

Chapter Three

The Hut under the Baobab Tree

I could not resign myself to doing nothing at all. A month later I began to pass closer than usual to the hut, and even linger a bit on my way, much as a girl does when she wants to attract a man's attention. It worked. There came a day when he was sitting in the doorway of his hut, and he crooked a finger at me. It was one single gesture, no part of his body or his face moving at all – only that one finger beckoning – once. But it was firm and obvious enough. I walked slowly towards him. He was immobile till I was a few feet in front of him and bowed my head. 'Nshila,' he said, and motioned me to sit behind him, just inside his hut.

After that nothing. Absolutely nothing for forty minutes with the tension building up inside me. Did I speak to him? Did I cough to gain his attention? Did I run away? Was he even awake? Was he in a trance? Was he communing with the spirits? Then, suddenly, he was pointing and asking, 'Where's he going?' It was Kapepwe, passing down behind the blue gums towards the low creek. 'He's going to spend an hour mending his canoe,' I said. 'He's supposed to be looking after the cattle, but he's sneaking off to the derelict canoe he hopes to repair. He can't get the loan of his father's canoe and he wants one so badly that he's got this secret project. He hopes that nobody else knows about it. I know, but he doesn't know that I know.'

I went to the hut at irregular intervals after that, being careful that nobody saw me. Each time, I now realise, Kwaname was using me as a source of information. How did he see the relationship?

'No, of course not. Not an apprentice!' He would have scorned that idea. 'Who ever heard of a girl being taken on? But she's sharp and she's useful. I really like somebody who has brains

and imagination. And apart from me, she is not scared of anybody. They all like to puff themselves up and show how strong and brave and clever they are, but she sees their failings as well as their strengths. There's no harm in letting her call, and talking to her.'

The relationship developed, as the papers in this country say. It got about that I sometimes visited him, and people eventually got used to it. After all, I was the Chief's daughter, and I was an odd girl anyway, and a girl could never be a danger to anyone, could she? Old Kwaname never used the word 'apprentice', but over the span of two years I picked up far more than an official apprentice might have done. I was smart and I was interested, and I watched and I listened. Probably I learnt more than Kwaname consciously taught me. And I did not make any stupid mistakes like that boy in the tale called 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice'. I never showed off my knowledge, because boastful girls were quickly punished in the tribe. Also, I never wanted to harm anybody. My interest was academic, if you can use that word of a child still at primary school. I simply liked to work out how one thing caused another. I still do.

I was unconsciously deceiving Kwaname about the knowledge I was picking up. Or perhaps I was letting him deceive himself. But he was also deceiving me, and using me. He got lots of useful information through me, and at times he used me to leak his own ideas into the tribe. I frequently had vivid dreams, and Kwaname encouraged me to describe them because he thought they might reveal things from my subconscious. At times he would suggest that the dream had a meaning, and more than once he was right. One dream had included a man lying at the door of a hut screaming. In my dream the man had no identity, but Kwaname said, 'That sounds very much like Nkumbula.' He skilfully wove a story around my dream and had me believing that something nasty was going to happen to Nkumbula. 'Perhaps you should tell somebody about that dream,' he said. 'Nkumbula ought to be warned in some way.'

I did what he suggested. The person I told was Nkomo: harmless enough himself, but he spoke to others and soon the message was everywhere. And if something bad was going to happen to Nkumbula, where was it likely to come from? From the witchdoctor, of course. All over the world a close group like a tribe will have a rumour-mill. Things got exaggerated. Somebody remembered that Nkumbula had been very rude to Kwaname two years ago when the rains were poor. Somebody else had seen Kwaname digging clay from the banks of the old creek. Within two weeks everybody knew that Kwaname had made a clay model of Nkumbula and stuck pins in it. Nkumbula would be seriously ill.

Kwaname had! Nkumbula was! I did not know it at the time and I never faced the full reality till I was in one of those late-night arguments at university where you solve the problems of the world and the universe and everything. Kwaname had practised ‘similarity magic’ in which an event is acted out in ritual play and the corresponding real-life event happens to a living person. It is all psychological, of course. The person being attacked has to know that the attack is coming and has to believe that its success is inevitable. He then gets so worried and upset that he really does fall ill. But he has to know about the attack. If Kwaname had made an image and stuck pins in it and nobody had known what he had done, then Nkumbula would have felt nothing. Kwaname used me to make sure that people knew. There is a perfect parallel with the way government ministers in this country leak rumours to the media in order to manipulate public opinion. I don’t suppose the Rt. Hon. Sir Edward Whotsit, Secretary of State for Whatever, thinks of himself as close kin to old Kwaname in the hut under the baobab tree; but he is so!

You must remember that I had an imperfect understanding of what was going on. I was at school, certainly, but primary school in those days in the remote African bush was not very sophisticated. I learnt to speak English and I learnt to read and write, and I learnt arithmetic and I knew stories from the Christian Bible, but all this was ‘foreign knowledge’ – quite

different from what I absorbed from the tribal environment. In that environment illness and death were no big deal. They were never much of a surprise. They were cause for weeping and wailing, of course, but if they appeared natural then that was the end of it and life went on. So if old Kwaname caused a few deaths I was quite able to tell myself that maybe it was not really he that did it, or that the victim was not much use to the tribe anyway, or that it was an adult matter and if it was serious one of the adults would have taken action.

That's why I can't ever be sure whether Nshila Ileloka, the child, really killed Samuel Shonga. Kwaname was not the most skilled model-maker, and when he made a clay image it really could have been anybody of the appropriate sex. (He usually got that right.) So when Kwaname called to me to put my hand on a knife, then put his hand over mine and united us in skewering a rather ugly male image, I did not resist. As the knife went in I did hear the words 'So pass, Samuel, son of Kotane!' By that time the deed was done. I do know for certain that Samuel Shonga was stabbed to death by his wife three weeks later. Is that when my career started?