

Nkuwu: vilua wa ntotila

Ntotila's Mistake

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Chapter One — The Fruit That Was Not Ready

The paka-paka was not ripe.

Nzinga knew this because it was still green.

He ate it anyway.

The sweetness came first, bright enough to make him think he had won. Then his teeth reached flesh that was still too firm, and sourness climbed into his jaw.

Across from him, Lukeni laughed so violently that the water he had been drinking came out of his nose.

Nzinga pointed at him with the bitten fruit.

"Good."

Lukeni coughed into his forearm. "You look like you ate ntondolo."

"At least I can drink without drowning."

"That fruit told you not to eat it."

"It did not speak."

"It was green."

"That is a color."

"It was a warning."

Nzinga took another bite.

Lukeni stared. "You do not even like it."

"I started it."

"That is the stupidest reason to continue anything."

Nzinga chewed very deliberately. "You want some?"

"No."

"Then your opinion lacks courage."

"My opinion has taste."

They were sitting behind Nzinga's mother's preparation shelter, where they had specifically been told not to sit.

The instruction had been precise enough that Nzinga had spent several minutes testing its borders.

Not beside the shelter?

No.

Not behind it?

No.

Not only if she was working?

No.

Not even if they touched nothing?

No.

At which point his mother had asked whether he intended to find his own food from that day onward.

The discussion had ended.

They had obeyed for almost an entire morning.

The sun had climbed since then. Its warmth lay over Kongo dia Nlaza with the confident weight of something that belonged there. It did not merely shine. It entered leaves, roofs, skin, wet soil, drying cloth, the backs of animals and the flat stones children sat on when they had been told not to sit somewhere else.

Beyond the houses, cultivated ground rolled into greener disorder. Some plots were dense with useful plants; others had been allowed to rest. A narrow path curved away between trees whose shadows had already shortened. Farther down, someone was beating fiber. The rhythm traveled through the settlement together with conversation, laughter, smoke and the green smell of things being crushed.

Nzinga lifted his head.

"Mfumbwa."

Lukeni sniffed. "And ngai-ngai."

"Which one?"

Lukeni closed his eyes with exaggerated seriousness. "Red."

Nzinga looked at him.

"You cannot smell a color."

"You cannot."

"Neither can you."

Lukeni sniffed again. "Red."

"Why?"

"Because yesterday they picked the white."

Nzinga stared at him.

Lukeni smiled. "You see? I can smell color."

"You are a liar."

"No. I am efficient."

Nzinga threw a piece of paka-paka at him.

Lukeni ducked.

The piece of fruit continued past him and struck a woven tray leaning against the preparation shelter.

Both boys froze.

Nothing happened.

They looked at the tray.

Then at each other.

Then toward the doorway.

Nzinga whispered, "Did you hear anyone?"

"No."

"You are closer."

"You threw it."

"You made me."

"I laughed."

"At me."

"That is not force."

"It contributed."

Lukeni's eyes narrowed. "You already sound like a bad nzonzi."

"I sound like someone establishing causes."

"You sound like someone whose mother is going to establish pain."

Nzinga grinned and rose to retrieve the piece of fruit.

When he turned, his mother was standing behind them.

Neither boy had heard her arrive.

She looked at the piece of fruit in Nzinga's hand.

Then at the tray.

Then at the two boys.

Lukeni pointed at Nzinga.

Nzinga looked at him in disbelief.

His mother sighed.

"Descendant of Tuti."

Lukeni lowered his hand. "Yes?"

"Is this how the great observers of heaven behave?"

"No."

"Good. I was worried."

Nzinga laughed.

Her eyes moved to him.

His laughter stopped.

"And you."

"I was retrieving it."

"Before that."

"Eating."

"What?"

Nzinga showed what remained of the fruit.

Her expression changed.

"Where did you take that?"

"From there."

"Where?"

He pointed.

She walked past him.

Nzinga followed.

Lukeni followed Nzinga.

The tree stood near the edge of cultivated land where managed growth gave way to thicker vegetation. Nzinga showed her the branch.

His mother examined it.

"What did you eat?"

"A paka-paka."

"I have eyes."

Lukeni made a small sound that might have been a laugh.

Nzinga ignored him.

"It was not ripe."

"What does that mean?"

"It was green."

She turned. "That is what it looked like. What does it mean?"

Nzinga considered the question.

"It is not finished."

"Better."

She looked at the tree again. "Paka-paka dia yisu."

Lukeni repeated softly, "Dia yisu."

Nzinga had heard the expression many times. He had never stopped on it.

His mother touched one of the fruits still growing.

"Raw. Primordial. Still becoming. The thing is here, but it has not completed what it is doing."

Nzinga looked at the fruit in his hand. "I can still eat it."

"You demonstrated that."

"It is sweet."

"And sour."

"Yes."

"Harder."

"Yes."

"So it is already paka-paka."

"Yes."

"And not yet the paka-paka it can become."

Nzinga frowned. "That makes no sense."

"Then think longer."

Lukeni had stopped looking at them. He was staring upward through the branches.

Nzinga knew that expression.

"Do not."

Lukeni blinked. "What?"

"You are about to say something strange."

"I was thinking."

"That is exactly what I mean."

Nzinga's mother smiled. "What were you thinking, Lukeni?"

He hesitated.

Ask Lukeni an ordinary question and sometimes six answers arrived inside him at once. They seemed to collide somewhere between his mind and his mouth. When he was younger, he had become angry at people for not following thoughts he had never actually explained.

Now he had developed another habit.

He looked away.

Found one thing.

Held it.

Then spoke.

"The moon does it."

Nzinga groaned.

His mother waited.

Lukeni continued. "It is still the moon when part of it is dark. But what we see keeps changing."

"That is not the same," Nzinga said.

"I know."

"Then why say it?"

"Because I was not finished."

"You stopped."

"To breathe."

"You breathe while talking."

"Not when talking to you."

Nzinga's mother laughed.

Lukeni looked pleased with himself, then tried again.

"The fruit is itself while becoming another state of itself."

This time Nzinga listened.

Lukeni pointed upward, although the moon was nowhere visible in the bright sky.

"The sky has many things like that. What something is doing matters as much as what it is."

Nzinga looked at his mother. "Is he right?"

She shrugged. "Ask him in twenty years."

Lukeni accepted this happily.

Nzinga did not.

"I want to know now."

"Yes," his mother said. "That is usually your problem."

She took the remaining fruit from him. "Come."

"Where?"

"To work."

"We were resting."

"You were forbidden to rest there."

"We moved."

"You moved because I found you."

"That is still movement."

She handed him a basket.

Nzinga looked inside. Empty.

"What am I getting?"

"First you are learning why I asked where that fruit came from."

That interested him immediately.

Lukeni saw his expression and laughed. "You forgot you were being punished."

"This is not punishment."

His mother looked back. "It can become punishment."

Nzinga followed.

Lukeni followed him.

No one invited Lukeni.

No one needed to.

He had spent enough time with the family that people noticed his absence more than his presence.

They moved past fields where several generations worked within calling distance of one another. Children carried small loads until distraction conquered responsibility. Older people did work that matched what their bodies allowed and corrected everybody else. Someone was singing badly. Another voice objected to the choice of song. A third insisted that the problem was not the song.

The air smelled of warm earth, leaves, smoke and food.

A woman called toward Nzinga's mother.

"Nganga!"

She stopped.

The woman's daughter had developed a rash along one arm.

Nzinga immediately moved closer.

His mother pushed him back with two fingers against his forehead.

"Space."

"I can see from here."

"Then see."

She examined the girl's skin.

Asked when it began.

Where she had been.

What she had eaten.

What had touched the arm.

Whether it hurt.

Whether it burned.

Whether anything had been applied already.

The girl's grandmother answered one question.

The mother contradicted her.

The girl contradicted both.

Nzinga smiled.

His mother glanced at him.

He stopped.

She asked the girl directly.

The girl explained that she had been helping clear growth near a wet patch two days earlier and had brushed repeatedly against something she could not identify.

Nzinga's mother asked her to describe it.

The description was poor.

Lukeni interrupted.

"Were the leaves facing each other or alternating?"

Everyone looked at him.

His face changed instantly.

He disliked becoming the center of several adult faces.

Nzinga knew this too.

"What he means," Nzinga said, "is how the leaves grew on the stem."

"I know what I mean," Lukeni muttered.

"Then ask louder."

Lukeni ignored him.

The girl thought. "Facing."

"What color underneath?"

She could not remember.

Nzinga's mother asked several more questions, then prepared something simple for the irritation and instructed them to watch for changes.

The girl's mother thanked her.

"What is it?" Nzinga asked as soon as they resumed walking.

"I do not know."

He stopped.

His mother continued.

He ran to catch her.

"You do not know?"

"No."

"But you treated it."

"I treated what I could see."

"What if the plant was poisonous?"

"Then we watch for other effects."

"What if-"

"Nzinga."

He stopped.

"What?"

"What are you trying to know?"

"What happened."

"Good. Then do not make an answer because you are uncomfortable without one."

Lukeni nodded solemnly.

Nzinga glared at him.

"You thought the moon was fruit."

"I was making a comparison."

"You compared it."

"That is different."

His mother ignored them.

They reached a patch where she slowed.

"This."

Nzinga saw several plants.

"Which?"

She pointed.

He recognized it.

"I know that."

His mother looked at him.

He corrected himself. "I know its name."

"Better."

She crouched.

Nzinga did too.

Lukeni remained standing because he was watching an insect move between two leaves.

His mother indicated the plant.

"What part is useful?"

"The root."

"Always?"

Nzinga hesitated. "No."

"When?"

He answered.

She asked another question.

Then another.

Season.

Age.

Preparation.

Quantity.

Interactions.

What changed when dried.

What should never be mixed with it.

Where the danger lay.

Nzinga knew perhaps half.

Each missing answer irritated him.

His mother seemed pleased by every gap.

Finally he said, "Why are you happy when I do not know?"

"I am not."

"You look happy."

"I am happy when you discover the border of what you know."

"That sounds like the same thing."

"It is not."

She covered her fingers before handling part of the plant.

"A toxic plant does not give you a second lesson because you felt confident."

Nzinga watched closely.

"What if someone already knows everything about it?"

His mother laughed. "Find me that person."

"There must be one."

"No."

"You?"

"No."

"Ngudi za ngangu?"

"No."

"Then how does anyone know enough?"

She looked at him.

"Together."

One word.

Nothing ceremonial.

She returned to the plant.

But Nzinga remembered it.

Together.

Not because everybody knew the same things.

Because nobody did.

His mother knew more medicinal preparations than most people Nzinga had met, yet yesterday another nganga nkisi had visited to discuss a plant his mother rarely used.

A nganga nitu understood things about bodies she did not claim to know.

A nganga kimia could explain transformations of materials she used without pretending to know illness.

Ngangula crossed several fields of knowledge because making things work often required several kinds of understanding at once.

And somewhere were people whose joy lay not primarily in applying knowledge but in extending it - the ngudi za ngangu his mother spoke of with a particular respect.

Nzinga liked them before meeting any.

Anyone whose work consisted partly of discovering that everybody else had been wrong seemed interesting.

"Can I touch it?"

"No."

"Why?"

"You are not ready."

"How do I become ready?"

"Learn."

"I am learning."

"Continue."

"How long?"

She looked at him. "As long as necessary."

Lukeni had wandered a little farther.

"Nzinga."

"What?"

"Look."

"No."

"You have not seen it."

"You always say look and then point at the sky."

"I am pointing at the ground."

That was unusual enough.

Nzinga went.

Lukeni had found a trail of ants.

"That is your discovery?"

"Watch."

Nzinga watched.

The ants were moving material away from a damp section of ground.

"So?"

"Yesterday they were using the other side."

"You watched them yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Lukeni looked confused by the question. "Because they were there."

Nzinga accepted that.

Lukeni continued. "The ground is wetter here."

"It rained."

"Not enough."

He pointed toward a slope. "Something changed above."

Nzinga looked.

"What?"

"I do not know yet."

His mother had approached behind them.

Lukeni saw her and became quieter.

She examined the ants.

Then the ground.

Then uphill.

"Go see."

Lukeni looked surprised. "Now?"

"You found the question."

That was enough.

The boys went.

They followed wetness rather than a path, arguing twice over direction, once over whether Lukeni was inventing patterns because he wanted them to exist, and once over whether Nzinga's refusal to admit Lukeni might be right was itself a pattern.

They found a narrow obstruction farther up where water that normally dispersed had begun collecting and finding another route.

Nothing dramatic.

No omen.

No invisible being rearranging the earth.

A fallen mass of vegetation had redirected flow after the rain.

But farther down, the altered water could matter.

To insects.

To plants.

To cultivated ground if it persisted.

Lukeni stared at it with complete satisfaction.

"You see?"

"You found water."

"I found a change."

"You found ants."

"The ants found the change."

Nzinga thought.

That was fair.

"How did you know?"

"I did not."

"You said-"

"I thought."

"That is not knowing."

"Yes."

Nzinga turned.

Lukeni looked at him.

Then both boys laughed.

When they returned, Nzinga's mother listened to Lukeni's explanation.

She asked how long he thought the blockage had been there.

He estimated.

Why?

The rain.

The condition of vegetation.

The ant movement.

The amount of moisture.

She asked what would happen if nobody changed it.

Lukeni began too quickly.

Water.

Insects.

A nearby patch.

Perhaps roots.

Maybe-

He stopped himself.

Looked toward the sky although he did not need the sky this time.

Breathed.

Started again.

"One thing at a time," he said.

His mother smiled. "Yes."

Lukeni pointed upslope.

"If water keeps taking that route, this ground stays wetter."

He pointed lower.

"Then plants that like that change spread."

Another point.

"Some insects follow them."

"And?"

"Animals follow insects or plants. Or avoid them."

"And?"

"People notice animals."

Nzinga interrupted. "People notice wet fields before animals."

"Not always."

"Farmers do."

"Hunters do not."

"Hunters have eyes."

"So do farmers."

"You are impossible."

"Your mother says that about you."

"She does not."

His mother said, "I do."

Lukeni smiled triumphantly.

She let them argue for another moment.

Then:

"This is why Tuti watch stars."

Nzinga looked at her.

Lukeni stopped smiling.

Now he was listening.

"Not because stars command ants," she said. "Or water. Or crops."

Lukeni nodded.

"The sky gives measures," he said.

"Yes."

"Cycles."

"Yes."

"Then we compare what happens below."

"Yes."

Nzinga looked between them.

"So if the sky tells you when-"

"The sky tells nothing," Lukeni said.

"You just said-"

"It shows."

"Fine."

"We learn."

"Fine."

"And then-"

"Lukeni."

"What?"

"You are doing it again."

He stopped.

Breathed.

"One thing at a time."

Nzinga grinned.

Lukeni shoved him.

His mother watched them with an expression Nzinga would understand only much later.

Not sadness.

Not yet.

Something closer to wanting to keep a moment while knowing moments refused ownership.

By midday they returned home hungry.

Food was already being served.

Mfumbwa had been cooked down until its darker bitterness had softened into depth. There was pondu, thick and fragrant. Bowls of ngai-ngai brought sharpness in different

ways: one red, one paler, another green preparation that Lukeni insisted tasted "more awake," which caused three people to demand he explain what an awake taste was.

He tried.

It became worse.

People laughed.

There were safu too, their richness coating the mouth.

Nzinga ate as though he had crossed half of Kongo rather than walked through fields.

His father arrived late.

He touched Nzinga's mother's shoulder as he passed her.

Not ceremonially.

Not for anyone.

Just because she was there.

Nzinga noticed because children notice the things adults assume they do not.

His father took food.

Looked at Nzinga.

Then at Lukeni.

"Why do both of you look guilty?"

"We are not."

Lukeni said, "He threw a fruit."

Nzinga stared at him.

His father nodded. "At whom?"

"No one."

"Then why mention it?"

Lukeni thought. "I panicked."

Nzinga's father laughed. "So the house of Tuti predicts seasons but fails under questioning."

"I am still training."

"Clearly."

Nzinga's mother sat beside him.

"He found a water diversion from ant behavior."
His father looked at Lukeni again. "Did you?"
Lukeni shrugged, suddenly shy. "The ants found it."
His father nodded. "Even better. Never steal another worker's achievement."

People nearby laughed.
Lukeni did too.
Nzinga watched his parents exchange a glance.
There was ease between them.
Not the ease of people who never disagreed.
They disagreed constantly.
His father said his mother inspected food as if every meal were a medicinal trial.

His mother said his father believed courage could replace planning.

His father claimed this was slander.
His mother listed evidence.
He usually lost.
That afternoon someone mentioned marriage.
Nzinga did not remember why.
Perhaps a relative had received news.
Perhaps a family was preparing kanga lupangu.
What he remembered was his aunt pointing at his father and saying:

"At least this one earned his wife."

His father groaned.
Nzinga sat straighter. "What does that mean?"
"Nothing."

His aunt smiled. "Ask him about the plants."

Nzinga turned. "What plants?"
His mother immediately began laughing.
His father's face changed.

"No."

"What plants?"

Lukeni leaned closer. "What plants?"

Nzinga's father pointed at both boys. "You two have work."

"We finished."

"You have more."

"What plants?"

His aunt was delighted now.

"The ones your mother's father demanded for the dimbu."

Nzinga looked at his mother.

She was still laughing.

"What did he demand?"

His father muttered something.

"What?"

"A plant."

"One?"

His aunt laughed louder. "A rare one."

His father corrected her. "Several."

"Several?"

Lukeni whispered, "This sounds good."

His father heard him. "It was not."

His mother finally recovered enough to speak.

"My father knew exactly what he was doing."

"He was trying to kill me."

"He was evaluating you."

"He sent me where there were things that could kill me."

"That was part of the evaluation."

Nzinga stared. "What?"

His father looked around the family as though betrayed by everyone present.

His mother leaned toward Nzinga.

"The plant he wanted reaches the right condition near the end of the year."

"So?"

"So your grandfather knew your father could not bring it earlier."

Nzinga slowly understood.

"He wanted you to wait."

His father pointed at him. "Exactly."

His mother smiled. "He loved his daughter."

"He was delaying the marriage."

"Those statements can both be true."

His aunt added, "He was hoping you would fail."

"He was."

His mother shook her head. "He wanted to know whether you would."

"What is the difference?"

"Character."

The laughter softened.

Nzinga looked at her.

She continued.

"The dimbu is a sign. Not payment."

He already knew this.

Everyone did.

But now the adults were speaking in the way they did when a familiar thing suddenly opened and showed deeper structure.

"A family says: you want our child to become part of your life. Show us how you understand that responsibility."

His father muttered, "By making me cross half the world for leaves."

"Plants."

"Leaves grow on plants."

"Not these leaves."

He smiled.

Whatever irritation remained in the old story had become pleasure from retelling it.

Nzinga's mother continued.

"My father wanted something difficult to find. Something you could not take carelessly and survive."

"And," his aunt said, "something you had to bring back alive."

Nzinga turned to his father. "You had to keep the plant alive?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

His mother answered.

"Because finding something is not the same as caring for it."

Her husband's eyes moved toward her.

For a moment their joking stopped.

She said, "My father wanted to know what kind of man would bring his daughter home."

No one spoke.

Then her husband said, "He also wanted four more months with you."

"Yes."

"And he hoped I would fail."

"Possibly."

"He told me later."

"He liked you by then."

"He laughed while saying it."

"My father laughed often."

"Especially at me."

"That was because you were funny."

Nzinga's father frowned. "I was not trying to be funny."

"That made it better."

People laughed again.

Nzinga asked, "What else was in the dimbu?"

A blanket.

Clothes for her father.

Clothes for her mother.

Munsambu.

A sign that her parents could keep in remembrance of their daughter.

Other small things chosen not for price but for what they revealed.

His father explained that families who tried to convert dimbu into extraction were spoken about with contempt.

"You do not use your child to become rich," he said.

His mother's expression sharpened.

"Mputu."

The word changed the tone.

Even Nzinga felt it.

Not poor.

Something uglier.

A person could be sukami through circumstance.

Mputu was appetite turned into character.

Grasping.

Taking relation and trying to squeeze profit from it until the relation itself became secondary.

His father nodded.

"Ask too much and people begin wondering whether you want a family or a market."

His aunt said, "And nobody wants to join a family of thieves."

Nzinga asked, "Was the plant the hardest?"

His mother looked at her husband.

"No."

His father closed his eyes. "No."

"What was?"

His aunt was already laughing.

His mother answered:

"He had to make the whole family laugh."

Lukeni slapped both hands onto his knees. "No."

"Yes."

Nzinga stared at his father. "You?"

"I can be funny."

The entire group laughed immediately.

His father looked offended.

"That proves it."

His mother leaned against him, laughing harder.

Nzinga saw him try not to smile.

Fail.

"So what did you do?" Nzinga demanded.

His father looked at him. "No."

"You have to tell me."

"I absolutely do not."

"Did you tell a story?"

"No."

"Sing?"

"No."

"Dance?"

"Stop."

His aunt was crying from laughter now.

Lukeni was begging for details.

His mother wiped her eyes.

And in the middle of all of it, she coughed.

Once.

Small.

Almost nothing.
Nzinga noticed.
Nobody else seemed to.
Her hand remained briefly against her chest.
Then she laughed again.
Nzinga watched her.
She caught him looking.
Immediately she smiled.
Not the smile she gave everybody.
The one that said:
I saw you see.
He wanted to ask.

Instead his father finally began telling the story of how he had tried to make an entire family laugh and almost destroyed his marriage before it began.

The house erupted before he reached the middle.
Nzinga forgot the cough.
For a while.

Outside, the afternoon sun moved slowly across Kongo dia Nlaza.

The fields did not stop.
Food continued cooking.
Children ran between houses.
Someone farther away began playing music.

Lukeni tapped the rhythm against his leg while listening to the story.

Nzinga's mother laughed until she leaned against her husband.

Her husband complained that everyone had remembered the story incorrectly.

Nobody believed him.

And Nzinga sat inside the noise of people who knew one another deeply enough to be merciless and safe at the same time.

Years later he would command armies.

He would judge men whose decisions affected thousands.

Foreigners would write his name in forms he barely recognized and explain his motives to people who had never heard him laugh.

They would call him by another king's name.

Some would call him inconsistent.

Some would say he had accepted one world and then retreated into another.

They would write about what he feared.

What he desired.

What he failed to understand.

But before any of them knew he existed, Nzinga had already begun learning the question that would govern most of his life.

What is a thing when you remove what it calls itself and watch what it does?

That day, however, he was still a boy.

His mother was laughing.

Lukeni was drumming badly on his knees.

His father was losing an argument he had already lost years before.

And nothing in the world seemed more permanent.

Chapter Two — The Stars Do Not Speak

Lukeni was not good at being still during the day.

At night, he could remain in one place for hours.

Nzinga discovered this before he understood why.

They were twelve the first time he woke and found Lukeni missing from the sleeping place they shared during a visit between families. Nzinga assumed at once that Lukeni had gone to steal food.

This was reasonable.

Lukeni had done it before.

Nzinga followed the expected route, found no one near the cooking area, then noticed a shape beyond the nearest compounds.

Lukeni was lying on his back in the grass.

Nzinga approached quietly and kicked the side of his foot.

"You are dead."

Lukeni did not move.

"Good," Nzinga said. "Can I have your things?"

"Which things?"

"You are not dead."

"Then no."

Nzinga lay down beside him.

The sky was enormous.

It always was, but the day gave the eye other work. At night there was no escaping it. Stars spread in different densities, some sharp, some faint, some gathered so tightly they looked like dust thrown across black cloth.

Lukeni lifted one hand.

"That moved."

"Everything moves."

"Not like that."

"Then what moved?"

"The relation."

Nzinga turned his head. "You say words as if they explain themselves."

"I am thinking."

"Think more clearly."

Lukeni ignored him.

"There."

Nzinga followed the line of his finger.

"Which one?"

"Not one. The group."

"I see many groups."

"That one."

"You have pointed at half the sky."

Lukeni sat up in frustration.

"This is why I hate explaining things while I am seeing them."

"Then explain after."

"After I see more things."

"That is your problem."

"No. That is your problem."

Nzinga laughed softly.

Lukeni lay back down.

For a while they watched in silence.

It was not empty silence. Frogs answered one another from low ground. Insects made thinner sounds. Somewhere far enough away to lose its edges, a drum had not quite stopped. A breeze moved over the grass and carried the smell of damp soil, smoke and something flowering at the edge of the cultivated zone.

Nzinga said, "Why do you come here?"

"Because no one is talking."

"I am talking."

"You just arrived."

"You could tell me to go."

Lukeni thought about it. "No."

"Why?"

"You know when to stop."

Nzinga laughed louder than he meant to.

Lukeni turned. "Sometimes."

"Better."

Another silence.

Then Lukeni said, "During the day everything arrives together."

Nzinga waited.

"People. Sounds. What they are saying. What they are not saying. The shape of a thing. Why it is shaped that way. What happens if it changes. What happened before. What might happen after."

He raised his hands, fingers open.

"Then somebody asks me a question and all of it tries to leave at once."

Nzinga understood more than he expected.

"And the stars help?"

"They stay where I put them."

"They move."

"Slowly. Predictably."

"Usually."

Lukeni smiled. "Yes. Usually."

He pointed again.

"I make stories."

"About stars?"

"About relations."

"That word again."

"If I connect them in one order, I remember where they were. If I connect them differently, I remember when."

"That sounds like lying to yourself."

"It works."

"That does not make it true."

"The story does not have to be true. The position does."

Nzinga thought about this.

"So the story is a tool."

Lukeni looked pleased. "Yes."

"Why not just remember the stars?"

"Why not just remember every word anybody ever says?"

"Because nobody can."

"Exactly."

Nzinga glanced sideways.

"You remember almost everything."

"No."

"You do."

"I remember things that attach."

"To what?"

"Other things."

Nzinga groaned.

Lukeni laughed.

Later, one of Lukeni's older relatives found them and did not send them back immediately.

He was Tuti by house, as Lukeni was, and his work depended upon the sky in ways that outsiders often misunderstood. He sat with them and listened to Lukeni describe what he had been tracking.

"What changed?" the man asked.

Lukeni showed him.

"And what does it mean?"

Lukeni began too quickly.

The man raised one finger.

Lukeni stopped.

Breathed.

"It means the measure changed."

"Better. And what does the measure change?"

"Nothing."

The man smiled.

Nzinga looked from one to the other.

Lukeni continued.

"The sky does not make the rain happen because I measured it. It lets us place ourselves in a cycle."

"Which cycle?"

"Several."

"Choose one."

Lukeni frowned, then obeyed.

"Planting."

The older Tuti nodded.

"And if the expected rains do not follow?"

"Then the relation changed."

"Meaning?"

"We look for why."

"Where?"

"Wind. Clouds. Heat. Water. Insects. Plants."

"And?"

"Other observations."

"Good."

Nzinga asked, "Can you know before the farmers?"

The man looked at him.

"Sometimes."

"How long before?"

"Depends on what is changing."

"A season?"

"Sometimes."

"A year?"

"Sometimes."

"Several years?"

The man smiled. "Now you want prophecy."

Nzinga pointed at Lukeni. "People say Tuti predict things."

"People say many things."

"Do they?"

"Predict? Yes. Know the future? No."

"What is the difference?"

The man picked up a small stone and threw it in a shallow arc.

Nzinga watched it land.

"Did you know where it would fall?" the man asked.

"Approximately."

"Were you seeing the future?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Nzinga understood.

"Because I saw what you did."

"And because you have seen thrown stones before."

Lukeni said quietly, "Patterns."

The man nodded.

"Patterns with causes. Never forget the second part."

He looked at Lukeni.

"People will praise you for seeing what they did not. Some will fear you. Some will want you to tell them what happens next so they do not have to think. Never make them dependent on your mouth."

Lukeni's face became serious.

"Why?"

"Because then your usefulness becomes their weakness."

Nzinga remembered the sentence.

The man continued.

"If what you know cannot be examined, repeated, corrected or made useful to someone besides yourself, be careful what you call it."

"Ngunza say things people cannot test," Nzinga said.

"Some things are not tested with the same tools."

"That sounds convenient."

The man laughed.

"It can be. That is why a good ngunza should make you more able to live, not more frightened to live without him."

Lukeni smiled.

"You sound like my mother."

"Your mother is usually right."

"She says that too."

They stayed until the night cooled enough that Nzinga wished he had brought another cloth.

Before they returned, Lukeni pointed to a faint arrangement near the horizon.

"That one is Mavungu."

The older Tuti raised an eyebrow.

"According to whom?"

"Me."

Nzinga laughed.

Lukeni ignored him.

"He is planted there like nginga."

"In the sky?" Nzinga asked.

"No. In the story."

"Good."

Lukeni continued, more confident now because stories were easier for him than explanations.

"Ne Nlaza Mpanzu shapes him, but does not finish him. Yisu works through him. Raw forces. Time. Heat. Water. Loss. Growth. Things that make and unmake. He becomes by living."

Nzinga looked at the stars.

"And then?"

"Kalunga."

"Everyone reaches Kalunga."

"Yes."

"Then the story is short."

Lukeni looked offended.

"You skipped the entire life."

"I was summarizing."

"Badly."

The older Tuti laughed.

Lukeni continued.

"At Kalunga you are transformed. Some say Mpemba. Some say another body. Another experience. Another way of learning."

Nzinga asked, "Which do you believe?"

Lukeni looked back at the sky.

"I do not know."

Nzinga smiled.

"Good."

Lukeni kicked him.

On the walk back, they heard music before they saw the people making it.

Lukeni changed immediately.

The child who could spend an hour trying to force one thought through his mouth suddenly had no difficulty at all when rhythm gave his body somewhere to place the excess.

He moved as he walked.

Not dancing exactly.

Almost.

Nzinga bumped him deliberately.

Lukeni bumped back.

"You are still nzunzu," Nzinga said.

"I am calmer."

"At night."

"That counts."

"During the day you nearly climbed a roof because you saw a bird carrying fiber."

"It was using the wrong fiber."

"For what?"

"Its nest."

"Did the bird ask you?"

"No."

"Then you were interfering in another profession."

Lukeni laughed.

They reached the edge of the houses.

Before separating, Lukeni stopped.

"Nzinga."

"What?"

"If something changes slowly enough, most people call it normal before they notice it changed."

Nzinga waited.

"That is why I like the stars. They help me remember where things were."

"You mean the stars change too."

"Yes."

"Then what remembers them?"

Lukeni grinned.

"Me."

Nzinga shoved him toward his sleeping place.

"Go remember from there."

Years later, people would listen when Lukeni lua Tuti spoke about changes that had not yet become obvious.

Some would call him a diviner.

Others would say the Tuti saw what ordinary people could not.

Nzinga would know better.

Lukeni did not see the future.

He simply noticed how many futures had already begun.

Chapter Three — Dimbu

The first lines of the following chapter. The rest belongs to the book.

Nzinga's father finally told the story because his wife threatened to tell it incorrectly.

"You would exaggerate."

She looked offended. "I would improve the parts you forgot."

"That is called lying."

"Only if the improvements are bad."

Nzinga sat between them with the alert stillness of someone who had finally trapped two adults inside a conversation he had been pursuing for weeks.

Lukeni sat nearby with food he had absolutely not been invited to take and that no one was going to remove from him.

The evening was cool enough that people had gathered close. Nzinga's aunt was there, which meant his father's suffering would have witnesses.

"Start at kanga lupangu," she said.

His father groaned. "Of course you would."

"He needs context."

"He needs sleep."

"I am not tired," Nzinga said.

"You are now."

"That does not work."

His mother smiled. "Tell him."

His father looked around, found no allies, and surrendered.

When he first asked to marry Nzinga's mother, nobody discussed a price.

They discussed him.

That was worse.

You have met Nzingani. His life will not
stay this simple.

He has a mother to love, a friend to challenge, and
an entire world to understand. His choices will
carry a cost no one in this courtyard can yet measure.

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