of snacks!"

Yathi, with complete trust in all mothers, immediately relaxed.

"The shelters are very big," Kolo said. "Maybe that is why we made them that way. So we can fit."

"Oh yes," Dala said. "Do not forget there will be others with us. *Waka* people or more in all the shelters."

There were groans of disappointment and guesses to whom they might have to share with.

Yathi declared, "Just no adults in ours!"

"And no farting!" Dala called.

He grinned as he said it, while looking at Yathi, who responded with a hearty belch.

"We can tell stories," Kolo said. "I know isipo of the yolumkono. Some of the stories are scary and some are funny."

"A scary one would be good," Dala said.

"No!" Yathi declared. "A funny one."

Kolo shrugged and clicked twice, then looked at Eku and Yathi, as though embarrassed, though both of them smiled and clicked back.

“We can tell both kinds of stories,” Eku said.

“But we cannot shit alone,” Dala declared.

Kolo groaned and said, “The dung pit is in only one spot!”

The young males shook their heads at the contrived inconvenience.

Longo added, “And we have to go with someone else!”

Yathi said, “My mother told me that *waka-waka* times already. Because of safety.”

Dala said, “My father said to hold it until morning.”

Now Yathi groaned loudly, saying, “I cannot do that. Shitting for me is the same as life.”

He glanced at Eku and smirked, before adding, “When shitting is meant to be, shitting happens.”

Everyone giggled.

“We might be here for more than one night,” Longo said. “My mother thinks it might be two or three nights.”

“This is the right spot,” Kolo said.

“Everyone keeps saying that,” Dala said. “What does that even mean?”

They all looked at Eku, who shrugged and answered, “I do not know, but my father and Uta picked this spot.”

Thought for a moment, then added, “I heard my father say this is the right place. That it is *embi-kulunge*.”

Yathi groaned again, saying, “Another one of those life things. I just hope the bubinzwana stay away. That would be the best.”

There would be festivity after all.

A commotion rose from amongst the rounded shelters.

Because of the somber atmosphere, a sudden explosion of happy noises brought the entire tribe to its feet.

Mothers sang a simple chorus, but with a vibrant, uplifting tone:

he waits

she cuts her hair

female to male

Uwama, Umawa!

Every Abantu knows this song.

Having heard it since the womb.

A song for when a female emerges after cutting her hair.

For a moment, Eku was baffled, thinking that he was looking at a younger incarnation of his mother, but it was Yat, walking out from amongst the shelters.

Behind her, Krele, Shona, Luvu and Nyama led a parade of mothers, arms raised, fingers waving as they sang with gusto:

he waits

she cuts her hair

female to male

Uwama, Umawa!

Yat came away from the shelters and was mobbed by young Abantu of all ages.

Everyone—even the Bwana and Mantel—joined the next chorus:

he waits

she cuts her hair

female to male

Uwama, Umawa!

And they repeated, even louder the second time through.

Finally the people around dissipated and Yat was left holding hands with Dokuk.

Filled with happiness, Eku jumped up and pushed past those in front of him, charging for his sister, and practically knocking Yat over with a spectacular hug.

She staggered backward, laughing.

“Thank you little brother!”

Eku released his sister and hugged Dokuk with the same enthusiasm, only to find he had a close up view of a fish eagle talon.

There has been no formal presentation, but that did not change that Dokuk was a hunter.

And now an adult, like his sister.

“You have an eagle talon,” Eku breathed, stepping back.

Dokuk nodded in a peculiar way, without saying anything.

His eyes were red-rimmed and he looked at Yatyambo with such love that Eku felt his own tears begin to well.

Eku knew that becoming a hunter meant the same to Dokuk as it did for himself, but he understood the sadness.

There is pride, for sure, but it can only come later, when the pain of missing Goguk fades.

Eku stepped aside to let other people through to offer congratulations.

Saw his mother wiping tears.

Shona, Nyama and even Luvu—all the mothers had such happy looks.

Everyone knew that Dokuk and Yat were destined to be mated.

It had only been a question of when.

Eku tried not to be jealous.

He was happy for Yat and Dokuk, of course.

Eku told himself it was silly to be jealous, especially since he can no longer even be a hunter.

Dokuk would no doubt find another, excellent hunting ikanabe.

As the celebration for Yat and Dokuk subsided, the crowd reshuffled.

Mothers gathered children for shelter deployment and excitement rose considerably amongst the young people.

Good-natured trash talk erupted between potential shelter groupings.

Everyone was eager to see which of the big huts would be theirs.

Eku, Yathi, Kolo, Dala and Longo stuck close behind their mothers, who knew they wanted to be together and had planned accordingly.

Eku was beginning to look forward to a different kind of fun at night, when he saw Krele waiting at the outer row of shelters, the line of her gaze no doubt singling him out.

Once closer, she clicked for Eku to stop.

When Yathi paused to linger with him, Krele and Shona both clicked to indicate he should move along with the others.

Eku looked curiously at his mother.

“Tiuti wants you to stay,” she said. “To listen and learn.”