

## Chapter 27

### Tribal Council

The behavior of the adults changed when all the children were inside shelters.

Everyone became serious.

People moved about the encampment with a purpose, despite a grueling day already.

Eku felt heavy with fatigue himself, but the nervous energy of the adults rubbed off.

Standing alone, just outside the shelters, he watched the bustle of activity.

What was expected of him?

When his mother said that Tiuti wanted him to stay and listen, Eku was too distracted to ask why until his aunt Shona returned.

Then it was too late.

He looked to where Krele and Shona hustled past the last shelters into the open area, in front of the upriver barricade.

To the left, the large fire burned bright. The yellow flames revealed adults gathered on both the river and forest sides.

Krele and Shona joined a group of mothers directly in front of the barricade, including Nyama and Luvu.

*Waka-waka* mothers had gathered in a half circle to address Kafilu, who faced them.

Ingwe's mother wore her finest vest.

The fire cast an orange glow to the softened wrap of skin and her dark ponytail swung when she gestured.

Kafilu flexed her fingers the same way as Ingwe, which made Eku smile.

What was she telling the other mothers to hold them in such rapt attention?

He thought of Ingwe saying that her mother was *nesibindi*, like her father, which only made him more curious.

Past the mothers, closer to the water, he saw his uncle Lume, the thickest trunk amongst a grove of *izik-kosa*. He also appeared to be leading some kind of group discussion.

Similarly, in the area along the water behind the shelters, Umthi held court with an equally large group of Mantel.

Eku swung his gaze back to the forest side of the large fire.

More people.

Abantu hunters were gathered along the arc of fire pits.

His father was there, with Nibamaz, Juka and Lopi, as well as other most experienced hunters, mingling with the Uta and the nesibindi, including Kotuta and Tokuta.

Eku was close to where he had been with the others during the feasting and figured that might be a good place to settle.

For now.

At least he would have a clear view of the area around the large fire by the upriver barricade, where everyone seemed to be focused.

Eku paced to a central area of the encampment.

Stood a bit separate from everyone else.

Wondering.

Then it came to him.

There was going to be a tribal council.

A *real* tribal council.

Something he waited his whole life to attend!

Of course, he always expected a fish eagle talon would gain him admittance; yet, here he was!

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Kafila finished the meeting with her fellow mothers and walked past the big fire with her profile to Eku.

Her hands were clenched at her stomach, pulling the flaps of her colored vest tight.

Her head was bowed.

She appeared to be studying her toes, but Eku knew that Ingwe's mother was deep in thought.

Uta, who at some point had left his father's group on the forest side, was waiting for her on the other side of the large fire.

Kafila joined Uta and they stood together, a moment, side by side, looking over the crowd.

Eku watched them settle cross-legged on the first, the same way he was.

Though a good distance away, thanks to the light of the fire, Eku can see their features, including Uta's awful scar.

He looked so different, Eku thought. The side of his torn face was to Uta.

The other side of Uta's profile was noble.

*Embi-kulunge*, Eku thought, though he wasn't sure exactly why.

But of this being a tribal council, there was no doubt.

Uta and Kafila had to be leading. Probably.

Eku saw his mother, aunt Shona, Luvu and Nyama come into the same area.

They began to settle into seated positions, forming rows in front of Kafila and Uta.

Many young adults began moving into positions behind the elder mothers, taking seats or standing and looking around for the friends they wanted to join them.

Eku saw Doku trailing Kozik and Ingwabe. They were with a large group of young hunters.

And then Krele was suddenly emerging from the fast-forming crowd, headed directly for Eku.

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Eku began to stand, but his mother gestured to indicate he should remain seated.

Krele plunked herself down on the dirt and leaned her shoulder into his, saying, "I am sorry Eku. I had to leave quickly to talk with Kafila and the other mothers. There is still much to do. And I will have to go back upfront with the mothers. Are you okay sitting back here?"

Eku nodded, for the moment, simply happy to not be alone.

Krele leaned off Eku.

Her shoulders immediately slumped and she bowed her head.

Weariness.

Eku leaned his body affectionately against his mother and threw an arm over her shoulders, which made Krele smile.

Mother and child sat close.

Relaxing just for a moment.

Watching.

Most of the adults took seated positions on the dirt and grass.

Kafila and Uta continued to wait patiently.

Eku thought they also looked a bit weary, like his mother.

He saw his father and the more experienced Abantu hunters remained standing along the arc of fire pits.

"Eku you can stay here," Krele said, "Or come up with me."

When he did not respond, she added, "Up where the mothers are seated."

She pointed and Eku leaned to look, though he already knew the location.

Yes, it would be nice to sit up front.

Not be alone.

Eku glanced over to where his father stood with the most experienced Abantu hunters.

He noticed the nesibindi were over there as well, including Tokuta and Kotuta.

He asked, "This is a tribal council?"

"Yes, Eku, this is a tribal council," Krele said, her voice grim. "We will be starting soon. I have to go back up to the front. Do you want to come sit with me?"

Eku did not want to sit alone, but ... If he sat with the mothers, he would look like a child.

"I will stay here."

Krele kissed him on the cheek and went back up front.

Eku adjusted himself into a more comfortable, cross-legged position just in time to have Yat come looming over.

Startled at the sight of his sister with short hair, he quickly uncrossed his legs and sprang up to hug her.

Yat giggled and exclaimed, "Two times in one night!"

She stepped back from Eku, looking radiant and said, "You are silly."

"I am happy for you and Dokuk."

Yat beamed and only looked more beautiful.

"I am proud of you, little brother. Just as I am proud of Dokuk. But it is ironic, because both of you have been honored, yet, both of you are sad."

She touched Eku on the arm with affection.

"Maybe you will not be so sad when we have time for a formal presentation. When Dokuk is named a hunter, and you, my own little brother, will be named *izik-ikiz*."

Eku could only stare blankly, still bewildered by how much everything had changed.

Including his sister's hair. Or lack of it.

But he was surely delighted that Yat joined him.

Yat had always been very popular amongst the young females, but now that she was mated to a young and impressive hunter, there would be many older females trying to woo her into one coalition or another.

As if answering the unspoken question, Yat said, "There is too much talking up there."

Nodded in the direction of the young females gathered to the side of the mothers.

"Now that I cut my hair it is all talk, talk, talk," Yat said. "And they never spoke as much as a word to me before!"

She leaned her shoulder against Eku and said, "So I sit with my little brother."

Eku grinned his appreciation and said, "This is a tribal council."

Yat clicked positively and Eku clicked back, just to be sure.

They sat cross-legged, side by side, waiting for the proceedings to get underway.

Eku glanced up to see clouds like puffs of smoke slip past the face of Yanga.

He wondered how the clouds moved so fast in the sky, while on the ground, Ulayo's breath was soft.

Maybe because of the mountains?

Or maybe because that was just the way that life worked: moving fast from a distance, but up close, plodding along.

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The tribal council began when Tiuti presented a gift to Kafila.

The old master paced across the front row of mothers, carrying an axe in two hands before him, formally, as though to make an offering.

He stopped in front of Kafila, who stood to face him.

The axe was simple, but brilliantly crafted.

An unusually long haft, pale and tapered from a heavy head to a slender handle.

Tiuti drilled through the thickset head, where he fit an adze-shaped blade of *isipo-gazi*, secured seamlessly with sinew glue and cordage.

The blade was long and narrow, knapped and then shaved by Tiuti to a sharpness that would cut hair with no resistance.

Kafila, wearing her splendid colored vest, was visibly moved.

She took the axe in two hands and looked at it for a moment.

Switched the shaft to one hand so that she could hug Tiuti with obvious affection.

Kafila stepped to better face the crowd and raised the ax above her head, so that everyone could see.

There were murmurs of admiration.

An excellent weapon, Eku thought, but wondered about its purpose.

The narrow and heavy head would easily slice through flesh, but the handle was not shaped for butchering.

Definitely not a blade meant for the dull hacking of harvest type work.

There certainly would not be wood chopping with such a specialized blade.

Yat murmured, as if she came to realize its purpose at the same time as Eku.

To kill.

Such an elegant design for a singularly, deadly function.

Kafila brought the axe down and playfully ran a finger across the unmatched cutting edge of *isipo-gazi* and then drew the hand away quickly, licking her finger.

She smiled and there was much laughter, especially amongst the Bwana mothers and nesibindi.

“I like Kafila,” Yat said.

Eku glanced at his sister and saw she was grinning.

Watched his sister’s closely shorn profile for a moment, then looked back at Kafila.

Yat turned and looked at Eku’s profile.

Smiled and leaned her shoulder against his and said, “And I like Ingwe, too.”

Eku’s smile broadened.

Sister and brother watched Kafila adjust the wrap around her shoulders and settle down beside Uta, the axe on her lap.

Yes, Eku thought.

He could see it now.

The bee-eater.

Her grace and the colored vest were her bright feathers.

The axe was her sharp beak.

A beautiful, but lethal hunter.

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The Tribal Council was really about how to defend from an attack by the bubinzwana.

Everyone had a critical role.

The more experienced hunters and nesibindi, would remain outside the encampment.

Their roles were established.

There were so many people in front of where he was seated that it became difficult for Eku to hear.

Perhaps he should have sat closer, but it was too late for that.

Yat suddenly surprised him by saying, “I am afraid.”

Eku didn’t know how to respond.

Yat afraid?

Then he realized she was worried about Dokuk.

Now that he wore an eagle talon, would be amongst those defending the camp.

Eku said, “At least Dokuk will be with the hunters who remain in the encampment.”

“Yes, that is much better. But father will still be out there.”

Eku felt his first tremble of fear.

There were so many people and they were sitting in the back so it was hard to hear.

A voice rose shrill and loud above the others.

*“Why are you so certain they will come for us?”*

Silence.

The entire tribe did not say as much as a word.

Or even click.

A lone figure had stood out of the elder mothers seated up front.

Luvu.

“We have suffered losses,” she cried.

Luvu was facing Uta and Kafila, but craned her neck to look in one direction and then the other crying out, “Maybe we should keep moving! Have we thought of that? They have left us alone so far!”

There was no disguising the quaver of fear in her voice.

But fear gave courage.

Luvu demanded, “Why now? Why here? Why this night? Or the next? Or the next after that? Are we so sure of what they will do?”

Kafila bounced to her feet.

Stepped forward.

“We have seen them do this,” she cried. “What the scouts are telling us of their behavior. It is what they do before a hunt. They are beasts with habits, just like all other beasts.

“They follow rituals and we have learned their habits. We once used that against them and were able to attack where they lived and killed many of them.

“This time, we use it against them by drawing them to us and finishing what was begun long ago on the shores of ichi-Bwana.”

A mother called, “Maybe they moved away from the river to avoid us? Maybe they are the ones who should be afraid.”

“Yes, they are the ones who should be hiding,” a young Abantu hunter shouted.

Kafila scowled and snapped, “The bubinzwana do not hide. They hunt.”

A mother called, “This land is so bountiful. Why would they hunt us?”

Kafila held up a hand as though to explain, but suddenly everyone was talking.

Questions flew back and forth.

What are the bubinzana really like?

Why has nobody seen them?

And where did the bubinzwana come from, after all?

Overwhelmed, Kafila took a step back and could only watch as many conversations broke out.

Uta stood and came to her side.

Gradually, the people stopped talking.

Finally there was silence again.

Uta was inspiring, as always, Eku thought.

Such a tall and muscular physique, and with his countenance of seriousness, with the scar and necklace he was most impressive.

“The bubinzwana do not stalk us for food,” Uta called.

There were murmurs.

A mother asked, “For what then?”

Uta shrugged and sounded almost apologetic when he said, “We will get to that.”

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Uta and Kafila sat down and the tribal council continued with more discussion, hard for Eku to hear.

He was getting very sleepy.

Finding it difficult to concentrate.

He glanced at Yat and saw her eyelids were droopy.

Eku snapped to attention when a loud question rang out—“But what are the bubinzwana really like!”

Juka came forward from the Abantu hunters gathered on the forest side.

Like the others, he wore only a loincloth and leopard skin belt.

Three eagle talons hung on his chest.

No other hunter had three talons except Lopi, and of course, Kaleni and Nibamaz.

Juka was renowned for *ibe-bonakalio*; able to track any beast, over any terrain.

Deadly with an *ula-konto* and javelin.

He nodded to Kafila and Kaleni as he approached.

He stood just to the side of them and bowed to the elder mothers.

Juka spoke loudly, so that everyone could hear.



“If you see a bubinzwana from a distance, you will think they are human,” he said, “But they are different.

“They have large heads and the males are thick and robust. They are not tall, but very large. Thick, especially here.”

Juka shifted his stance sideways to the main crowd.

Raised both hands, saying, “Much bigger than we are here.”

He slapped shoulders, chest and hips.

Turned suddenly and flipped his loincloth to show his naked butt, slapping an exposed cheek and shouting, “And they are especially large here!”

Yat and Eku joined the laughter.

Juka, happy to have inspired a bit of mirth, let the loincloth fall and stood straight.

Became serious again.

“Only the males are big,” he said. “The females are not.”

Kafila called out, “But the females are as vicious and aggressive as the males. Even more so when we attacked their camp. They fought ferociously, but we killed many of them.”

Somewhere just in front of Eku and Yat, a young Abantu adult called out, “But are they the same as us or like a monkey?”

Juka said, “They are like us. Males and females. But the males are big and the females are small.”

“Our females are smaller,” someone shouted.

Juka said, “Yes, but bubinzwana males are much bigger than the females, more like baboons.”

“They are like a baboon’s ass,” a hunter called.

“But you like baboon ass,” another shouted back.

Yat giggled and Eku joined her.

There was more laughter.

Crude jokes erupted.

What might a bubinzwana butt look like?

Who really wanted to find out?

Perhaps, because of the tension, people laughed a bit too shrill.

Jokes were put forth with overt enthusiasm.

Juka seemed bewildered at what to do and retreated to stand with the other hunters.

There was even more commotion than previously.

People shouted out whatever came to mind.

“They are hairy like a vervet monkey and ugly as a wildebeest!”

“They smell like buffalo shit.”

“They are stupid and have thick skulls!”

Eku saw Uta stand.

Arms folded across the chest.

Looking stern.

Angry.

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Uta was indeed angry.

Both he and Kafila were angry because they were afraid.

This new tribe was large and dynamic and truly powerful, with many young and proud nesibindi.

The Abantu and Mantel have incredible hunters.

But out of all of these capable people, only Uta and Kafila have been face to face with a bubinzwana.

Uta, numerous times.

He wanted to scream.

Not at any one person, but at everyone.

To warn them of what is coming.

Uta personally trained all of the young nesibindi, but not a single one has actually fought a bubinzwana.

And the Abantu and Mantel?

While their forest skills and weapons were without equal, they have only been able to observe the bubinzwana from afar.

One cannot judge the true nature of such a beast without fighting it.

A bubinzwana was more agile and powerful than a human.

Fueled by pure aggression.

Attacking with unmatched speed and ferocity.

Uta stepped away from Kafila and began to pace in front of the mothers.

Eku watched the light of fire play across the scar and disquieting images appeared in his mind.

Teeth and raw flesh and blood.

He felt his first bite of real fear.

The crowd had gone quiet.

There was only a steady drone of insects.

Croaks and peeps from the river.

The fire offered an occasional pop.

Uta looked deliberately across the tribe, as though trying to touch the gaze of every individual.

No one as much as clicked or whispered.

Slowly, he raised his left hand and pointed to the scar.

His voice was low, but easily heard.

“A bubinzwana did this to me.”

The fire cast flickering light.

Uta opened the pointed hand with the palm, splaying his fingers and thumb.

“A bubinzwana did this to me with a blow of his hand. A hand like mine, but nails hard like claws. When I was at my strongest.”

Uta bowed his head as though to remember, but then quickly shook it, as though to be rid of the thoughts conjured.

“The bubinzwana kill,” Uta said. “That is what they do.”

He paced in front of the mothers while looking at the ground.

Stepping a few steps one way, before spinning to the other.

Uta went past Kafila, speaking loud with his head bent, “The bubinzwana kill.”

Spun around and added, “And then they eat what they kill.”

Spun again and said, “They are like hyenas, but worse. Much worse!”

Uta pivoted as he spun and motioned powerfully with both arms in a stabbing motion.

Shouted, “The bubinzwana charge swiftly forward like lions and thrust with a spear.”

He quick-stepped forward in front of the mothers, knees bent in an attack position to thrust in a vicious, two-handed stabbing motion.

“I have seen them do this,” he cried.

The Bwana chieftain made an impressive leap and spun around.

Demonstrated the same type of two-handed spear attack from the other direction.

“A single thrust skewers right through a strong Bwana,” Uta shouted, “So the spear enters the stomach and comes out the back!”

He straightened and saw the looks of horror.

Revulsion.

Nodded and reached out at the crowd, clenching his fingers, as though to grab someone by the throat.

Said in a harsh tone that made many of the mothers wince and pull back, "And as you die, they seize you and bite ferociously at your face and neck."

Uta demonstrated by shaking his hands as though around another's neck and snapping his teeth where the face would be.

There are looks of horror, even amongst the hunters.

Uta's lips were pulled tight, exposing teeth, but he was not smiling.

Eku thought the scar was somehow glowing in the firelight.

At that moment, the Bwana chieftain was easily the most ferocious person Eku had ever seen.

But apparently, the bubinzwana were more ferocious.

Keeping his voice low again, Uta said, "The weakest male bubinzwana is stronger than our strongest. The largest are very dangerous. Very hard to kill."

He paced to the side, looking down as if reluctant to continue.

Stopped.

And finished what he had to say.

"I have seen the bubinzwana do things my mind could never imagine without my eyes showing me.

"The bubinzwana killed the people of *ichi-Bwana* and ate them.

"They cooked and ate them in the same villages in which they once lived.

"The bubinzwana killed the people of my village. My family. When I was a young male.

"I was one of the few to survive. Able to flee with others."

Uta nodded at the pain he saw in the faces of his people.

And though he deeply appreciated—and needed—their empathy, he felt great responsibility.

They had to know what they were up against.

"The bubinzwana hunted and ate the linwelewana," Uta said. "They captured the linwelewana to bring back to their camp where they let the young males play with them for practice hunting.

"Again and again and again until the linwelewana simply died of fright."

Uta gestured past the mothers, toward the darkness of the forest.

"The bubinzwana will come for us. Here. Tomorrow. Or the next day.

"You ask why?"

He paused, one last time.

Took another step forward, to hover over the front row of mothers.

“The bubinzwana are not hunting us for food, but for our females.

“They intend to capture them and bring them back to their camps.

“They will keep them for their own pleasure until they are tired of using them and then they will be killed.”

He gestured to Kafilā and said, “We have seen them do this.”

There were visceral reactions and some of the people sobbed.

Uta sighed, knowing this was no time to be soft.

“The bubinzwana will kill our youngest,” Uta said.

“They will take the bodies back to their camps for the females, who will fight over who gets to distribute the tender meat.

“That is what the bubinzwana intend to do if we do not stop them.”

Kafilā sprang up, making Eku think her colored vest looked like folded wings.

“If the bubinzwana want something they do not stop,” she cried.

She stood beside Uta.

“They will come for us again and again and again until they finish their hunt,” Kafilā cried, “And that is why we will stop them here, at this place!”

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Yat cried softly.

Of all nights, Dokuk had to become a hunter on this one!

Eku said in a way that meant help from their ancestors, as well as comfort, “*Isipo-kee!*”

Yat immediately repeated “*Isipo-kee!*”

Eku did not know what to think of the bubinzwana.

He tried to use his mind to imagine some kind of beast, but ended up conjuring a big baboon or something similar to a linwelewana.

But then, when Eku thought of a linwelewana’s strength and agility in a body much larger, he realized that would be very scary.

“I am going to lie down in a shelter where Tar and Maz are,” Yat said.

She kissed him on the cheek.

“Ingwe is in the same shelter as us. So you can come see us in the morning, yes?”

She managed a more familiar smirk when she saw Eku's huge smile.

"Do not worry about me, little brother. We are safe in the shelters. Worry about Dokuk and the hunters. See you later."

Eku watched Yat until she disappeared into the cluster of shelters, making sure he remembered exactly where she went.

Alone again, he tried to pay attention, but there was much talking and it was hard to hear.

Besides, Eku was suddenly very sleepy.

Without Yat to keep him company, there was little to focus on.

Suddenly it was dark.

Eku's eyes flew open.

Oh no!

Horried to realize he dozed off.

Not acceptable!

He tried to focus on Kafil and Uta.

And then it was dark again.

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Eku wanted to groan with pleasure.

What a wonderful feeling!

Then he realized it was mother, rubbing his shoulders.

Those wonderful hands, coaxing him into wakefulness.

Eku was slumped over, chin to his chest, still in a cross-legged position.

He raised his head and felt an ache in his neck.

He really fell asleep!

Krele clicked in a way that meant to get moving.

Eku opened his mouth to protest, but a series of soft clicks told him not to bother.

Besides, now his mother was rubbing between his shoulders and his eyes were already droopy again.

"Come with me," she whispered into his ear. "There is an extra shelter. For you and I and any of the other mothers who might need it later."

"Where is Yathi," Eku mumbled.

"He is in the same shelter as he went to before. He is asleep with Kolo and the others. They are in the shelter next to Yat and Ingwe. You can see them later. When Ulanga rises.

“Come with me for now. I can show you where and stay for a bit.”

“There is an extra hut?”

Krele pointed to a smaller, reed woven dome on the outer row.

Tucked between two larger huts, the entrance was not visible.

Eku knew all exits pointed toward the center.

“That one is empty,” Krele said. “For anyone who needs it.”

Eku clicked that he was confused.

Krele put a palm to the top of his head and said, “Eku, I already put your bed mat down. And your *ula-konto* is in there.”

“How did you know to do that?”

She straightened and beckoned with one hand. “Let us go. Come on.”

Eku took her hand and stood.

Followed his mother as she explained, “I will be coming to lie down with you later. But first, there are things we must finish.”

“What other things?”

Krele shook her head, but the movement was lost in the low light.

Eku glanced back.

The large fire still burned.

The adults were still seated around Uta and Kafilá.

The fire pits formed a glowing orange line in the black.

He turned around and the shelters organized into pale humps.

Eku asked, “Is the tribal council over?”

“Almost. Come, you can listen from the shelter.”

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The shelter Eku would stay in was smaller than the others, but still plenty spacious.

He crawled inside and found the familiar outlines of his bed mat.

Reached to the side and sure enough, there was his *ula-konto*, set on two flat rocks.

Clicked his gratitude as Krele crawled in behind.

Eku positioned himself on the bed mat and Krele shuffled herself onto the mat next to him.

“I must go soon but will be back soon, Eku,” she said. “Once the talking is finished. It will not be long. Are you okay?”

Eku, feeling very sleepy and comfortable, clicked yes.

Soon he was sound asleep.

Krele crawled out and returned to the tribal council.

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It was nearly dawn when Krele came back to find Eku still asleep.

She immediately backed out on all fours.

Rose to face Kaleni, waiting.

They walked around the shelter and into the open area of the encampment, now mostly clear of people.

The night sky was cloudless, well lit by Yanga and many stars.

The camp appeared inactive; though, they both knew that was hardly the case.

Beds of coals provided a glowing arc in front of the forest.

What lay beyond was undetectable shadows played across the black of the mountain.

A world of mysterious shapes and shadows.

Krele and Kaleni were close.

He was taller and looked down slightly as she looked up.

Kaleni said softly, “Is he asleep?”

Krele offered a terse nod, forehead nearly touching the tip of Kaleni’s nose.

“Do you want to see him?”

“Not now. Are you going to stay with him or remain outside?”

Krele clicked undecided.

“There is time for you to rest,” Kaleni urged. “Lie with Eku. At least until Ulanga begins to rise. Nothing will happen until then.”

Krele glanced over the domed shelters.

A pattern she had already memorized.

She knew where everyone was.

Sighed.

Closed her eyes and felt fatigue blanket her mind with a warm darkness.



A dangerous darkness.

Grunted in annoyance.

Rest now?

No.

She had work to do, like everyone else.

Krele opened her eyes.

She knew that all of the young ones slept peacefully.

The youngest mothers and any nursing mothers were in the centermost shelters.

All pregnant females and children were also at the center.

The surrounding shelters were empty; they would be occupied by adults ... When there was finally time for rest.

She could wake Eku and squeeze him into another shelter, but that would mean disturbing both.

And with dawn fast approaching?

She stared at Kaleni, needing the strength she knew was always there.

“We are safe here. Yes?”

Kaleni clicked yes.

“Then I will stay in the little hut with him until Ulanga rises. It will not be long. You know how he is once he wakes up. He needs to rest.”

Kaleni nodded, keeping his expression neutral.

But Krele no longer hid her fear.

Bitterly she said, “They are coming?”

“It will be soon.”

Kaleni put both hands to her shoulders.

Looked at the top of his mate’s shorn head.

Frizzy, probably due for a cut.

Felt a moment of frustration.

Yearning for his thoughts to simply leap into Krele’s mind, so that she knew how much he loved her.

How much she meant to him.

How much he has loved her since even before cutting her hair for him.

Krele and Kaleni have been together for many cycles.

Endured and triumphed.

Which was why he knew that she understood that he must do what a hunter must do.

As if reading his mind, Krele looked up.

Touched a hand to his face.

Ran the tips of her fingers across Kaleni's nose and mouth.

Caressed his throat and chest.

Nudged aside the four eagle talons and bowed her head and placed lips against the skin of his chest, whispering, "I will sing in my mind for you to come back to us, as you always have."

Kaleni put fingers to Krele's chin, raised her face and kissed her.

"When something is meant to be, something happens."

Kaleni left and Krele crawled inside the shelter to lay beside Eku.

She even managed to fall asleep.

Briefly.

Her and Eku woke when the bubinzwana attacked at dawn.