

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 30

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 to apologize.

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

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

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

All thinking the same thing: how had Eku done it?

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

Young adults continued to celebrate.

Shouting and singing.

Young mothers and children moved like a slow tide from between the shelters and into the main area of the encampment.

Ulanga had yet to clear the mountain, but the day was bright. The only lingering shadows were cast by the mountain.

Across the encampment, people celebrated with whomever they encountered.

Laughing.

Hugging.

Kissing.

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

Enthusiastic shouting rose when the first wave of fighters from outside the encampment returned.

The young nesibindi and hunters could not help but saunter a bit as they entered to such rousing cheers.

Krele frantically tried to spot Kaleni; Eku glanced at his mother as she did so.

The sealskin vest she favored, having lasted all the way from home, was streaked with mud.
Smudges of dirt stained her arms. Her loincloth and legs.
Her face was streaked with tears and flecks of dirt speckled the fuzzy dome of her head.
Mother needs to cut her hair and clean off in the river, Eku thought.
Turning to him, Krele implored, “Eku I am sure father is okay, but I think he is still outside by the forest. With Uta and the others. I do not see them. You are okay if I go?”
Eku clicked yes.
She pursed her lips and looked skeptical.
“I want you to check on father.”
Krele clicked positive, began to turn away, but stopped.
Taking a moment to simply stare at Eku.
Peering into a face where every detail was already etched into her heart; yet, she witnessed him perform an action that simply had to be seen to be believed.
With movements swift and precise, Eku used his entire body to propel the *ula-konto* through the air like one of the Mantel’s tiny spears.
In that moment, Eku became something more than the sum of his whole.
Able to deliver the weapon precisely where it needed to go.
She searched his face and wondered.
But there was only the sweet face of her child.
Looking thoughtful.
But then Eku’s eyes widened and he 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.

When he saw that Krele remained concerned he added, "I am fine, mother. You are a healer and have a duty. I understand you must go. I am fine."

Tearing up again, Krele seized Eku tightly by each shoulder.

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 looked hard into his face and used fingers from her right hand to trace a path from Eku's shoulder to the spot next to his heart, where she knew her child's greatest hope was to have an eagle talon 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.

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

Figured he might as well stay where he was.

Tried to spot Yathi amongst the many bodies in front of him, but his attention was drawn away as the crowd surged in one direction.

Uta and the nesibindi had returned from the floodplain.

A throng of people surrounded them, clapping and shouting.

Eku spotted uncle Lume, his giant body gently parting the flow of bodies, leading Yathi in the opposite direction, headed for Kozik, who stood with Ola, and Doagu and Iti along the arc of fire pits.

Yat suddenly swooped out of the crowd and ran past the bubinzwana and straight up to Eku to seize him in such a hug that all of the air was expelled from his lungs.

Yat giggled as Eku sucked in his breath, trying to recover,

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!"

Eku could only 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 directed its attention on Uta and the nesibindi, who had joined with the throng surrounding Kafil and Ingwe.

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

She was looking 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 noticed blood smeared along the haft.

Dokuk hugged Yat quickly with his free arm, then 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, "Was 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.

"I yelled a lot and hurled my *ula-konto* into a body already pierced by other weapons," he said, looking a little sheepish.

"We had them trapped," he explained. "They just didn't know it."

"Bubinzwana are dangerous, like a rogue elephant, but we put them in a good trap and there was no escaping."

Eku 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."

Shook his head and looked at Eku as though mystified, adding, "What I did? That was nothing. The beast I threw my *ula-konto* into was already dying."

"Everyone is talking about what you did."

All Eku could think to say was, "You mean with my *ula-konto*?"

Dokuk continued to stare at Eku, as though in disbelief.

When Eku offered nothing more, Dokuk said, "Eku, they say you made a single throw with an *ula-konto* to bring down the beast. One throw!"

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

"He made that throw and then Kafila finished it off before it could get up."

Dokuk looked at Eku and shook his head.

Eku simply stared back.

He really didn't know what to say about what happened.

He hadn't even thought about it, really.

In his mind, there was only the act of throwing.

And then the result.

Which was good, of course.

The alternative was too awful to even think about.

Dokuk said, "Juyat was killed by a blow to the head."

Eku gasped.

Juyat was the father of Tuve.

He had two talons and sometimes scouted with his father and Nibamaz.

Suddenly concerned again, Yat said, "I am going outside to find mother. To see if she needs help."

Dokuk offered Eku an apologetic look and dashed away after Yat.

Eku was by himself again.

And people were avoiding him.

Eku saw individuals glance his way, only to look away.

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

A few of the Bwana quickly touched their hands to their heart before looking away.

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

Eku 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 move 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.

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

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

Thanks to the wound, the dark 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 half open exposed square teeth, much bigger than a human's.

The eyes were half open; white with a dark center and long eyelashes, reminding Eku 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 long and thick on the sides and back, but scraggly and unkempt, having never seen a comb.

The skin of its face was a ruddy gray, darker than the rest of its body.

Eku saw silver in the hair and beard and said softly, in a surprised tone, "You were an elder."

Something hung around the thick fur 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.

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

The penis poked from a hairy groin.

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

Found that unnerving.

For some reason.

"You were alive," Eku 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.

Eku 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 Kafil, surrounded by *waka-waka* Bwana.

Eku walked back to where he stood a moment ago.

He 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 Eku'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, Eku 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 returned to 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.

Eku 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.

Eku rubbed the heel of his palm across his cheeks.

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

Krele was unprepared for the carnage.

No wonder the noises were so terrifying!

Past the ring of fire pits was mostly grass and short brush and palm.

As soon as she reached the palms, Krele saw *waka-waka* bodies strewn about the dirt and grass, all of them the result of a violent death.

The look of each individual was made all the more horrifying because every one of them appeared human.

At first glance.

But they were bubinzwana.

Dark and ugly faces had contorted into grotesque expressions.

The bodies were all naked and pale and bloodied with their limbs splayed out.

Javelins, *ula-konto*, 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.

They looked so human!

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

Some of the other mothers following behind vomited.

The sight of Kaleni with blood on his body brought tears streaming down Krele's face, but she quickly recovered, realizing the blood was not his own.

Miraculously, it seemed, 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 a well-known healer and space was 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 detail, Kaleni hurried back to camp with the other hunters.

Uta was swarmed by members of the tribe.

When he returned to camp with Tokuta and Kotuta, all he felt was weary relief—and a desperate need to see Kafila and Ingwe.

Uta smiled graciously to each well wisher, but pushed purposefully forward until he reached Kafila, with Ingwe in tow.

Kafila's beautiful, but formidable exterior did not soften often, but she wept when Ingwe leaped into her fathers arms and buried her face into his neck.

Uta simply gloried in the moment, holding his daughter.

Then he realized Ingwe was repeating over and over, "Eku saved me."

Uta released Ingwe.

Hugged and kissed Kafila, who quickly described the events within the encampment.

She told Uta of the stalwart action by the young adults and hunters; the heroics of the Mantel and *izik-kosa*, who thwarted a devastating attack from the river; and finally, to Eku dramatically saving the life of Ingwe and likely many other children.

Tokuta, Kotuta and other nesibindi all heard the tale and word spread.

In the meantime, Uta was overcome by emotion.

He looked for Eku.

Saw him, at the moment, standing over the dead bubinzwana.

The Bwana chieftain desperately wanted to go to him and express the depth of his gratitude, but had become so encased by others, he could no longer even move.

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 puddle.

Eku waited as Kaleni paced through the open area where the dead bubinzwana lay.

His father looked so worried.

Kaleni went nose to nose with Eku, peering into his eyes, as though straining to see into his mind

They were almost the same height now.

“Eku are you okay?”

He touched Eku on the arm, lightly, as though to be sure he knew he was there.

Eku did feel strange.

Like he was somehow lighter than he had been just a moment ago.

As though a weight had been released from his shoulders.

His father was there. With was the trifecta of pale specks in the right eye and the scar through the left eyebrow, which at the moment, made him look extra concerned.

Kaleni snapped, “Eku! Are you okay? Aunt Shona told me what happened.”

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

Like he was hearing things underwater.

Or distracted.

His father was so dirty.

Even dirtier than mother had been (and she had been very dirty).

There was also blood; in fact, more blood than mud.

Even on his loincloth.

A bloody loincloth.

Not good.

Father needs to go in the river, like mother, Eku thought.

Probably we all do.

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

Kaleni grabbed Eku’s elbow.

Searched his face, feeling the same awe that Krele had just moments before.

Kaleni said softly, "Aunt Shona 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.

They looked at each other for a moment.

"Eku! Everyone saw!

"Everyone is talking about it!

"Everyone is saying it was some kind of ... Nobody even knows the words?

"A wondrous event.

"A new legend.

"A new story.

"There will be songs.

"So everyone was waiting for me or Uta to see you first."

Eku nodded, but still said nothing.

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

Eku still said nothing.

Kaleni shook his head.

Concerned with Eku's ambivalence, he turned to look at the bubinzwana.

A huge beast.

No doubt terrifying.

Eku would have made the throw from just about where they were 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 turned back and 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 his mother had.

Father's hands were hot and sweaty and felt wonderful.

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

Eku clicked no and then yes, still unwilling to speak because it would betray the tears.

Having no idea why the urge to cry was so strong.

The danger was over?

Finally, softly, he said, "I did not have time to be afraid. When it happened."

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.

There was a crimson streak across his chest.

Some of the drops 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 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 asked, "Are you waiting for mother? She is tending to one of the wounded. Making sure the bleeding stops."

Eku offered a neutral expression, but nothing more.

Kaleni nodded to indicate where Yat stood with Dokuk.

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

Eku looked around.

Once again, so much happened so quickly.

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.

Stood and looked around.

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

Everyone was enjoying the happiness and relief that came with mutual survival.

Waiting to see what happened next.

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 bent his head slightly and listened.

Tall enough to see over everyone to the open area, Uta eyed the dead bubinzwana where it lay on the hard-packed dirt, with Eku standing just behind until Kaleni finished talking.

Uta's response was a grave nod.

Kaleni left Uta to stand with Yat and Dokuk, pressed together, arms around each other, part of the huge circle 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.

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.

Remaining shadows fled.

The trees were a vibrant green, the sky a brilliant laza. The river reflected both.

Uta walked purposefully to the dead bubinzwana.

Stood still for a moment.

Slowly, a hand rose to touch the scar.

The Bwana chieftain remained that way for some time, having recognized the body.

His old foe.

He would never forget the face of the bubinzwana that gave him his scar.

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.

Waiting.

Uta turned back to the bubinzwana and knelt to a crouch.

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 told stories 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 Kafilá, 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.