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BLOOD ON THE PLAINS

His future lay in tatters. The Leopard of the Sky, the Crowned Eagle, his quarry... was dead, not by snare, machete, or sling, but by a knife. The sigil of his clan was desecrated with shallow cuts around its body, its skull caved in from a blow with a war club, and its feathers a sea of blood. The killer took no meat or bones. Instead, he took the eagle's wings, talons, and Kamau's dream of manhood.

Kamau Kimoni stood slack-jawed. He blinked several times, trying to force himself awake. Upon his release from this dream, he would be back at the initiate camp with his brothers and cousins, listening to Spirit Master Abedi's lecture about the importance of this ritualized hunt and how they walked in the footsteps of their ancestor, Fati the Hunter. They would learn that to meet the Crowned Eagle in its territory and kill it without spilling its blood, as Fati did, was the ultimate act of cleverness, resourcefulness, daring, and might, worthy for men of the Kimoni clan.

But Kamau did not wake up.

The empty eyes of the eagle stared back at him, and its blood continued to tarnish the savanna, an omen that promised at least four years of misfortune to the land.

The boy of fifteen ran a hand over his shaved head and fidgeted with his machete. He held in a scream, whether of fury or despair, he was not

sure. His shadow elongated on the acacia's trunk where the eagle lay. The sun was near the underworld, and when it succumbed, the dark world of the savanna would emerge.

Already, the hippos growled, eager to breach and walk on land after their day-long soak. Hyenas cackled at the yelps of the spotted hunting dogs as they jockeyed for the last few puddles that remained of the watering hole. A shift in the grass made Kamau grip the pouch of rocks on his hip. His sling wouldn't be enough to kill a hungry predator, but it was enough to force them to retreat and find an easier meal.

"I should let them eat me," Kamau said to the perished bird. Its corpse already attracted a circle of vultures.

A mauling was preferable over returning to camp and Vunguza empty-handed. His death song would at least be a tragic lament about a boy cut down in his prime, rather than the farce of continued failure. That was, of course, if Mother and Father would even permit Spirit Master Abedi to sing over his body as it burned. The honor was preserved for Kimoni who distinguished themselves by providing boons and prestige to the clan, men like his elder brother, Masilo. A mauling hardly amounted to much honor or prestige. The only honor such a death could provide was to serve as an example of what not to do for future initiates, a distinction he already held.

Bitterness swelled Kamau's tongue at the thought of presenting himself to Father and Mother, the Lord and Lady of the Kitwana Savanna, without the Crowned Eagle.

"So, you have chosen to shame us further..." Father, Lord Abasi Kimoni the Iron Hearted, would say.

"I was a fool to believe your atrocious performance during the Akanma Hunt was the full depth of your incompetence, boy," Mother, Lady Mariama Kimoni, the Maiden of a Thousand Lies, would agree.

A fresh wave of anger gripped his stomach. Kamau ran his fingers across the ground, searching for tracks. He refused to present himself this way. This wouldn't be his end. He wouldn't be an impotent fool or the Hapless Instigator for another year. If the thief was sloppy enough to leave such a mess, he certainly left behind a trail.

Kamau squinted at the ground in the fading light, hoping, however vainly, that the ground would yield its secrets before his glare. The savanna grass pricked at his feet while a steady line of insects feasted on his torso, producing a maze of bites. Kamau's shadow nearly overtook the acacia when the ground permitted discovery of its first secret, a blowpipe and a sole dart.

He raised an eyebrow. The eagle had no piercing wounds. Perhaps the thief attempted to use the dart, but the eagle spotted him? But why would he have only the one? Kamau pushed the question aside and slid the pipe and dart into his trousers before continuing his crawling vigil.

Finally, he found them. Faded as they were, the footprints were clear enough to follow. They moved to the northeast.

Kamau brushed off the collection of dirt, grass, and insects that formed on his chest, and unwrapped the sling around his wrist. The eagle was out of his reach, but he could capture the thief. Kimoni law, after all, forbade the hunt of the Crowned Eagle by Freeman and slaves alike. The crime was punishable by flogging, dismemberment, enslavement, or death, depending on the skill of their assigned arbiter.

The thief's capture had to be an act worthy of manhood and prestige. A different quarry, perhaps, but captured with the same techniques. Moreover, he was enforcing Father's law. Was that not the primary duty of any Kimoni man?

Master Abedi would smile at his return with the thief in tow. The Spirit Master would declare Kamau a man before Father and Mother. They would see him, truly see him, as a son of the Kimoni worthy of their ancestors' blood flowing through him. Father would place a hand on his shoulder and say all was forgiven for his foolishness during the Akanma Hunt. He would be given a proper spear, a collection of men, and an assignment to the west or south to protect their borders, where he would further distinguish himself.

Perhaps then, they would look at him as they did his brother Masilo.

Kamau nodded to himself as he cut down several branches from the tree and wrapped dry grass around them. Fire blazed over his completed torch. Kamau held out his machete and took a breath before following the trail northeast.

He would be Kamau, man of the Kimoni clan, before this night was over.