

Chapter 31

Rainbow Fish

Vultures gorged when the people marched into the land of legend.

With somber spirits and a survivors' resolve, the tribe set forth.

Two of the nesibindi and another Abantu hunter died as a result of wounds suffered from the battle against the bubinzwana.

Those recovering from injuries were carried on a travois, one person to each corner.

Upon the lips of many were new songs composed to commemorate victory over the fearsome beasts.

More than two, full *yaka-yaka* have passed since the Abantu left the southern shores.

The tribe was a resilient and adaptable force that had only flourished.

New babies seemed to arrive by the day, adding to what was shaping up to be an enormous first *labi-ini* for the first tribe.

Amidst the parade of people, Eku walked with Ingwe to one side, Yathi on the other, Kolo, Dala and Longo nearby.

Yat and Dokuk paced close by, along with Tar and Maz, Odi and Tuve.

Another day of rain was a gentle reminder this land was different; at home, *sika-yaka* was coming to a close, as it was here, but Ulayo was notoriously stingy at this time of the cycle.

Perhaps she treated this part of Umawa a little differently?

Either way, Eku knew that *lobo-yaka* was approaching.

The people wore loincloths and nothing else.

Everyone carried a full satchel.

Eku no longer held an *ula-konto*; instead, he held Ingwe's hand.

The hunters led the people across a dirt and leaf-strewn shoreline covered with bright green water grass.

The water was gray and flat, textured by rain.

When the forest encroached upon an impassable, rocky shoreline, the hunters turned inland, marching through mature forests of tall, broadleaf hardwoods, giving Eku a chance to ogle *waka-waka* hanging bats.

Away from the shoreline, the land was flat with occasional low ridge lines.

When they passed over a ridgeline high enough to see across canopy tops to the water, Eku saw the opposite shoreline was but a faded line.

The next time they returned to the water to fill bladders, the river was gone.

Only the bumps of distant mountains lay across an open expanse.

The people walked the shores of the lake they named, *ichi-sikalo-ata*.

The lake of endless freshwater.

The tribe continued along a coastline that continued to change.

Ichi-sikalo-ata proved to not only be vast, but deep, offering a deep tone of laza.

The shoreline was lined by angular boulders, as though knapped into shape by the hammer of a giant *izik-kosa* and then crammed into place along the water's edge.

The tribe found an area of shoreline so crowded with flat rocks, the young people were able to step from rock to rock along the edge of the water, making the hike more interesting.

"There are more rocks than soil here," Yathi said, as they skipped close to the water.

"But it makes walking easy," Ingwe called, hoping from flat rock to flat rock just ahead of them.

"I wish it was like this around the entire lake," Kolo shouted from beside Eku, who was just a few steps behind Ingwe.

"For sure," Eku said. "But I would be surprised. Everything keeps changing. Look up ahead."

Ingwe had slowed in front of them and the four came to a stop.

Ahead of them, piles of rocks were strewn just off the shore, like miniature islands.

Other, enormous rocks rose further out in the water, like old petrified volcanoes.

A fascinating landscape of hidden coves and swimming pools.

The rocks in front of them reminded Eku of a fractured egg.

"Let's go see," Eku said.

The four took off again.

Ingwe, Eku, Yathi and Kolo skipping across the shoreline rocks, brown limbs striding in synchrony across boulders burned pale by Ulanga, the spread of the brilliant laza water behind them.

The water was just below.

A multitude of crabs crawled amongst the bottom.

Clearly in view.

But something was off, Eku could tell.

He watched the smoky distillation of debris as they foraged.

Particles rising, but ... something was not right.

“The water is so clear,” Ingwe said in amazement.

“So deep,” Kolo exclaimed.

“I could not tell at first,” Eku marveled.

“Like we are looking through air, not water,” Yathi said.

Up ahead, the piles of rock spewed forth formed secluded basins.

Isolated habitats.

Ingwe and Eku never tired of exploring.

Each pool was a miniature world filled with water plants that spiraled and many different kinds of colored fish.

“How can there be colored fish in freshwater,” Yathi said. “We have never seen that before?”

The fish were similar in body structure, but remarkably different in coloring.

Different shades of red

Some that looked yellow and others orange.

There were fish silver or green or both.

Even fish with iridescent hints of laza in addition to all of the other colors.

“The fish here have every color of the rainbow,” Ingwe said.

“Maybe they came from a rainbow,” Eku said and thought that was silly, though Ingwe giggled in a nice way.

Eku watched the fish as Kolo and Yathi moved along.

He found the movement of their swimming within the perfectly clear basin pleasant to watch.

Mesmerizing.

When he realized the others had moved along, he went to follow, but stopped.

Ingwe remained right in front of him.

She normally would have moved when he did, but ... She didn't.

She was waiting.

Eku looked at her and wanted to tell her how pretty he thought the fish were, like she was, but then his mind went blank.

Ingwe had planted a warm and long kiss on Eku's mouth.

When their tongues met and began a seductive dance, his mind became very much awake, and exploded into a new realm of happiness.

Access to the north has ended.

At least for the time being.

The shoreline continued unerringly in that direction, but it was as though Umawa declared, "Time to choose a different path."

Where water met shore was a mountain-sized jumble of rock.

The only vegetation to find purchase was whip-like vines and gnarly bushes.

An all but impassable barrier.

Even Kaleni and Nibamaz had never been this far before.

Not sure what to do next, the hunters would scout inland for another route.

In the meantime, the tribe made camp along a flatland that preceded the steep incline.

Forested by acacia with pale bark and downward spreading limbs; the outermost branches heavy with fully mature leaves.

The air was hot and very dry.

Leaves crunched under their feet as the people cleared space.

Eku is busier than ever.

There are chores, as always, but Tiuti was constantly pulling him away.

Whatever type of grueling training Eku thought the old master might have in store for him, turned out to be anything but.

Tiuti simply immersed Eku into whatever activity was interesting at the moment.

Tiuti was always doing something interesting.

They spent much time exploring the new countryside, something Eku would have loved to do anyway.

Tiuti was the first person to show Eku how to study the behaviors of all beasts and birds.

Eku had always been enamored by birds in particular, but Tiuti taught Eku to pay attention to the smaller beasts; in particular, the different types of fish, *ubhak-unda*, insects and spiders.

Yat, Tar and Maz mischievously giggled at Eku when he was forced to tag along with some of the mothers and young females.

But Eku didn't mind.

He appreciated being around them.

Tiuti followed the mothers as they foraged for valued plants and small beasts.

The dry part of the cycle offered different grasses and shrubs valued for such things as spices and flavoring and poultices for treating ailments and wounds.

There were valued water lilies and spider plants from lakeside thickets.

Hearty corms and tubers from meadows.

A grove of monkey oranges was discovered in a nearby forest, bursting with sweet fruit at this part of the cycle.

Ekū enjoyed it when Tiuti began to teach him how to recognize stone formations, which led to the location of quartzite and other valuable rocks.

Tiuti taught him how Umawa offered clues where to find a good quarry, whether a cave, the rocky bed of a stream or the crumbly of a rocky ravine.

He learned to look at the color of a stone, not just with his eyes, but by rubbing to test luster or scratching a different rock to test hardness.

Tiuti showed Ekū how to use his keen eyes to detect the crystal formations that allowed a stone to cleave cleanly along a plane.

The first time Ekū led his uncle Lume to a small quarry that he found with Tiuti's help, Lume said little, at first.

His uncle used the backside of his tree-felling ax to lop off a chunk of core rock to carry back to camp and start experimenting.

The next day, Ekū felt proud when his uncle showed him a beautifully knapped adze shaped blade.

He fell asleep that night with a smile, when Lume said he was going to be a great *izik-ikiz*.

First thing the next morning Krele directed Ekū to the end of camp.

At the foot of the steep hills the most experienced hunters had gathered.

He was to accompany them!

Ekū left the area of rounded shelters and headed below boughs of acacia.

Spotted his father and Nibamaz, in discussion with Juka and Lopi and highly regarded hunters.

Ekū gulped.

They all wore at least two talons!

Ekū slowed.

Nervous.

Spotting his approach and seeing his tentative look, Kaleni clicked in assurance.

Wide eyed with curiosity, Eku went to his father, who gestured over his left shoulder, through the trees at the first rocks, where the incline began to rise steeply.

“We are going to climb this hill,” Kaleni said. “From the top, we should be able to see far and decide which direction to go next.”

Eku grinned and felt a jolt of excitement.

He was going scouting!

How could he ever imagined being so fortunate!

He knew the hunters would go up the steep incline with no respite.

“Eku, this is a new place,” Nibamaz said. “Where we are going? No Abantu, Mantel or Bwana has ever been there before.”

Eku looked through the trees, his expression showing his awe.

“No one has ever climbed this hill?”

“We are the first humans,” Kaleni said. “Eku, this is something we would have had Tiuti accompany us, but this hill is difficult. He said to bring you instead.”

Kaleni smiled, knowing it was not necessary, but adding just to see the look on his child’s face, “But you have to keep up.”

Eku’s eyes instantly narrowed and the iron resolve began to grow.

He would keep up, for sure.

Eku can hardly believe his good fortune.

“Snakes like to bask in the sun or hide in crevices and holes in such a place of rock,” Nibamaz warned.

“Watch your feet and hands.”

“You follow behind me and Nibamaz,” Kaleni said.

“Will you be at the front?”

Kaleni smiled.

“Sometimes. Not always. We will take our time and get there safely.”

The climb was physically very difficult.

But at the same time, exhilarating.

A steep incline that only grew steeper the higher they went.

Much of the hill was packed with boulders, the gaps filled with leaf-strewn soil from which gnarly bushes of juniper-like toughness gripped into the sandy soil.

The roughly textured limbs had many smaller branches, but only the outermost fringe of tiny twigs bore slender leaves.

Eku often went down on all fours.

Climbing over and squeezing between rocks.

Crab walking across slants of bedrock

Sticking fingers into faultlines (making sure there were no snakes first, of course).

Tiptoeing around bulging boulders.

Grabbing opportune branches to swing himself along or lever himself into position to get past the next rock.

Eku settled into a rhythm and the hard work became enjoyable.

Winding through the rocks, Eku lost track of direction, but knew they were close to the peak when he caught a glimpse of water over his right shoulder.

He took the next chance to look and saw parts of the encampment below, looking small through the canopies of trees.

Near the peak, loose rock and sandy soil were replaced by slabs of bedrock with miniature fault lines.

All that grew were cacti with light green whorls, prickly with needles.

Cutting diagonally across a slab of bedrock, Eku glimpsed water again; only this time, the shimmer was over his left shoulder.

That did not make sense.

At first.

Moments later it did, as Eku and the hunters crested the top.

The peak was a small, and relatively flat, windswept plateau of bedrock.

Eku's sweat quickly dried in a steady wind.

Like the hunters, he walked in a circle, mouth open, gawking at what was around them.

As far as the eye could see, they saw in every direction.

The hill upon which they stood was the highest point by far in every direction.

Juka stood nearby to Eku and said, "I think we stand upon the ass crack of the lake," which resulted in laughter.

Eku giggled, at first, simply because Juka has used the phrase, "ass crack", but then he realized it was an appropriate description.

The hunters stood on the highpoint of a rocky peninsula that jutted into the southern flank of the lake, which bifurcated the rounded shores at this end of the lake into ... Well, kind of like two butt cheeks.

The water spread outward in three directions.

Directly in front of him, to the north, where the peninsula dropped off and ended, was only water and sky.

If he faced north, to the right, Eku saw a very steep incline that led only to water, almost like a cliff face.

Looking back, he saw the shoreside edge of their village.

Further out to the right, in the distance, the ridgeline of hills curved along the shore and then north as the lake expanded in width and breadth.

When Eku looked left of the peninsula, he saw a stretch of flatland along the water, including a possible beach, before a similar ridgeline of hills curved outward and north.

After scouting, Kaleni and Nibamaz led a small party of scouts across the peninsula.

Just two days later they returned with wonderful news.

They had found a new home!

When word spread of what the hunters found, nearly everyone expressed unbridled enthusiasm.

Everyone but the elder mothers.

While what the hunters had found did sound wonderful, some would not be so easily convinced.

Krele, Shona, Nyama and Luvu gathered with the other elder mothers and made sure they were in firm agreement that any final decision would be theirs.

They would see this new, supposedly wonderful place for themselves; and, if necessary, remind the hunters of who was in charge.

Turns out, the hunters were right.

8-9 miles to river, 2 days

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The first day across the peninsula was a bit difficult.

Everyone had an extra bladder to carry.

The ground was very dry.

Trees with spiny canopies showed only leaves that were shriveled and brown or yellow.

With no moisture available to take advantage of the light, ground cover was sparse and the people stirred up dust as they walked.

Clumped nests made by silkworms.

Clumps of Yellow thatching grass.

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Cone-like hills appear, brown facing the side Ulanga rose, but green on the other.

Surrounded by an abundant plain of foxtail grass.

Strangely, like in the land of grass and palm, there are no large beasts.

Not even lizards.

But as always, there are *waka-waka* birds.

Fowl in very large flocks that moved like a herd.

Black plumage with some feathers spotted white.

Forward strutting, like a pigeon, with a vulture-like head always posed to snatch the next ripe seed or creeping insect.

The Mantel crept up to easily harvest some of the birds, using the *guka-ombe*.

Hunters used *ula-kontos*.

Very tasty and savory after skewered on a pole and hung over an open fire pit.

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Eku is with Ingwe.

She moves so gracefully, naturally almost like a hunter would.

He marvels at her ability.

She smiles and kisses him when he says he is going to teach her *ibe-bonakalio*.

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Flocks of cuckoos, similar to turacos, but with brown feathers and bright orange chests.

The birds performed repetitive exchanges that grew in volume until a crescendo and then silence.

Until one bird squawked.

And then another.

And soon, the whole process repeated.

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The ground stalking bird.

Tall, similar to an ostrich.

Funny little dance. Always looking at the sky....

Streamlined for running, both the body and head like an adze-shaped ax, the powerful wings folded tight against the muscular body.

Eku took advantage of every early morning to explore.

The hunters deemed the land remarkably safe and his mother gave him the freedom to explore.

Thus far the only beast of any interest was a forest antelope, barely the size of an impala.

The beast was pretty, with black and white stripes on the legs like a zebra, but a smooth, yellow-brown coat up top.

The coloring allowed them to vanish at the edge of forests, where they liked to feed.

Darting into the leafy shadows at the first inkling of danger.

Very skittish, even for antelope.

And solitary, also unusual, best that Eku knew.

There were plenty of open grasslands away from the lake.

Devoid of any large beasts, despite the presence of succulent grass.

Another thing that Eku found particular.

Especially considering the lack of predators.

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When a beast of size presented itself, Eku was astonished.

The beast paraded right through their camp in the middle of the day, as if they were not even there!

A gigantic porcupine!

Lumbering down to the lake to drink.

Easily the size of a half-grown water buffalo, moving deliberately, with no regard to the two-legged humans.

Eku and other young people followed the porcupine to the water.

Armed with quills long and sturdy enough to serve as tiny spears for the Mantel's *guka-ombe*!

The tail of the beast was bulbous and bristling with long barbs as it swayed back and forth.

Eku had never seen such armament.

Fascinated, he walked with the beast all the way to the water.

Watched it drink.

Walked with it back through their camp and into the forest the same way it came.

Eku watched the porcupine disappear into the leafage.

A big porcupine with big quills.

That made sense.

Or did it?

Eku pondered, why would such formidable weapons be necessary when the beast was already bigger than everything else?

He planned on posing the question to Tiuti or his father, but while venturing out the next morning, the answer was provided for him.

The porcupines were armored for the same reason there were no antelope in the grasslands.

Or any other large beasts.

The same reason the ground dwelling bird always performs its sky gazing dance.

The alpha predator that ruled this land hunted from the sky.

The first time Eku caught sight of the raptor was due to its shadow.

Passing swiftly across a field of grass.

Eku spun to look upward, expecting to see several birds or a tightly packed flock.

Oh but no!

The shadow belonged to a single bird.

An eagle by shape, but with proportions like no other.

A fish eagle would be dwarfed by its magnificent wing span, nearly twice as large.

The primary feathers were banded dark and pale, thick as his leg.

The tail was an enormous fan above black talons wickedly curved.

An eagle to rule all other eagles.

Eku watched the mighty bird soar into the distance.

He soon learned that the great eagle preyed primarily on the many large fowl of the region.

But surely, no creature that tread this land was entirely safe from those terrifying claws.

Watching the bird grow small in the distance, Eku thought of the Mantel's *guka-hombe*.

In the hands of a talented hunter, the curved bows were now deadly from a distance even higher than the tallest tree.

He thought of the many new babies in camp.

As the eagle faded out of sight Eku said softly, “Stay away from the tribe if you want to live.”

At first the mothers were reluctant to admit the hunters got it right.

But then, the mothers, like everyone, realized there was no mistake about this place.

A paradise, for sure.

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The shoreline gradually curved away from the delta.

A deep shore of brown sand led to a treeline of weeping aspen.

The shoreline curved up and away until ending at the rocky cliffs of the peninsula, now a good distance away and in front of them.

The length of the peninsula appears to be a cluster of rock bristled by brush.

Eku wondered which of the taller peaks was the ass-crack hill.

Behind them, beyond the river delta, the coastline followed a similar line, before turning sharply north, the mountains rising as the ridgeline along the lake advanced.

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The hunters led them down the beach in the direction of the peninsula and the land only grew more appealing.

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A lone hill lay separate from the peninsula.

Like a young adult that had lagged behind the main herd before it crowded onto the peninsula, leaving no more room.

The lone was symmetrically round and climbable from all sides.

Covered by scrub and brush on one side, tall trees on the other.

Not as high as the highest peaks of the peninsula, but offering a spectacular view from the top in every direction.

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Directly in front is only the clear and beautiful freshwater of *ichi-sikalo-ata*.

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The village would be established along a beautiful stretch of beach.

A wide and deep beach built from countless millennia of runoff from both the river.

The earth is dark and rich.