

Shungu

By Lloyd Winini

The day Shungu was born was the day his father died. His father Mutiza was the oldest in his family, even though he was not the first born. Mutiza who was named so, because he was fast, would one day lead the clan if it was not for death. The death that took him on the day his son was born.

His mother Kakanaka who was named for her size and beauty, was a short and beautiful girl. She had witnessed fifteen harvests before she was married off to Mutiza. She was lucky he was still young, after all, her older sisters had been married off to much older men. She was excited. She too was to carry out her duty and serve her father, by serving her husband. Her bride price was steep and it was worth it.

Their clans conveniently stumbled upon one another as they were both migrating. Life in the plains south of the lakes was dangerous. There were monsters and predators lurking in the grass and in the mountains. So the two clans spent the dry season together in a brown valley.

After a few months of awkward sex, Kakanaka fell pregnant. And it was at this time that Mutiza and Kakanaka fell in love. Mutiza was a hard man. He was strict and gave no quarter. He led the charge when they went hunting, and he was the fastest in his clan. But when he was home, he was as soft as a cloud. He would lie on the mat with his beloved bride and make love to her. The belly never stopped him. He had begun to understand how her body worked and giving her pleasure pleased him.

Their love was short lived. One night, monsters came to their camp and massacred the clan. However, during the attack his father gave him the only horse they had and instructed him to leave with his wife and unborn child. If Mutiza and his son survived, the family would live on. If he was to have a girl, Mutiza and Kakanaka would keep trying. He heard his father wail as they galloped away.

They found a mountain to take refuge in as the last rains of the season fell. That night, the clouds hid the crescent moon. The cave was warm and moist. The smell of rain and wet fur flooded their noses. Something didn't feel right. They wanted to leave. They had to leave. But Kakanaka's water broke and their child had to be born. As Kakanaka pushed and screamed in the darkness of the cave, a howl or a cry was heard at the entrance.

Mutiza left his wife to push and went to fight the monster. He had an axe blessed by a northern Arab trader. It had apparently belonged to a Jewish prophet from long ago and could float in water. He used it to kill the monster. The monster that injured him. The monster that took his life. He had managed to crawl back to his wife and help her finish delivering their son. It was too dark so he never got to see his son.

Shungu lay lifeless in his mother's arms. She cried because he was not breathing. Mutiza crawled to his lover's side and asked Nyadenga, their God who resided in the sky, to

give breath to his son. Nyadenga granted Mutiza's wish, a life for a life. A life that had not been had, but was possibly destined to do great things. Good or evil, Nyadenga would have to gamble. So, he did. As Mutiza took his last breath Shungu took his first. The baby did not cry but found his mother's tit and drank from it.

A little after giving birth to her child, Kakanaka passed out for days. But her baby did not die. He drank and burped himself for days. He had to learn to be self-sufficient. He had a hard life ahead of him. He knew it.

After days of constant black outs, Kakanaka finally came to. She had to. She had a life in her hands and her husband had given his life to protect it. A cockroach crawled past her. She grabbed it and with crushing grind, popped its unlayed eggs into her mouth. She willed herself to her feet and with the axe that was used to the kill monster. She killed the horse and found nourishment in the horses' eyes.

Shungu was left in the dark cave the day his mother buried his father. She dug a shallow grave and wept, before she collected firewood. The carcass of the monster took her days to move. She used the wood to chop it up and would bury the pieces. This cave was to be her home. Her child's home.

The first time she lit a fire in the cave, Kakanaka noticed something about her baby. Shungu was an albino. But she loved him non the less. The son of Mutiza of the Cheetah totem.

She knew it was going to be a hard life for him. She knew society would have a hard time accepting him. Society hated what was different. Society hated albinos. They had a link to the spirits and some used the bones and blood of albinos to enhance their connection to the elements and the spirits, but never to God.

Kakanaka raised her son in the cave. She named him Shungu not only because she was bitter but because she knew he had to strive. They ate berries and fruits and when they were lucky they ate mice or rabbits. They made traps and Kakanaka taught her son how to use the axe.

To Shungu, the world was small, the cave was safe and everything outside was dangerous. His mother was the law and he came to realise she was wise and was always right. Shungu did not meet another man until he was seven. And until that that point, he had never wondered why he and his mother had different bodies.

The stranger came with the rain. He stumbled into their cave looking for shelter. As he stood at the entrance his small figure blocked the light. At first Kakanaka and Shungu thought that a predator had found them. Monsters never roamed the earth during the day. Never. So it had to be something that wanted to kill them.

He had a spear in one hand, and around his waist were two figures; Shungu knew that one of them was for collecting water. Shungu and his mother had one. The other one was oddly shaped and looked heavy.

Kakanaka held her axe as her boy hid behind her. The stranger noticed the mother and child and tried to communicate his peace but alas, they spoke different dialects. The stranger reluctantly put his spear down. He had realised that the boy's mother hadn't cried for help so he was sure that there was no one else around. So he decided to sit at the entrance just to show that he wasn't a threat.

As he sat down, he released a sack that was hanging on his shoulder. He pulled out something from the sack, and began to eat it. It smelled nice, and Shungu wanted some. The stranger offered, his mother glared but Shungu's mouth was pouring with saliva so he accepted it. The tender guineafowl drumstick was new to Shungu's tongue. He had never tasted salt and this was the best thing he had ever put in his mouth. Kakanaka knew better so she ignored the man's offer. It had been a while since she had smelled something so appetising. She would not be tempted and took her boy deeper into the cave.

She would not sleep that night. Her boy would not sleep as well. They listened to the man sing as he rhythmically beat the other object which he had taken from his side. His song was not sad, his song was not happy. It was neither. His voice though was an instrument of beauty. It played on their souls, and brought them near to tears. It sounded like love, the love that Kakanaka had felt for Mutiza, the love that Kakanaka felt for Shungu and the love that Shungu felt for Kakanaka.

As the morning came, mother and son fell asleep and when they woke up, the man was gone leaving a memory and curiosity in the heart of the young mind.

Years passed and Shungu was becoming a man. He had his father's speed and he had learnt how to use the axe. He was mastering it. He had thrown it at a leopard thirty steps away and had struck it on the forehead. It died on the spot and he wore its skin around his waist. He had become a good hunter, of small animals that is. When his traps failed him, he used his axe. Meat made his mother happy, so he hunted for her.

One afternoon as he returned from a hunt with a baby bock on his shoulders, Shungu heard his mother scream. He ran towards the cave and so five men trying to bind her. She was doing her best to fight them off but she was fighting a losing battle.

He dropped the baby bock as he raised. His heart pounded like it did on the day that he had killed the leopard. He clenched the axe, ready to throw it. He would aim for the big man and fight the others. But one look from Kakanaka, stopped him dead in his tracks.

He remembered what she taught him. Hide and she would sing. He was to listen to her words, and she would instruct him as she sang. So she let the men bind her and began to sing.

“They tied my hands so save me not”
“These five big men will kill me not”
“So follow my heart, for I am bitter”
“So follow our prints, my dear bitter”

For days, Shungu followed her and every night she sang the song. They arrived at a camp. They too were nomads. They followed the rains and during the dry season they went to live near the lakes.

Kakanaka was still beautiful, so the leader of the clan made her his property. Though he had five wives, he spent most of his nights with Kakanaka. Not only was she beautiful, but she was wise. He would always let her wonder to the south of the camp every night so that she could leave a plate of food to the spirits. And this would keep them safe.

But the food was for Shungu. His mother always made sure that her boy was fed. In the mornings, Shungu would look for fruit. He especially liked plums. He liked how their soggy insides were both sweet and sour. He had recently rediscovered his love for them. Unknown to him the plums reminded him of his mother's love.

As a child, his mother was always with him. She took him everywhere when she was hunting or gathering but one day Shungu became very ill. Kakanaka went out to look for food and herbs and she didn't return until the next day. Shungu had thought that his mother had abandoned him. Throughout the day, he tried to keep hope alive and he suspected she had walked a substantial distance to get the herbs she needed but when night came, fear and anxiety cooked up different scenarios in his head. Maybe she had been attacked by wild animals, or maybe she had gotten lost. What if his mother had realised that she didn't love him anymore and had left him here to fend for himself? Maybe that's what mothers do. He barely slept that night. He was in so much pain and the anxiety brought on by his recent abandonment was the salt in the wound. He would never forgive her for this and he would never trust anyone ever again. But the morning brought with it Kakanaka. She limped into the cave; her coat stained with blood. She ground some roots and mixed them with water. Shungu drank and squinted his face to acknowledge the bitterness of the medicine. He almost didn't finish it but his mother made him drink it all. After he drank it all, she gave him a sweet plum to sweeten his mouth and to console his pain.

Years later she told him how she had been attacked by 2 wild dogs which had followed her. They had stalked her and ambushed. She had killed one and fought the other off. She didn't want it to follow her home to her son so she stayed away till the morning.

One day as Shungu picked plums, he heard voices headed his way. It was the women from the tribe that had captured his mother. He had never seen them this close before, in fact he had never seen other women who were not his mother this close. So, he hid just as his mother had instructed him to if he met any strangers. They stopped at the plum trees and started picking plums and eating on the spot.

Shungu observed them. They were interesting beings. He found himself paying particular attention to their breasts, thighs and buttocks. He marvelled at how different their bodies were. He enjoyed looking at their breasts. They came in different sizes and he couldn't figure out which ones he liked more. They all had thick thighs and buttocks like plums. He wondered how they would feel in his hands and suddenly his manhood stiffened.

He was embarrassed. He was embarrassed because he was stiff, he was embarrassed because he was watching the women and he was embarrassed because he had enjoyed it. It was at that moment that he first saw her.

She was taller than he was. She was majestic. Her dark brown skin matched the soil. Her thighs were thick and curved into her buttocks. Her belly though not big was not small. She had enough fat around her waist to support her nearly big breasts and her face was pleasingly symmetrical. Her lips were thick and her eyes were big and round. He felt his heart beat faster and his palms sweat. He heard her laugh and it was the sweetest thing that he'd ever heard.

Shungu had never felt lonely before but today he did. He had never wanted anything that was beyond his reach but today he did. He wanted to know her name, he wanted to make her laugh, and most of all he wanted to touch her. He wanted to touch her with his hands, he wanted to touch her with his lips and he wanted to touch her with his manhood.

His mother had taught him about how his body worked and she had given him lectures on the female body as well. She hoped one day that a beautiful maiden would stumble into their cave, lost and afraid with nowhere to go and they would adopt her. At first, she would be apprehensive. But they would grow on her. They would be kind to her and she would fall in love with Shungu just like the way she had fallen in love with Mutiza. She would be the daughter Kakanaka never had and soon enough, the girl and Shungu would give her grandchildren. That was her fantasy and she always shared it with her son who at that moment was looking at the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. A woman.

The women went down to the river and Shungu followed. He watched from a distance his guilt eating at him. He knew what he was doing was wrong but still did it anyway. He wanted to know her. He wanted to meet her. He was infatuated. He watched the women bathe and then followed them to their fruit gathering duties.

He followed them for weeks, and every time they had the same routine. She was always laughing and smiling even when they teased her. The other women had a particular word for her. It annoyed her and sometimes she would scowl when they used the word. But even then, she was still beautiful.

One day, she didn't come with them. Shungu was hurt but none the less he followed the women in the hope that she would show up.

Unknown to Shungu the women were onto him. They knew they were being stalked but they didn't know by who. Their training had taught them how to track and how to notice that you are prey. Their whole tribe was trained to fight with spears and swords. Swords were expensive so they had more spears than swords. Over the last five harvests their tribe had managed to slaughter three monsters and fight off grain and livestock raiders.

So, a trap was set and Shungu fell into it. It only worked because something unexpected happened. After they swam the women started off for the bushes to collect fruit but a few moments later, one of the young women rushed back to collect her basket.

The spot that the women used to bathe was shallow because of the grey igneous rock formation that started off on the river bed. Next to it was a muddy side of the bed that had lost vegetation because the rock attracted both people and animals. A few paces off the bank was tall grass which quickly merged with short trees. There were a few large trees here and there that were greened by the river.

Shungu, who was hiding in a tree, observed the girl as she picked her basket, suddenly slip and not get back up. Shungu was worried so he climbed down the tree to see if he could help. Something at the back of his mind urged him to go back but he ignored it. As he approached the girl, he heard a laugh and before him, a hyena with its tongue out stared at him and then its potential meal, the girl. He heard another laugh and two more hyenas emerged from the bushes.

The girl who was meant to be the bait realised that the situation had changed, quickly surveyed her surroundings and abruptly sat up. She slowly stood up and looked around. She was surrounded by Shungu and the three hyenas. The hyenas slowly moved towards her about to pounce. The other women might be too late. So, she decided to run.

There was a gap between the hyenas so she tried to exploit it but one of the hyenas quickly saw it and leapt in front of her as she was about to run past it. She was a goner. But just as the hyena's jaws were about to crush her neck an axe fizzed past her ear and struck the hyena's forehead, cracking its skull open.

Those few seconds felt like eternity. She stood there in shock as another hyena ran to her but it was intercepted by Shungu who tackled it to the ground. The third hyena came to its brethren's aid and dragged Shungu by the leg and started pulling him. Shungu reached for the axe stuck in the dead hyena's skull and jostled it off. But before he could swing his axe, a spear struck the hyena that was pulling him. It loosened its group but it didn't let go until another spear hit it. It let go and Shungu got up. The last living hyena was trying to run away but it ran into a sword. Its neck pierced from front to back.

The women had seen him and he would be next so he decided to run. He ran and they followed. Even though he was as fast as his father, the hyena had damaged his leg so he didn't get far. He would have escaped if it wasn't for her. The object of his affections.

He stood there frozen as he watched her kiss another man. In fact they were not just kissing. Their bodies were one and whatever it is that he did to her, made her moan with pleasure. He was angry and jealous and for the first time in his life, he experienced what his name meant. Bitterness. But before they knew it, the women had caught up to him. He was surrounded and apparently so was the object of his affection. She stood up embarrassed. Both her and the young man she was with. The other women scolded her and shamed her. As they all walked towards camp.

When they reached camp the first thing that Shungu saw was his mother. He could see the disappointment in her eyes. Why had he let himself get caught? He was lucky to be alive. And he knew it. Shungu was tied to a tree and the elders would decide his fate that night

around a fire and some hyena meat. Tonight, they would feast on one hyena and then dry the other two and store the meat for winter.

Kakanaka would do everything she could to save her son and if she failed, she would die. He was her life and her only reason for living.

It turned out that the girl Shungu had feelings for. Sekerera, which meant smile was the name given to her because she was always smiling as a child and even in her youth. She was the fourth wife to an old man who only visited her bed once a month so she searched for pleasure elsewhere. But this time she sought pleasure in the arms of the young man who was married to the chief's daughter. The chief's daughter was the girl who Shungu had saved from the hyenas. Maybe that's why he was still alive.

He deduced all this from observing the camp. Everyone was very testy and on edge. Because of age, Sekerera's husband could not give her a thorough beating so he spanked her. He did this conscious of the fact that if she so decided she could rearrange his face and send him to an early grave.

The night came and Shungu was brought before the elders. They discussed his fate in front of everyone because their small community kept no secrets and for the young to learn and understand how decisions were made. This was a good way of imparting knowledge. The elders agreed that Shungu was very brave. Saving one of their own was commendable. But Shungu was like a thief. He lived in the shadows and spied on their women. Moreover, his skin was not the same as their own. Was he born of a monster or was he a curse? Either way, they had couldn't trust him or his presence. He had to die.

Kakanaka stepped up wailing. She confessed that he was her son and that she had been feeding him. She told them their story and convinced them that her son was harmless. He was a good hunter and could contribute to the community. If they killed him, they would kill her. And the chief did not want that.

Shungu was given his freedom and allowed to stay in the camp for that night. After that, he would sleep outside the camp until they knew they could trust him. He would hunt with the men and if he proved himself worthy, they would give him a wife.

That night they feasted on rice and a roasted hyena. They sang and danced around a bonfire and they drank beer. They celebrated life and forgot that it was a full moon. They forgot that during a full moon monsters got excited and got stronger.

That night a monster attacked. Songs of joy turned to screams of terror. Shungu could only watch as the monster tore Kakanaka's head off as she danced with her son. All he could see was red. And then he blacked out.

He opened his eyes and it was morning. He could feel his axe in his hand. Sekerera sat in front of him shaking. There was a bloody sword in front of her. He looked at his axe which was covered in blood. Come to think of it, both him and Sekerera were covered in blood. He winced as he noticed the wound on his stomach which extended all the way up to his neck.

He remembered the night before and how everyone had died. Somehow, they had survived.

"We killed it." Sekerera whispered.

End