

## **Part 4**

### **A New Home**

*The old alpha was confused.*

*Found himself flailing on the ground, where a moment before he was running full speed, club raised, about to gain some measure of revenge by dealing a death blow to the young flat face.*

*Then a hard punch to the ribs.*

*Ah!—he fell.*

*The old alpha tried to get up, but his body wasn't working properly.*

*Something pulled heavily at his side.*

*Squirmed and reached and found a slender spear stabbed deep.*

*Grasped and yanked, but the haft snapped and then his breath burst bloody and painful at the heavy impact of another body on his.*

*And now a female flat face was on top of him!*

*Pinning his arms down, while straddling him in a sexual position!*

*The features of her flat face were contorted, but not from pleasure.*

*Rage.*

*The old alpha understood rage.*

*And he knew very well that even a powerful male does not provoke the rage of a female protecting her young.*

*The arms of the flat face were raised, one of their clever clubs clenched between her fists.*

*Screaming into his face.*

*The old alpha's last thought—my death arrives.*

## Chapter 29

### Necklace and Pendant

Ekus was deliriously happy, having embraced Ingwe in the most spectacular hug of his entire life.

—While receiving *waka-waka* kisses all over his face and lips!

—While both of their mothers watched!

When Eku and Ingwe at last released a passionate embrace, Ingwe went back to getting squeezed by Kafila as Eku was smothered again by Krele.

After the second, hearty squeezing by his mother, Eku listened patiently as she began apologizing.

Of course, Eku knew there would be wounded and she was a healer.

“I must help those who are hurt,” she kept repeating as she looked him over, unable to believe the beast died without inflicting any harm on either Ingwe or Eku.

Mothers stood all around them, along with some of the Mantel and *izik-kosa*.

The remainder of the tribe swarmed across the middle of the encampment.

Young adults were enthusiastically celebrating.

Shouting and singing.

Young mothers and children continued to move like a slow tide from shelters, everyone crowding into the area between the shelters and the arc of still smoldering fire pits.

Ulanga had yet to clear the mountain, but the day was bright.

The only lingering shadows were cast by the mountain.

Across the encampment everyone was embracing and celebrating with whomever they encountered next.

People laughed.

Hugged and kissed.

Some simply staggered about, blissfully unaware of the violence that occurred, but knowing it was good to be alive.

Tremendous shouting rose when the fighters from outside the encampment began to approach.

The nesibindi and young hunters cannot help but saunter a bit as they enter to rousing cheers.

Krele and Eku frantically tried to spot Kaleni.

Ekus glanced at his mother as she looked apprehensively over the crowd.

Her face was streaked with tears and flecks of dirt speckled the fuzzy dome of her head.

She needs to cut her hair, Eku thought.

Smudges of dirt stained her arms and loincloth and legs.

The sealskin vest she favored, having lasted all the way from home, was streaked with mud.

She needs to clean off in the river, Eku thought.

Probably we all do.

Turning to Eku, Krele implored, "I am sure father is okay, but I think he remains outside with others. I do not see him. You are okay if I go find him?"

Eku clicked yes.

She pursed her lips and looked like she didn't believe him.

Eku said, "I want you to check on father."

Krele nodded and began to turn, but stopped once more.

Took a moment to simply stare at Eku.

Peering into a face already etched upon her heart; yet, she witnessed him—her own child—perform something that had to be seen to be believed.

In hindsight, his actions were breathtaking.

Movements so swift and precise, using his entire body to propel the *ula-konto* through the air almost like one of Mantel's tiny spears.

In that moment, the mind and body of Eku became something more than the sum of its whole.

She searched his face and wondered.

But there was only the same sweet, but always serious face of her child.

Looking thoughtful.

But then his eyes widened and Eku blurted, "I saw uncle Lume kill a bubinzwana with his tree felling axe!"

Krele exhaled sharply, almost like a laugh and shook her head.

Eku would forever be full of surprises.

Apparently, he witnessed all of the skirmishes that took place.

She couldn't resist and chided, "You went outside the shelter."

Eku tried, but failed to hide the smile and blurted, "I was worried about Dokuk and the others!"

"I know," Krele said, smiling back. "My brave and curious child."

She looked around again.

Spotted Shona, looking their way and pointing toward the perimeter.

“I have to go, Eku. Will you be alright?”

Eku clicked that he was good, but saw that Krele remained concerned and added, “I am fine, mother. You are a healer and have a duty. I understand you must go. I am fine.”

Krele felt herself tearing up again; instead, a stern look came to her face and she seized her child tightly by each shoulder and looked intensely into his eyes.

Eku saw his mother’s fierce love and pride and a lump rose to his throat.

The good kind of lump, that meant only love.

Krele used the fingers of her right hand to trace a path from Eku’s shoulder to the spot next to his heart, where she knew he had hoped that an eagle talon would rest.

Said in her fiercest, mother-loving voice, “Eku kaleni-yana, you are a hunter. You will always be a hunter.”

Then she sped away to tend to the wounded.

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Eku looked for Ingwe and saw she and Kafilá drifted to the upriver side, with an entourage of females.

Decided to stay where he was.

Just then Uta and the nesibindi returned from the floodplain outside the forest and much of the surged his way.

A throng of people surrounded their heros, clapping and shouting.

Eku spotted Yathi and Lume, his giant uncle slowly and politely parting bodies as he moved toward Kozik, who stood with Ola, and Doagu and Iti at the center of the throng.

Yat suddenly swooped out of the moving crowd and ran up to Eku, seizing him in such a vigorous hug that all of the air was expelled from his lungs.

As he sucked in breath, trying to recover she giggled.

The words tumbled out fast, “You are very brave and very silly and very brave and very silly and very brave little brother.”

She stared at him wide-eyed, Eku, still speechless.

“Dokuk always said that no one has accuracy like you,” Yat declared. “He said so with a keri stick. And then he said the same with an *ula-konto*.

“But I could not have believed it without seeing it!”

Finally catching his breath, Eku could stare, thinking his sister still looked strange with no hair.

Older. Somehow.

How was that possible?

"I saw what you did," she said.

"You did?"

"Everybody did."

"Oh."

Not sure what to think, Eku asked, "Have you seen Father and Dokuk?"

"Yes. Dokuk is fine. He is with the other hunters. I saw him briefly and he told me that father is fine. And Nibamaz. And Kozik and Ingwabi."

She sidled closer to her brother.

They looked around.

Neither sure what to do next.

Most of the encampment seemed to directed its attention on Uta and the nesibindi.

The Bwana chieftain and his entourage had drifted to the upriver side, to join with Kafil and Ingwe.

"No one wants to go near the body," Yat said.

She looked at the dead bubinzwana, a few steps away.

"I know," Eku said. "But it is only a beast."

They stared at the bubinzwana for a moment, then saw Dokuk working his way through the crowd, tall enough to stand out, carrying his unsheathed *ula-konto* high to keep the blade away from contacting anyone.

Eku saw blood smeared along the haft.

Dokuk hugged Yat quickly with his free arm, then pulled away, looked at Eku and said, "Your father is safe."

Eku nodded with gratitude and said, "Yat told me."

Yat laid a hand on Dokuk's chest, near the fish eagle talon and kissed his cheek.

They both looked at Eku, Dokuk adding, "He and Nibamaz each killed a bubinzwana. Single-handedly. With their javelins. And Nibamaz killed the leader of their tribe!"

Impressed but relieved more than anything, Eku asked, "Is anyone hurt?"

"There are injuries," Dokuk said. "But most of the bubinzwana are dead. A few ran into the forest, but not many. The hunters with the javelins killed most of them."

Eku stared at Dokuk with open admiration, amazed and envious that he had ventured into the thick of the fight.

He shyly asked what he did and Dokuk was equally shy, saying he did nothing more than yell a lot and hurl his *ula-konto* into a body already pierced by other weapons.

“We had them trapped,” he said. “The bubinzwana are dangerous, like a rogue elephant, but we put them in a good trap and there was no escaping.”

Ekuk beamed and smiled and said, “You are a real hunter now.”

Dokuk grinned back and said, “Me? What are you even saying? I heard of what you did, Eku. Everyone is talking about it.”

Bewildered, all Eku could think to say was, “You mean with my *ula-konto*?”

Dokuk stared at Eku, as though in disbelief.

“Do you really make that throw?”

“He did,” said Yat flatly, “I saw it happen, but I don’t think my little brother really understands.”

Dokuk still stared at Eku in disbelief, then began shaking his head.

Ekuk simply stared back at the two of them.

He just didn’t know what to say about what happened.

Dokuk said. “Juyat was killed by a blow to the head.”

Ekuk gasped.

Juyat was the father of Tuve, a hunter with two talons who sometimes scouted with his father and Nibamaz.

Concerned, Yat said, “I am going outside to find mother. To see if she needs help.”

The two of them offered Eku an apologetic look and dashed away through the crowd.

Ekuk was by himself again.

Were people avoiding him?

Ekuk realized people were glancing his way, only to look away again.

Some held his gaze for a moment, offered a smile, then looked at the dead bubinzwana, shaking their head in amazement.

A few of the Bwana offered Eku solemn looks, quickly touching their hands to their heart before looking away.

Ekuk remained where he was standing, unsure of what to do.

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Ekuk found he kept staring at the dead bubinzwana.

Nobody wanted to go near and a rough circle had formed, the beast at the center.

Curiosity, as always, goaded Eku to look closer.

Tentatively, he approached to stand over the body.

The beast remained on its back.

Arms and legs out straight.

Oddly tranquil.

Peacefully posed for a death that was anything but.

Ekú crouched to his haunches and looked curiously at the bony ridge, thick with short, bristly hairs like an enormous eyebrow.

The axe wound left an awful looking, deep red gash in the center of a broad, sloped forehead.

Thanks to the wound, the face was covered by blood. Mostly.

Below the bony ridge was a human nose, but thicker, more robust, with very large nostrils.

A hairy face with a jutting jaw; a wide, lipless mouth was half open and Ekú saw enormous, square teeth, bigger than a human's.

The eyes were half open; white with a dark center with long eyelashes, reminding Ekú of the *linwelewana*.

The ears were similar to his own, but larger, with a protective coating of fine hair on the inside.

The hair grown from its head was thick and swept down the back and shoulders, scraggly and unkempt, having never seen a comb.

Ekú saw silver in the hair and beard and said softly, as though surprised, "You were an elder."

Something hung around the thick fur and beard of its neck.

The strap of a necklace, but whatever pendant was lost or slung to the side, hidden from view.

Powerful muscles roped across the chest and shoulders.

The legs and arms were shorter than a human's in relation to a thick and powerful looking torso.

Judging from the rough-hewn elbows, wide hips and enormous knee knobs, the bones were extra heavy and thick.

Many old scars criss-crossed the body.

Ekú stood and used his toes to prod the thigh, marveling at the movement of once powerful muscles.

The penis poked from a hairy groin.

Ekú was startled to see it looked the same as an Abantu's.

Found that unnerving.

For some reason.

"You were alive," Ekú said in the same, quiet voice. "Now you are not."

Checked his *ula-konto*.

The haft lay broken in the dirt.

Looked at the corpse again and studied the raw entry point, where a pale shard protruded.

The momentum of the beast helped the killing barb of the *ula-konto* to stab deep.

A good throw.

Felt a bit proud.

But then, he noted the carefully constructed barb had fractured against another bone.

Probably a rib.

Both ends of his *ula-konto* were destroyed, like his chance to be a hunter.

Thought of what his mother told him and felt an urge to both laugh and cry; decided on neither; instead, turned to check Ingwe, now sandwiched between Uta and Kafilá and surrounded by *waka-waka* other Bwana.

Ekú walked back to where he stood a moment ago and kept looking around.

There were so many people.

What should he do?

Thought about getting another hug from Ingwe.

And kisses.

Lots more of those.

For sure.

The danger was over, but Ekú's stomach was queasy.

His legs trembled, as if he had run a long distance.

Keenly aware that he had saved Ingwe's life and probably others, Ekú worried about the attention.

He preferred not to think about that.

All that mattered was that she and others were safe.

Once again cries of joy erupted when the last of the defenders reentered camp.

The Abantu hunters with multiple eagle talons.

Stunningly—wonderfully, there were few injuries.

The bubinzwana made a catastrophic mistake thinking they could raid a powerful tribe of humans.

Ekú saw his father and Nibamaz with other hunters, many of them bloodied; though, from the way they walked and talked, he knew it was not their own.

Ekú rubbed the heel of his palm across his cheeks.

He would go to his father after the tears were dry.



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Once Krele got past the perimeter of fires she was unprepared for the carnage.

No wonder the noises were so terrifying!

*Waka-waka* bodies of bubinzwana were strewn about the dirt and grass, all of them the result of violent deaths.

Bodies naked and bloodied and limbs splayed out.

Javelins and spears and axes left gruesome wounds.

Krele has seen countless dead beasts in her life, but nothing like this.

She had to suppress the urge to wretch.

The bubinzwana looked so human!

Distraught, Krele was glad most of the tribe did not have to see this; but then, maybe they should?

She turned to find Shona and the others following and offered clicks of warning, but she was too late.

Some of the mothers were already vomiting.

The sight of Kaleni with blood on his body brought tears streaming down her face, but Krele quickly realized the blood was not his own.

Miraculously, Kaleni, like most of the hunters, did not suffer a scratch.

He brought Krele and Shona to another hunter, who lay bleeding and was being attended to by other hunters.

Krele was known as a healer and space was quickly made.

As Krele began looking over the most seriously wounded, Shona offered Kaleni a cryptic account of what happened in camp, including Eku's heroics.

Desperate for more details, Kaleni gathered with the other hunters to head back to camp.

When he spied Yat and Dokuk on their way out, Yat, who had been standing just behind Ingwe when the attack occurred, provided a blow by blow account of Eku's heroics.

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Uta was swarmed by members of the tribe as he returned to camp, Tokuta and Kotuta at his sides, along with many other nesibindi.

He smiled graciously, but pushed the people trying to touch him and hollering their appreciation.

Kept moving until he spotted Kafila, with Ingwe in tow.

Kafila smiled and allowed her formidable exterior to soften.

Ingwe leaped into her fathers arms, burying her face into his neck, repeating over and over, “Eku saved me.”

Kafila recounted what transpired in the encampment, including how the young adults and young hunters performed brilliantly, how the Mantel and *izik-kosa* thwarted what could have been a devastating attack from the river, and finally, of Eku’s heroics, which did nothing less than save the life of their child—and likely many other children.

Tokuta, Kotuta, and *waka-waka* others were close enough to hear.

Immediately word began to spread of Eku’s heroics.

Uta, meanwhile, was overcome by emotion.

He looked for Eku and found him, at the moment, standing over the dead bubinzwana.

The Bwana chieftain desperately wanted to go to him, to try and express the depth of his gratitude, but was so encased by others that he could barely move.

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Despite the raucous noise around him, Eku picked out the click of his father as easily as he could have seen the impact of a single drop of water falling into a placid pond.

Eku let Kaleni approach across the open area where the dead bubinzwana lay.

His father looked so worried and went nose to nose with Eku.

They were almost the same height now.

“Eku are you okay?”

His father peered into his eyes as though to look straight into his mind.

Eku felt a certain weight come off his shoulders.

Seeing the face he knew so perfectly.

The trifecta of pale specks in the right eye.

The scar through the left eyebrow that always made him look extra concerned.

Especially now.

A lump in Eku’s throat made it hard to talk.

He decided to say nothing.

“Eku! Are you okay? Yat told me what happened. And aunt Shona.”

Though his father was speaking, Eku found it difficult to distinguish words.

He felt distracted, somehow.

Like he was hearing sounds underwater.

For now, he only wanted to stare at his father.

He was dirty.

Even dirtier than mother.

(And she had been very dirty.)

But his father also had blood on him.

In fact, more blood than mud.

Blood was even on his loincloth.

Like mother, father needs to go in the river, Eku thought. Probably we all do.

His voice returned and Eku said, "I am fine. Mother checked me. I ... Nothing happened to me."

Kaleni grabbed Eku by the elbow.

Feeling the same kind of awe that Krele had, just moments before.

Kaleni said softly, "Yat told me what you did, Eku. She said it happened directly in front of her. In front of everyone."

He let go of Eku's elbow.

Eku said nothing.

"Eku! Many people saw. Everyone is talking about it. Everyone is saying it was some kind of ... Nobody even knows the words to say. A wondrous event.

"Nobody is even sure what to say to you. They are saying it is the start of a new legend. A new story. And there will be songs.

"So everyone has been waiting for me. Or Uta. To see you first."

Eku nodded, still unable to talk.

Kaleni said, "People gave you space until I could talk to you. That is why you were left alone."

Eku still said nothing and Kaleni shook his head, marveling at how such an event could have unfolded.

Turned and looked at the bubinzwana.

A huge beast.

No doubt terrifying.

Eku must have made the throw from just about where they were now standing.

Not a long throw.

But such a fast moving target would require a type of precision that many adult hunters could never master.

And to perform such a throw spontaneously?

While under duress?

Kaleni offered Eku a tentative smile. "Must have been a good throw."

Eku managed a nod, hating the way his lower lip trembled.

Kaleni put both hands on Eku's shoulders, just as mother had.

His father's hands were hot and sweaty and felt wonderful.

In his most worried voice, Kaleni asked, "Are you afraid now?"

Eku nodded, still unwilling to speak because it would betray the tears.

Finally, softly, he said, "I was not afraid. Not when it happened. I did what you taught me."

Kaleni nodded, hoping for more.

Eku needed a moment, then added, "But now my stomach feels sick and my muscles are shaky."

"That will pass. You need to eat and rest. You may have frightful dreams. But you will be with Yat and Yathi. And now Dokuk."

Kaleni smiled and added, "Mother is already warning everyone we will need to make a bigger shelter."

Eku managed a tentative smile.

Dokuk in their shelter?

He hadn't thought about that yet.

Feeling better, Eku marvelled once more at how filthy his father was.

A heavy crimson rope stretched across his chest, some of the drops having splattered the four eagle talons on their way to the neck and voice box.

Without even realizing he was going to, Eku lunged against his father, nearly knocking him over while wrapping his arms around the shoulders and neck, tall enough now to go cheek to cheek so that when the tears finally came, they mixed with the blood.

Kaleni held Eku tightly, relishing the coils of muscle in his young, slender body.

So strong.

Full of life.

The two released a long embrace.

Eku, clear eyed now, looked his father in the eye and said, "I know who I am."

Kaleni cocked his head and smiled. "That is good."

The two embraced again, this time more quickly.

Eku knew that he was Eku kaleni-yana, a child of Krele and Kaleni.

Brother to Yatyambo.

Ikanabe to Yathi.

Destined to be in the arms of Ingwe.

Perfectly unique and yet, a tiny drop in the infinite water of Uwama.

How do all of those things work together?

Well, not even Tiuti could answer such a question, but Eku knew now with the assurity of youth, that if he was not meant to be a hunter, he would be something different.

And that was good.

Kaleni clicked and nodded his head to indicate where Yat stood with Dokuk. "Are you waiting for mother? She is tending to one of the wounded. Making sure the bleeding stops."

Eku clicked that he understood.

He looked solemn now.

Content.

Back to his typical confidence.

"Come," Kaleni urged. "Be with me and Yatyambo and Dokuk. Yes?"

Eku looked around.

Once again so much had happened.

Life really does move fast and then slow.

Kaleni added, "Yathi is with uncle Lume. Aunt Shona is also with mother, helping."

"I will come," Eku said, eyes still focused elsewhere. "I just want to stand here a little longer."

Kaleni followed the line of Eku's gaze and saw the shaft of his beloved *ula-konto*, broken in the dirt.

Sacrifice and triumph.

Somehow, his precocious child always understood there would not be one without the other.

Eku worked so hard to gain a prestigious weapon while so young.

He glanced at the dead bubinzwana, having noticed something that made him curious.

Kaleni stepped away from Eku to stand over the corpse.

Knelt for a moment to look more closely at the body and then stood again.

Looked around.

He and the body were at the center of an enormous, tribal circle.

Everyone was hugging and kissing with the happiness and relief of mutual survival.

Waiting to see what happened next.

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Kaleni approached Uta, still swarmed by a grateful crowd that refused to let him step away; fortunately, Tokuta and Kotuta were part of the entourage; seeing Kaleni approach, they politely made space for him to talk to their father.

Kaleni shuffled past bodies to put his mouth to the ear of the Bwana chieftain.

Uta listened intently.

He was tall enough to see over others to where the dead bubinzwana lay on the hard-packed dirt. And also to where Eku stood, close by.

Uta watched both until Kaleni finished talking.

His response was only a grave nod.

Kaleni left Uta to stand with Yat and Dokuk, pressed together, arms around each other, at the front row of the ring of people that had formed around the dead body.

They looked at him, expectant, but Kaleni only clicked and used his eyes to tell them to pay attention.

To watch what was about to happen.

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Uta stepped into the open area and clapped his hands and let out a loud shout.

The talking subsided.

The people became silent.

Ulanga rose over the mountain and remaining shadows fled.

The forest shone vibrant green.

The sky was a brilliant laza.

The river was bright with a reflection of both forest and sky.

Uta walked purposefully to the dead bubinzwana and went otherwise still.

Slowly, a hand rose to touch the scar.

The Bwana chieftain stood that way for a long moment, having recognized something about the body.

Finally, his gaze went to Eku.

Gave him a long, piercing look.

Not knowing what else to do, Eku simply stared back.

Like everyone else, he watched.

And waited.

Uta turned back to the bubinzwana and knelt to a crouch and took a firm grip of blood soaked hair with one hand and lifted the head.

Reached behind the neck with his free hand to grasp while simultaneously letting go of the beast's hair to pull something over the large skull as it thumped heavily back to the ground.

Uta rose to a standing position, holding a looped cord from which swung a single, great fang.

A collective gasp.

The Bwana knew only legends that came from the canine of the most fearsome and legendary predator, but the Abantu and Mantel had never seen such a vicious tooth: as long as one's hand, slightly curved, now streaked with red.

Uta lifted the necklace high so that everyone could see and said in his commanding voice, "Eku kaleni-yana."

Eku, like everyone, was transfixed at the sight of the necklace, jumped, eyes opening wide at the sound of his name.

Uta gestured with his free hand for Eku to come forth.

All at once, Eku realized what was happening and a numbness enveloped him; like he couldn't feel any part of his body.

He looked around at the tribal circle.

Everyone was watching, but individual faces were a blur.

But then he found Yat and Dokuk, standing with their father.

Yathi, wedged against strong Lume.

The tall figure of Tiuti.

Everyone was smiling and nodding.

Eku found Ingwe, leaned against Kafilā, still holding her protectively.

Ingwe smiled in her perfect way and Eku was strong again.

He paced to the center of the tribal circle and stood before the Bwana chieftain, who was looking at him in a way that made the fierce scar almost disappear.

Uta raised the strap over Eku's head and lowered it into place.

Sticky with blood, the sabertooth rested firm against his young chest.

Eku solemnly stared at the Bwana leader, who had a look of such gratitude that his eyes were spilling tears as he said, "That necklace belongs to you now."

The tribe cheered.

A roar that carried down the south-flowing river, perhaps all the way to *shatsbeli-lambo*.

And that echoed north, to the lake of endless freshwater, perhaps even, to whatever lay beyond.