

Chapter 28

Attack of the Bubinzwana

The bubinzwana bounced.

Packed shoulder to shoulder beneath an opening in the canopy, illuminated by Yanga's light upon a flattened terrace near the peak of the mountain, well above where the flat faces nested by the river.

Bouncing.

All males faced the center, the Alpha at its heart.

Feet pounding in unison, a single, thudding heartbeat so that even the mountain felt their presence.

When the Alpha barked orders, it seemed like shouting and possibly words.

Those around him responded in kind.

The bubinzwana leader timed it so that balls of the feet hit the ground and powerful muscles recoiled, sending him higher into the air.

Growling began, like a chant, low and deep and rhythmic, in line with the pounding.

Thick hairs along their heavy browlines bristled.

The short hairs at the peak of their sloped heads stiffened.

A feeling like sexual intensity spread.

Their stench became heavy.

Adrenaline and hormone levels spiked.

The Alpha tilted his enormous head back to scream, a blood curdling sound

All of the bubinzwana joined the Alpha and their screaming rose to a terrifying clamor.

All denizens of the forest reacted.

They had no choice not to.

Ears flickered.

Fur rippled.

Feathers ruffled.

All beasts within hearing range paused what they were doing.

Those sleeping became awake.

The bubinzwana were hunting.

At the bottom of the mountain the nesibindi have no choice but to listen.

The hunting call of the bubinzwana had a visceral fury, descending down the mountain like an avalanche to the floodplain where they all stood, close enough to touch.

The nesibindi are all lifelong friends with familial bonds.

Each has taken a sacred vow to protect the tribe.

No matter the cost.

They are the first warriors.

The young nesibindi stand beyond the arc of fire pits, far enough away to preserve their night vision.

The darkness of dawn allows only a comrade's shape, a glint of teeth or the pale of an eye.

The terrain is unseeable in the black, but earlier in the day there was time for each of them to become familiar with the landscape.

While Yanga was still in the sky, they took the positions they were in now.

The old inlet was flat.

Covered with thistle grass and scattered palm.

The shape of the mountain loomed over the treeline, black against the slate of dawn.

Uta assured them the bubinzwana will wait for Ulanga to rise.

"They are not like a leopard," he said during the tribal council. "The bubinzwana have no more ability to move through the dark than we do."

Uta stood with them now, at the center of their formation, the pillar upon which all of the young nesibindi anchored their courage.

Despite Uta's presence, there was not a single hand that gripped a spear without the greasy sweat of fear.

The young nesibindi repeatedly wiped their palms on loincloths, waiting for the bubinzwana to emerge from the black.

Gaps in the canopy offered enough light to allow the bubinzwana to advance slowly down the mountain.

They moved at the pace Ulanga rose.

Cautiously.

The incline was steep.

Fortunately, the ground was firm underfoot.

They each carried a spear or club, leaving one hand free to maintain balance.

The bubinzwana at the front are clear on the objective.

Other members of the clan had roles more complicated, but theirs was simple: capture young females and carry them away; kill any flat faces that try to stop them.

For some time, the Alpha considered an attack with a smaller, more agile raiding party.

Each time the plan was dismissed.

Mostly because of the old one.

The old male had a strong influence.

And he was clever.

More clever than any of them.

But the old male was too cautious.

Not aggressive enough for the younger males' taste.

They would have preferred to raid and attack repeatedly until they simply got what they wanted.

But the Alpha listened to the old male.

He warned that the flat faces moved in a disciplined herd.

More importantly, the young females remain well protected.

And since a surprise raid would require a small group to remain undiscovered, they would not have the numbers to succeed.

Begrudgingly, the bubinzwana had to admit the flat faces were clever hunters.

A bubinzwana nose missed nothing, after all.

Unfortunately, the only time they caught the scent of a flat face spying on them was after it was gone; nevertheless, the bubinzwana were aware the flat faces had watched them.

Just as they watched the flat faces.

Flat faces were clever prey.

More clever than anything the young bubinzwana have hunted.

Which was probably why this was not about food.

This was a different hunt.

A much better kind of hunt!

Every male member of the clan participated.

The females waited at the top of the mountain, where they would be given the captured female flat faces to ward over.

Teach them how to stay in line.

Where they fit in the order of things.

The bubinzwana at the front of the horde were close enough to see the glint of fire.

That was good.

They liked fire.

Fire was important for cooking food, of course, but for other things, like hardening the ends of the spears they were about to use to kill some of the flat faces.

The bubinzwana can smell their prey now.

They salivate at the now recognized stench.

Only this time, they're close enough to detect the spicy addition of fear.

Uta and the nesibindi watched the dim shapes of the bubinzwana emerge along the treeline.

Only a few at first.

Some of the nesibindi hurled rocks.

Surprised when the bubinzwana tossed them back.

The same as a human would.

The two groups were a short sprint apart now.

Everyone was quiet.

Waiting for more light.

Uta knew the bubinzwana recognized his nesibindi as a fighting force to be reckoned with; after all, this was the same clan that once pillaged the shores of *ichi-Bwana*.

Both he and Kafilā are sure of it.

Tribes of separate species forced to flee ancestral homes, driven by the same desire for a better land, following the same path.

Destined to clash once more.

Against a small number, the bubinzwana would have simply attacked.

Against a large group they fought with feints and deception.

Always maneuvering to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

Still, when the attack came, it would be with the same relentless fury.

But, while confident and aggressive, a bubinzwana was clever.

It would not recklessly charge into the black, only to end up skewered on a spear.

Uta knows the bubinzwana will wait for the light.

He also knows they will launch a surprise attack.

Before the main horde tries to break through, Uta knows they will send another group to attack elsewhere.

To make them think that is the main threat.

A feint before the main group attacked in full force.

He and Kafila have been through this before, after all.

The bubinzwana never change tactics.

Perhaps they have never had to.

Both clans planned carefully for this night; thus, Uta—all of the nesibindi—was stunned by the sudden tumult of voices from behind.

From within the encampment!

Not a surprise attack, though.

Aghast, Uta realized that some of the young Abantu hunters were singing!

Inside the shelter, Eku lay with his mother in total black, listening to the blood curdling roar of the bubinzwana hunting party.

A horrible clamor that only seemed to gather strength as it tore down the mountain and across the encampment, making him wonder if the reeded shelter might just shake apart.

Terrified, Eku calmed at Krele's soft clicking and gentle touch.

She grabbed hold of his bicep and let go.

"I am here, Eku," she whispered in the black. "There is protection all around us. We have prepared for this attack. The nesibindi and hunters are ready. Try not to be afraid."

Upon waking, Eku pulled himself in a seated position, legs bent so his feet were flat against the bed mat, same as the palms of his hands.

Krele sat close, no longer touching, but Eku felt her body heat.

As the hunting cry of the bubinzwana faded, the whimpering of babies surfaced briefly and then went silent as ready nipples closed mouths.

Eku heard whispers and soft clicking.

The fear and angst of his tribemates was all around him, radiating somehow through the reeds of the shelters.

Eku felt anger.

His tribe was being attacked!

Eku felt as though his heart stopped when his mother said from out of the black, as though directly into his ear, “Eku, I am sorry, but I have to go. It is my duty.”

“But why?”

Eku hated the scared tone of his voice, thinking he sounded like a child.

Krele placed a warm hand to the skin of his back and clicked in an apologetic way.

Eku felt guilty for not being more brave.

“I know you are frightened,” she said. “But I must go, Eku. To be where the other mothers are.”

“I know.”

“You must stay in this shelter, so I know where you are.”

“I know.”

Eku did know.

He paid attention during the tribal council. Before he got too sleepy.

So he did have confidence in the tribe’s prepared defense.

Why was he afraid?

Because he did not want to be alone.

“Eku, I am sorry, but this will not be for long. I don’t think so anyway.”

There were clicks from outside the shelter. Eku recognized his aunt Shona. His mother clicked back.

Krele’s hand fumbled over his knee and found his arm and rubbed across his shoulder to the back of his neck, where her fingers kneaded the back of his head the way he loved.

“Eku this will be over soon,” she said. “I am sorry for not moving us earlier. I hoped that it would not happen so quickly.”

Eku could not himself and blurted, “Why are you leaving? What is happening?”

Krele used the hand on his neck to pull him closer.

Kissed the top of his head so he felt her teeth.

“Eku, the bubinzwana are coming. That is what we hear.”

“I know.”

“Then you know we are prepared. And because I am an older mother, I must go where the tribe needs me. We are part of the protection—but only if necessary.”

“I remember.”

“So I have to be with aunt Shona and the older mothers.”

Still fearful, Eku clicked yes, using his mind to focus on being brave.

“Eku, be sure you stay here,” Krele insisted.

“But what can I do?”

“Nothing, Eku. You are too young. There is a circle of safety all around you, but you must NOT leave this shelter. This is the safest place you can be. We know where everybody is and it needs to stay that way.

“So you stay here!”

She kissed him on the head again and crawled out of the shelter.

Eku sat with his chin resting on his knee.

Forearms wrapped around the shins, feet pulled tight so his heels hitched up against his butt.

Small and compact in the center of his bed mat.

In the black.

Willing something to come into his vision.

Anything.

Wavy shadows of gray conjured by the mind?

Nope.

Nothing.

In the dead of night, the bark-like sounds of the bubinzwana rang sharp across the slant of the mountain.

Back and forth in a manner that suggested organization and procedure.

Were they like birds communicating over distance?

Or like monkeys calling out direction?

Were they saying words?

Difficult to tell.

Curious, Eku thought, the bubinzwana made no attempt to hide their methodical approach.

Abantu voices also rang out.

Cryptic messages called back and forth across the ring of fire pits.

Eku used his mind to place the proximity of the human voices to what he heard coming from the mountain and knew the bubinzwana were still a distance away.

Felt somewhat relieved.

His mind reasoned how the shape of the mountain and the stillness of the early morning had amplified their roaring.

Softly, he said, "They are just beasts."

Oh?

He saw something!

An oval of light emerged from the black.

The shelter exit.

Eku shifted to his hands and knees.

Opened his eyes wide.

Slivers of gray appeared above the oval, in parallel.

Gaps between reeds and saplings.

Ulanga was rising, but still behind the mountain.

What should he do?

Nothing.

Mother said to stay here.

Eku wondered if anyone besides Krele knew he was actually here.

Alone.

Yat was with Tar and Maz—and Ingwe!

No doubt close to the shelter where Yathi and Kolo and Dala and Longo would be.

They were all surely awake now.

Would they be wondering where he was?

Would Ingwe be worried about him?

Yat was worried because Dokuk was outside with the hunters in the encampment.

Would the young hunters be forced to fight?

Would that mean Dokuk?

As though his voice could carry all the way to wherever Dokuk was currently stationed, Eku whispered, "Stay close to Kozik and Ingwabi, until you have a hunting ikanabe."

Coming to a decision, Eku crawled forward along the contours of the bed mat until his hands touched cool earth.

Surely mother would not mind if he only stuck his head out?

Eku crawled so his head poked past the oval opening.

A hair-like strand of cordage tickled his back.

The air was cooler outside.

The contours of the shelter in front of him took shape: rows of water reeds, thick as his thumb, woven in and out of the flexible ribs.

There was the ambient hum of a nighttime forest.

Animal calls.

A nearby cricket focused only on defeating the nearest competitor.

Human sounds all around.

Clicking and whispering.

And then a noise much louder!

What was that?

Some of the young Abantu hunters were singing!

Dokuk was amongst the young Abantu hunters organized into groups behind the arc of fire pits.

He crouched, nervous.

Assigned simply to follow Kozik and Ingwabi and watch their backs.

Until he had a hunting ikanabe.

The three of them sat together, amongst waka-waka other young hunters, sitting or kneeling.

Trying to remain relaxed.

Talking softly, as was permitted.

Each young hunter had an *ula-konto* in hand and another strapped to his back.

Axes and daggers and keris sticks hung from cordage around their waists.

The initial roaring that came from the top of the mountain was frightful, but there was only periodic barking hence.

Through the tenseness of waiting, a young hunter seated near Dokuk was taken with the idea of singing.

Having never experienced such a terrifying situation, the young hunter nearly panicked at the hunting cry of the bubinzwana.

The young hunters had been lectured about how fearsome the beasts would be visually, but the volume of noise had been unexpected.

After hearing such unbridled fury?

The young hunter struggled to remain still.

What would help?

He had always loved singing.

Singing was actually his favorite thing to do, actually.

Even for an Abantu he liked to sing a lot.

And since the bubinzwana were already making plenty of noise?

No one had exactly forbidden singing?

Had they?

Spontaneous, as young people can be, the frightened young Abantu began to sing a song that hunters used to shoo away lions and hyenas.

Dokuk, at first, was shocked by the sound of his companion's voice.

Impulsively, several around him raised their voices.

More hunters joined in and though Dokuk did not actually sing, he found he mouthed as though he actually were.

The young hunters did not sing for long, which Eku (and every adult) was thankful for.

The short burst had been horrifyingly inappropriate.

Though certainly not maliciously so.

When the young hunters stopped there was a curious period of silence.

Forest noise only.

The nesibindi crouched in a defensive posture outside the fire pits.

Stunned.

Singing was not part of the plan!

As for the bubinzwana?

At first, there was only a curious, high-pitched bark, unlike any of the other sounds made as they came down the mountain.

There were several more, similar, high-pitched barks and then a rumble.

Getting louder.

All of the bubinzwana were emitting some kind of low-pitched growling ... Only different.

They are laughing, Eku realized.

Then the sound changed.

As one the bubinzwana began screaming their response—the same cry heard before they began their descent.

The avalanche of sound swept over the encampment, this time, even louder.

Much closer.

Eku remained on his hands and knees.

Arms trembling.

He remembered the horrible, momentary feeling of terror when realizing he and the others were in the path of rampaging forest pigs.

What was coming down the mountain?

His mind conjured dripping fangs, curved talons and a predator's terrifying eyes.

Bumps appeared on his skin.

The palms of his hands released sweat into Umawa.

The voice in his mind cried, "You should not be here!"

Eku thought of his dream while they were traversing the escarpment.

We should not have come here.

We should go home!

Run into the river!

Water was safe.

Surely, the bubinzwana cannot swim?

Fear.

Eku's father taught him at a very young age that fear was part of the mind.

Not real.

The *real* danger was outside of your mind.

Which is why you must remove the fear and listen to Umawa.

Eku crawled the rest of the way out of the shelter and stood.

The exit was positioned away from the encampment, toward the center shelters and then the water.

Firelight cast enough light for him to observe the pale, rounded tops, making him think of the stick-covered carapaces of river dwelling *ubhak-unda*.

Beyond the shelters, a margin of pale river grass distinguished the river from a background of pure black.

Each of the domed shelters around Eku rose to his height.

He pivoted and went to his toes to see over the shelter he just exited.

Across the encampment, *waka-waka* dark figures lurked in front of the arc of fire pits.

Young hunters, some of whom were probably the singers.

Definitely not a good idea.

They all crouched or kneeled.

Waiting.

Eku saw individuals slinking along the edge of camp, keeping movements minimal while adding *layit-umlilo* to glowing fire pits.

He tried to find Kozik or Dokuk amongst the dark shapes of young hunters, but the light was too dim to recognize individuals.

Looking in the upriver direction, Eku saw the mothers and *benzi-kusela*.

They too crouched or kneeled in the dirt.

Eku could see the end of camp more clearly, due to light from the big fire, next to the upriver barricade.

He picked out the shapes of his mother and aunt Shona, sprawled on their bellies, looking toward the forest.

He wondered where his uncle Lume and the *izik-kosa* were?

Where were the Mantel?

Eku regretted becoming sleepy during the later stages of the tribal council.

Eku did know that his father would be outside of the encampment, with the most experienced hunters.

Same as the nesibindi.

For as long as Eku could remember, he wanted to be a hunter, always the one engaged on that mysterious periphery.

But now?

That would be scary!

He shifted his viewpoint to the direction downriver.

The big fire was bigger in that direction.

Brighter.
Firelight glinted off the stems of the barricade.
The leaves were still fresh and green.
Not even an elephant could break through.
A bump in the terrain blocked Eku's view of what lay to the right of the large fire and he decided to move to gain a better angle.
He stepped silently past a dimly lit, oval opening.
Relieved to not hear voices call out to him.
It was still too dark to see into the shadows.
Eku was keenly aware that he was disobeying mother.
Not a good feeling.
But surely by now everyone was awake.
Of course, he was the only one sneaking around!
Best he could tell, anyway.
It was still hard to see detail.
Once past the shelter next to his, Eku could better see the downriver side of the encampment.
The large fire cast light even beyond the fire pits.
Stumps like ghostly pale worms poked from the dark leaves where the *izik-kosa* sheared away the grove of saplings.
Where they gathered the tasty berries.
There was movement amongst the leafed branches.
Bubinzwana!

While descending the mountain, two groups separated from the main pack of bubinzwana.
The first group headed in a direction upriver.
The second group forged ahead, circumvented the floodplain and remained under cover to eventually approach the flat face lair from a downriver direction.
Using the club ends of their sturdy spears, the bubinzwana picked their way through a steep incline of granite boulders and bushes.
Angled downhill, they can see the top of the barrier built in front of the water, to prevent access from along the shoreline.

The arc of the fire pits lay in front of the bubinzwana. Just beyond they can see the flat faces waiting for them.

That was good.

The bubinzwana pushed through a last layer of bushes to reach a cleared area in front of the fire pits and charged.

Heart in his throat, Eku fought the urge to holler an incoherent something, only to watch in confusion as a confrontation took place that proved frightening to watch ... But resulted in no bloodshed.

The moment the bubinzwana appeared, voices rang out.

There was movement from the area around the large fire.

Having been camouflaged amidst matted piles of layit-umlilo, young Bwana and Abantu came rushing into the area in front of Eku, between the shelters and the approaching bubinzwana.

They carried slings which they used to send a crescendo of stones hurtling at the beasts.

Eku watched in fascinated horror as the naked and muscular bubinzwana came to a skidding halt, the huge muscles of their thighs flexing as their feet plowed dark streaks across the earth.

They protected themselves from the pelting by crouching and raising burly arms over their faces.

The volley ended and the bubinzwana glared at the stone throwers, who quickly armed themselves with axes and the short, stabbing spears the Bwana favored.

Eku instinctively took a step back, horrified, expecting a ferocious charge, but strangely, the terrifying bubinzwana did no such thing.

The beasts had dark and hairy faces.

Glaring from angry white eyes with small black pupils below a heavy ridgeline.

Mostly hairless about the front of the body, the skin was paler than the face. There was an extra amount of hair around the groin, upper back and shoulders.

They were muscular, like the strongest Abantu.

All of the beasts were built thick and powerful, making Eku see them as violently quick, like the sturdy mongoose.

There were six of the beasts.

Shaking huge spears, but strangely, considering their sudden appearance, they did not approach closer.

Eku was shocked by the thickness of their weapons.

Similar to a nesibindi spear, but less straight and more robust.

Such a lack of straightness would make balancing impossible for throwing.

They were only good for stabbing.

Or clubbing.

More worrisome, was how powerful a bubinzwana must be to wield such a weapon!

By now, the young Abantu hunters moved quickly en masse from the center area of the encampment.

Due to his height, Kozik stood out in the middle and Eku thought he glimpsed Dokuk, but there were too many bodies to be sure.

The young hunters were in a disciplined formation, armed with spears and axes.

The bubinzwana, now pinned on two sides by two, much larger forces, screamed ferociously, drawing Eku's attention back their way.

Several of the young hunters were overeager and let loose with *ula-kontos*, only to see the bubinzwana slap the speeding spears out of the air easily with their much larger spears!

Eku was aghast.

Not only were the beasts powerful, but marvelously agile and coordinated.

Even so, caught between two large groups of axe and spear wielding humans, the bubinzwana had to know they were in trouble.

The young hunters prepared for a close-range, sustained volley of *ula-konto*, only to see the beasts suddenly turn and race away, leaping past the fire pits and climbing back into the darkness of the rugged terrain from which they came.

Stunned, the young hunters could only watch.

Finally, there were a few catcalls.

An incoherent scream of defiance rang out shrill and loud, resulting in the nervous release of laughter.

Mystified, but pleased at the outcome, Eku thought of baboons.

Baboons were fearsome creatures, especially the males, with fangs comparable to a leopard; yet, bloodshed was rare, even when opposing clans clashed.

Baboons were obviously well armed and fierce, but like most predators, cautious when it came to risking needless injury.

Judging from the volume of noise within the forest, Eku knew that *waka-waka* bubinzwana had advanced upon the floodplain.

Why send so few this way?

Partway down the mountain, a shelf of rock protruded at an angle, as though put there specifically to see the river through a gap in the treeline.

As the horde continued down the mountain, a smaller group of bubinzwana swarmed across the slab.

The leader went to the front and stood at the crest of the overhang.

Peering downward.

His head was enormous and sloped almost to a point.

The extra-thick hair along the heavy browline was not bristled at the moment, but stuck forward impressively, nevertheless.

He was heavily muscled, even for a bubinzwana.

The Alpha.

Those standing to the side and to the rear were similarly large and impressive.

The clan's dominant alliance.

Thanks to the vantage of the overhang, they can see the flat faces gathered like a herd on the outskirts, as the old male told them to anticipate: the herd that became a dangerous predator.

Guarding the only easy avenue into the nesting area.

Clever.

As expected.

Behind the fires were more flat face males with weapons.

The Alpha watched them move quickly and capably to confront the small group he sent forth.

The young flat faces were not fierce, but had the numbers to inflict harm.

The Alpha nodded his overly large head to show he was pleased.

The other bubinzwana immediately moved their heads in a similar fashion.

They made deep toned sounds, like grunts or chuckles.

Everything was going according to plan.

The Alpha was pleased to have followed the suggestions of the old one.

The old one was clever.

The most clever of all the bubinzwana, by far.

The Alpha felt an inexplicable affection for the old one.

When a bubinzwana became an Alpha, he more often than not killed his predecessor—even the male who sired him—to better establish or maintain an alliance; instead, when the young Alpha replaced the old male in nothing more than formal combat, the new Alpha and the old male instantly forged an invincible alliance.

The young Alpha remembered.

Despite being just a fledgling when the clan marched across the land of death; one of the few to survive.

He remembered the old male as he was then: awe-inspiring.

The Alpha never forgot that it was the old male's strength, but even more so, his cleverness that allowed the clan to survive the terrible march, when so many others had not.

But that was long ago.

Tonight was the beginning of something new.

Which was why the first sneak attack was merely a probe.

A guise.

The first group exposed where the flat faces were strong.

Now the old male would show where they were weak.

And then the real fun would start.

Upriver from the flat face encampment, the old male led the first group of bubinzwana to separate from the main group.

Led them in a wide arc so as to approach the flat face lair from the upriver side.

The old male moved with a limp, one shoulder bent lower than the other, yet, his muscles remained corded and powerful.

The younger males accompanying him were in awe of the old male; highly motivated to play their part in a critical role.

The old male led them under the cover of heavy vegetation.

Eager, but wary.

Flat faces were clever and prepared for this raid by doing some of the things he should have thought of before they surprisingly and devastatingly attacked his clan, so long ago.

But now, finally, revenge was nigh.

He and the other bubinzwana carried clubs.

Spears were too cumbersome for the task at hand.

The bubinzwana crept to the barrier the flat faces erected to prevent access along the shoreline.

The others paused while the old male cautiously approached closer.

Stopping in front of the mound of sticks and brush.

Stroking the sabertooth that hung on his chest.

Listening.

The quiet before carnage.
There was a tilt of his head.
The old male looked at the others.
Nodded in a way to indicate satisfaction.
They could all hear the commotion from the other side of the barrier.
Flat faces jabbering because the other, smaller group was pretending to attack from the opposite side.
Silly flat faces.
The old male motioned for the water.
The bubinzwana approached where the bank was steep.
Slid down the muddy incline into water and pushed away from shore.
Floating past the barricade.
Letting the current take them.
Yanga was gone.
Stars faded into the black.
Croakers and peepers paid them no heed.
The old male was confident they would not be noticed, especially after the other group pulled the flat faces defending inside the nest to the opposite side.
Bubinzwana were excellent swimmers, after all.
They paddled smoothly, causing only as much disturbance as was necessary to breathe.
Emerging as dripping shadows in pre-dawn darkness.
The sky was just beginning to brighten over the mountain.
Before them, the flat face nests were outlined by the first light.
Rounded, like eggs.
Whether prey or predator, the first rule was to protect the little ones.
That was where the flat faces were weak.
Like all prey.
They will attack where the youngest are nested.
Club some of them to cause noise and distraction.
Bludgeon a few of the smallest to carry back to camp and earn favor with the females.
Such a diversion will cause panic amongst the flat faces acting as a herd that is a predator.

When the outer defense collapsed, the main group would storm through.

After capturing some females, they would disappear into the mountains before the flat faces realized what happened.

The bubinzwana waded through the shallows.

Pushed through soft river grass to reach dry ground.

And charged for the shelters.

Though baffled by the actions of the bubinzwana, Eku felt tremendous relief.

Beating such a hasty retreat had to be good?

Yes?

No?

Either way, now Eku had to deal with a wave of guilt for disobeying mother.

Hoping that no one had yet to notice him sneaking about, Eku crept back the way he came.

A quick glance between shelters to his left offered a glimpse across the encampment.

Young hunters were heading back into position.

There were trees beyond the fire pits.

The outline of the mountain.

Ulanga was coming.

Would the attack come with him?

Distracted, Eku went past his own shelter.

Turned to go back, spinning in the direction of the water.

His eyes caught movement down the incline.

Eku went to his toes to look across the domed tops of the shelters.

Murky shapes were pushing their way through the pale margin of river grass.

Bubinzwana!

As though spawned from the river itself, out of the grass and charging for the shelters, Eku could see the outline of each dark and hairy beast.

They carried pale bone clubs, surely with cruel intent.

Having a crazy thought they could swim after all, Eku gathered his breath to yell, but there were already multiple shouts.

At the same time of the shouting, Eku saw movement all across the front area of the waterside shelters, where once again, *waka-waka* people had remained concealed.

Only now, rising out of the shadows and into position.

Confused by what he was seeing, at first, Eku thought all of the heads had something sticking from the top.

Ah!—the Mantel ponytails!

As the bubinzwana charged, the Mantel hunters stepped forth and made smooth, synchronous movements; there was the thrum of taut strings released and the bubinzwana began to stagger, clutching at their bodies.

For a frantic moment, Eku thought the bubinzwana were sprouting strange and thick hairs only to realize they were being impaled by the tiny spears of the *guka-ombe*!

How powerful the stringed bows have become!

More Mantel emerged from the shadow and taut strings thrummed and the tiny spears sped through the air like angry insects.

Two of the bubinzwana are so injured they simply fell to the ground.

Two more staggered to their knees.

Despite tiny spears hanging from its body, a single, giant bubinzwana almost reached the shelters.

Eku heard a ferocious roar and saw the huge form of uncle Lume rush forward—much bigger than the bubinzwana!

The great, tree-felling ax was in his hands and he delivered such an awful blow there was a gout of blood and the bubinzwana's head seemed to explode and the beast fell in a heap.

Young *izik-kosa* rushed forward and used vicious blows of their wood chopping axes to finish off the remaining bubinzwana, already staggered, having been pierced by so many of the Mantel's tiny spears.

Stunned and impressed by yet another effective defense, Eku almost missed the large and hunched figure moving away from the battle, toward the upriver barricade.

Possibly another bubinzwana, but Eku could not be sure because he instinctively ducked down at the tremendous escalation of noise behind him.

The horde was attacking!

Everyone was defending but him!

Eku whirled and darted for his shelter.

Located the dark oval entrance and launched himself into a dive, tumbling into the black.

Struggled to his knees, but was startled by the shrill screech of an *ichi-whistle*.

His foot tangled in a loose skin, causing him to fall over.

Eku's head struck something hard and he let out a startled, "ouch!"
Reached for what bumped his head and Eku took firm hold of his *ula-konto*.

Bubinzwana streamed out of the forest.
Dark figures, moving swiftly.
"To the edge of the encampment," Uta roared. "Fall back with me! Stay in position!"
The nesibindi sprinted back, drawing the bubinzwana with them.
There was plenty of light now.
As the nesibindi drew back, young Abantu hunters raced through the arc of fire pits to begin forming a second line of defense.

Dokuk could hear a serious fight raging behind the shelters, but there was nothing he or any of the young hunters were allowed to do about it—for now.
Hopefully, the backside defenders had things under control.
Under strict orders, Dokuk took his place behind Kozik and Ingwabi.
Being told to stay back, he was able to look up and down the line.
He looked at the nesibindi in front of them.
He looked across the width of the encampment.
There were not enough bodies.
Everyone knew it.
Fear was spreading like a fire running out of control.
There was simply no way they could stop this many savage bubinzwana!

At the front of the line, Uta checked the nesibindi closest to him, including his beloved sons Tokuta and Wutota.
Everyone had a battle axe in one hand, a spear in the other.
Terrified, but standing together.
They will die to defend the camp, if necessary.
Uta cannot let that happen.

But he also knew how much they devoted to the inner defense, to forge an impenetrable ring around the children and the young mothers.

That ring of protection will shatter like an egg against the horde.

Which was why the horde had to be stopped!

Uta saw no more bubinzwana emerged from the forest.

Everyone was on the floodplain now, the two sides massed together, face to face, the outcome hanging in the balance.

Uta roared, "Nesibindi this is where we stand!"

All of the nesibindi squared their shoulders, spear in one hand, throwing ax in the other, crouched low, focused on the approaching bubinzwana.

Seeing everyone ready, Uta took a step back and began blowing an *ichi-whistle*.

On the downriver side of the encampment, where the ridgeline began to rise, ancient and now amorphous boulders slumbered beneath the soil; though, some of the stone still surfaced as lumps of granite.

The tips of the granite boulders may seem large to anything mortal, but were mere detritus to the mighty hills that shrugged them off during the final tremors that formed this land.

Nestled hollows formed around the rocky protrusions, now draped by bushes and perfect cover for the Abantu hunters, all of whom wore two or more talons of the fish eagle on their chest.

Kaleni and Nibamaz kept everyone calm and concealed until the sound of the *ichi-whistle*, when they burst from cover to rush down the incline and onto the floodplain.

Each hunter carried a javelin.

Each hunter paced side by side with his lifelong ikanabe.

All moving in familiar teams.

Eyes well adjusted to the low light, the hunters hurtled past small palms and grass

Some of the bubinzwana saw them coming and cried out.

No doubt a pathetic attempt at a diversion.

The Alpha, like all of the bubinzwana, believed the momentum of the hunt was in their favor.

The old male was attacking.

The herd that was a single, mighty predator was going to collapse.

The Alpha ordered his dominant alliance out to dispatch the Abantu hunters.

They went forth eagerly, with the confidence of predators.

The large and muscular bubinzwana carried sturdy wooden spears with sharp, fire hardened tips. They wielded heavy, skull-crushing clubs made from a leg bone with a heavily knobbed hip joint. Fearsome weapons, indeed.

But the Abantu javelins are like nothing the bubinzwana have ever encountered.

Weapons originally designed to skewer a seal larger than a male lion, each spear is twice as long as the hunter is tall, the haft straight and thick and strong and finished with an extended blade of *isipo-igazi*, viciously sharp on two sides.

The muscular arm of a bubinzwana cannot bat aside such a long-shafted weapon.

Even a well-timed blow with a bone club will not deter such a blade.

The Abantu hunters remained silent as they approached.

Not trumpeting like charging elephants.

Not overeager, like a roiling mass of hyenas.

Disciplined.

Communicating by clicking only.

Holding the deadly spears in two-handed grips practiced many times over.

Led by Kaleni, the first team of hunters hammered into the center of the bubinzwana advancing to meet them, javelins poised to strike with horrifying consequence.

The Abantu put their full body weight behind each thrust to send the wickedly sharp blades slicing through forearms, skewering between ribs, severing throats.

Even a misdirected slash to the thigh or stomach tore open a mortal wound.

At the screams of their comrades, more bubinzwana leapt from the main pack to help, only to be cut down by a second team, slashing in from another angle, led by Juka and Lopi.

For every hunter who struck with a javelin, a bubinzwana fell.

Making matters worse, the bubinzwana do not understand such tactics.

Not only have they never encountered these weapons, but the flat faces are not attacking like a powerful herd; instead, they were attacking as many small packs at once, working in unison, from seemingly every direction.

The Alpha roared in anger and pushed forward, charging for Kaleni, who had his foot to the throat of a dying bubinzwana, struggling to extricate the javelin deeply embedded in its guts.

Kaleni was helpless as the Alpha raised his club to deliver a killing blow, only to see the bubinzwana come to an abrupt and stunning stop, blood exploded from his mouth and chest, impaled on the javelin of Nibamaz, stepping in with perfect timing to defend Kaleni from exactly such an attack.

The Alpha dropped like a stone and the bubinzwana began to panic.

From the edge of the camp Uta roared, "Now we fight like nesibindi!"

Axes were hurled with deadly accuracy and more bubinzwana fell.

Uta and the nesibindi aggressively sprang forward, stunning the bubinzwana as they worked together, viciously stabbing with their short spears.

The nesibindi were indeed a single, mighty predator.

More bubinzwana fell.

Bubinzwana begin colliding and then tripping in their haste to retreat.

Sprinting and screaming from the encampment to encircle the horde came the young Abantu hunters.

Waka-waka ula-konto flew.

More bubinzwana fell.

The horde became hysterical.

Individuals resorted to base instincts.

Amongst their kind, when a male bubinzwana showed superiority, the defeated could offer fealty by dropping weapons and offering supplication, through facial expressions and hand gestures.

Such acts of submission were instinctive and necessary for the rituals of combat that maintain their alliances.

But when the leaderless bubinzwana made their appeals at the entrance to the land of legend, the flat faces did not recognize what they were doing.

Nor would they have offered mercy if they had.

The hunters and nesibindi closed on the hopelessly outnumbered bubinzwana.

The javelins, spears and axes were equally effective and a rout became a slaughter.