

# **DANCE OF EAGLES**

by

*J.S. Holloway*

## DANCE OF EAGLES

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To YL.  
*Full circle.*

## Honours

Rhodesians never die. *Hamba gahle.*

## My Thanks

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... and of course to my family, who continue to love and uphold me in spite of myself; to all my dearest friends, who support me with astonishing loyalty; and to Aslan, who believes in me.

## PRAISE FOR "DANCE OF EAGLES"

*Reminds me of some of the great works of Wilbur Smith. The author interweaves multiple, strong, leading characters and two completely different time frames masterfully. Ranks with some of the best I have reviewed. Romance, adventure, suspense, ancient tribal history and modern day action – this book has it all!*

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*The author pulls no punches. The characters are finely drawn and the story becomes compulsive reading. Great insight into the hearts of people on all sides of the Rhodesian war.*

– Lucy McCarraher, author: *Mr Mikey's Ladies, Blood & Water, Kindred Spirits, The Book of Balanced Living*

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*Held my interest right through to the last page, twisting and turning through the plot, bringing the far-away characters and scenery straight into my London pad. A fantastic read and insight into an ancient people and a war-torn country.*

– 'A book devourer', independent review online



## Chapter 1

*She knew that she was dying; she felt it in her bones, in her bowels, in the blood clotting on her chest, drying dark brown on the dry white sand. The pain of the slashes was different to that of the brutalisation. Her mind tried to analyse the two; to identify the different miseries, separate and give them distinction; but the effort hurt. If she opened her eyes she could see, through a haze, daylight – a backboard to the root-like branches high above, dead blackened bones against grey African skies. Enclosed in this cavern, the hollow centre of an ancient baobab tree that had wrapped its roots and branches close around the huge Matopos rocks, she was completely alone.*

*Rhodesia, 1975*

**B**eneath the spreading thorn trees the water hit the bottom of the pail with a sound like distant rifle fire, the fat droplets colliding, whirling, glistening, jostling, jetting from the tap like the silvery falls of the Phumisela river in full spate. When the bucket was almost full the youth put it aside and thrust his hands instead into the crystal burst, splashing the fine layer of dust from his face, arms, legs, naked feet.

Soon, the rains would come.

The old spigot squealed in protest as he turned it off, twisting hard against its persistent leak. He stood up and looked back toward the mission buildings, the once-white paint peeling now.

He smiled suddenly. Little Chela was climbing out of

her window again before the rising bell was rung, to greet the sun in her own way.

The tiny bronze-black girl, not yet three feet tall, cautiously swung her leg over the crumbling sill and hung there for a precarious breath. The other leg followed, and she dropped to the hard, dry ground where she crouched for a moment, listening.

She turned then, and her face lit up as she saw Mandhla. Silently, duiker-like, she ran to him.

He put the pail down and swung her high, both of them whisper-laughing secretly. When her feet touched the dry grass again she scampered off into the bush. He watched her a moment, beaming his pleasure, then lifted his load again and moved towards the cook-house.

He stopped at the door and stood watching for a moment, his chest swelling. Inside, Nada was preparing the porridge for breakfast, and the yellow light of the sun that fingered its way through the high windows found her thick, glossy hair and sprinkled the tight curls with diamond-dust. She was tall for a girl of sixteen, and well-built, strong and graceful. Her hips were wide and her bottom swelled under the skirt she wore, and as she poured the mealie powder into the huge pot her muscles rippled under the purple-black velvet of her skin.

She pivoted and saw him standing there, his shadow long on the tiled floor. Immediately her curling lashes swept down over her deer-eyes as they dropped from his in respect, and her cheeks glowed red under the ebony. He moved inside and heaved the bucket onto the table for her; it was not a man's job to fetch water, but for Nada ... besides, there would be time enough for her to assume wifely chores once they were married.

The date was already set. The betrothal was itself a year old, and in another year, at the first full moon of the spring season, the mission children would kill a calf for the wedding feast. Mandhla's heart still tumbled under his ribs when he thought of it, and quickly, to hide his unmanly emotion, he poured the water into the porridge and went to replenish the bucket.

He was scrubbing the kitchen floor when John Elliott walked in, his wife following close behind.

“Mandhla, do you know where Chela is?” asked Ruth Elliott. “She’s gone again!”

He dipped his dark head to them. “She went to watch the birds, Mma, by the stream. She will come soon, she is fine.”

She laughed and shook her head despairingly. “No-one will ever tame that wild little spirit!”

John smiled. “Time enough when winter comes; you know how she hates the cold – Mandhla, will you please help me prepare the school books when you’re finished?”

Mandhla lit up, pleased at the new responsibilities he was being assigned. He didn’t look at Nada to see whether she had noticed – he knew she would have. And he had already told her of the Elliotts’ plans to train him as a teacher here at the mission.

“*Ehh, Baba.* Of course, Mr. Elliott.”

The missionary went out. Mandhla watched him speculatively for a moment, then turned to the white woman who had brought him up for fifteen of the eighteen years of his life. “Baba is worried.” He said it flatly, a statement of fact.

She sighed. “Yes, we are worried. Another of our sponsors has left the country. It will be even more difficult – ”

“We have always managed before. Our God provides, always.”

The missionary’s wife looked seriously, assessingly, at him. “You’re absolutely right, Mandhla. Your faith is strong. We must pray about it.”

She walked out, and Mandhla returned to scrubbing the floor.

**A**t breakfast, Chela was still not back. Counting the thirty-three dark heads, Mandhla shook his head and frowned. He clicked his tongue impatiently. She knew she shouldn’t be this late; she’d been told off for it only three weeks ago. Exasperated, he bent back to his plate.

She came in the middle of the first lesson. Ruth Elliott was teaching the younger pupils to read – Dick was giving Spot a new ball. The little ones were more concerned with the bright red ball in their books than with the machinations of the crawling black letters, but the bigger ones were

repeating the sentences in careful unison.

The door creaked open. Mrs. Elliott hesitated, and cast a severe glance toward the round black eyes that stared warily at her. Then, round the edge of the cracked wood, a fat fist appeared, clutching a bunch of wild orange flowers.

The blooms were thrust toward the teacher apologetically. About to speak, Ruth thought better of it, afraid she may laugh. Instead she kept her face stern and gestured for Chela to sit.

The child, thrilled with her easy escape, scuttled to her place and sat, avidly joining in with the older ones as they chanted. Ruth had to turn to look at the blackboard, hoping Chela hadn't seen her shoulders shaking.

**M**andhla was angry with her. "Little sister," he berated her in their native tongue, "Beware! The crocodiles are moving closer as their water dries up in the rivers."

The little girl trembled obediently. The young man, her very own personal god, straightened, glared at her, and went to help Mr. Elliott in the vegetable patch. The chastised child stood for a moment, unsure; then a butterfly bobbed past and her face shone again, her friend's disapproval forgotten.

**F**ive of the older girls, under Ruth's supervision, prepared the supper. Today was special; it was the birthday of Mr. Elliott. They plucked the chickens and peeled the potatoes excitedly, chattering in anticipation of the feast they would have.

Earlier in the afternoon they had been taught to bake – little cakes, the size of small buns, yellow and crumbly and moist. No icing – but then, most of them had never tasted icing anyway, and the cakes in themselves were a rare enough treat. So were the potatoes; sadza, the thick porridge made from mealie-meal and used for any or all meals, was by far the cheapest staple starch food. And the chickens had been fattening for the last three months. Amidst the laughter and babbling the feathers flew, white and brown and grey and speckled.



The men were there almost before Mandhla and John realised it. One moment they were digging a new patch for cabbages, the next the strong smell of unwashed bodies was before them. The heavy rifles were pointed at their stomachs. Slowly the missionary and his pupil straightened up, fear knotting in their guts.

The leader spoke in Ndebele, Mandhla's language. "This is Elliott's Mission. You – " he gestured with his rifle, "you are Elliott."

The missionary nodded carefully, hands raised, wordless. He knew immediately that they must be ZIPRA, the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army; this was their patch. The ever-present fear had finally become reality.

The leader spat in the general direction of the white man's feet, then turned his eyes on the youth. "And you?"

Mandhla could hardly speak. He felt himself sweating, but with a new kind of sweat; not that of the work he had been doing. "I am Mandhla Ndhlovu."

The big man laughed, pleased. "Mandhla – the Powerful One. That is good; you will need much power, very soon."

Mandhla moved to speak, but thought better of it. The man gestured again with the weapon he held for them to lead the group to the main buildings. With Mandhla at the end of his Russian-made AK rifle, the leader spoke again to John Elliott.

"You! Assemble all the people here. Now!"

Dutifully, they assembled. The littlest ones were curious at this change in their routine, and stared at the strange men with their funny-looking sticks. The older ones trembled, and some of the girls cried, which frightened the toddlers. Nada pulled them against her, hiding their faces in her dress to quiet them. She stared fixedly, wide-eyed, at Mandhla, as if by seeing only him the rest would all disappear.

John and Ruth Elliott stood with Mandhla, their heads high, facing the intruders, whose cold eyes roved continually over the children, calculating, assessing, deciding.

Suddenly the leader's arm shot into the air, fist to the sky, and immediately his the other three men, who had still not spoken yet, followed suit. "Amaaaaaaandhla!"

The sudden black power salute startled two of the toddlers into crying, and Nada, holding them, shushing them, began to shake.

“Freedom!” The men raised their heavy weapons above their heads with both hands and cheered, and the little ones cried more loudly.

The leader finally addressed the huddled group, in Sindebele. “We are ZIPRA. We come to lead you to freedom, to where there will be no more oppression by these – ” he spat again, “Boers!”

The older children and teens glanced uneasily at each other and shuffled their feet, avoiding the eyes of their white ‘parents’.

“Who among you is the eldest?” His glance went to Mandhla. “You?” He motioned for the boy to step forward. “You will come with us. You, you, you,” he said, indicating the older, fitter-looking children, until twenty had been selected. They were moved into a group, where they clustered together, afraid. The youngest was twelve-year-old Mali, a mischievous imp of a child who was forever playing tricks on the missionaries.

The remaining fifteen children, their ages ranging from two to ten, including little Chela, were lined up against the dirty white wall of the mission station. The ZIPRA leader surveyed them critically, looking particularly at ten-year-old Benjamin. The child’s small eyes flamed; he was fascinated by the strangely-garbed men before him, their olive-green uniforms filthy and worn.

“You!” Benjamin leapt to attention, smiling brilliantly. “Who are we?”

“The men who will give us our freedom from the white rule – who will give us our country back!” The answer was prompt and firm, and Mandhla looked in astonishment at the little boy. The ZIPRA soldiers laughed delightedly. One of them spoke.

“Let him come. He will be entertaining on the journey.”

The commander grunted, still grinning. Abruptly his face changed and he spoke harshly. “He will hinder our walk. He is too small. Kill them.”

Startled, Mandhla stepped forward involuntarily as Chela cried out in fright. The leader turned and looked at

him coldly, then swung back to Chela. He gestured for her to step forward, then for Mandhla to come forward, too.

Terrified, shivering, Chela had to be dragged from the ranks of her peers by one of the terrorists. The commander stared deep into Mandhla's horrified eyes. Then he handed him his own rifle. He pointed at the child who was still holding Mandhla mesmerized.

"You! Kill her." The other rifles were turned threateningly on Mandhla. He hesitated, his bowels liquid, then thrust the weapon back at the officer.

"Aiiieewah! No!"

The man calmly pointed at Ruth Elliott. Grinning, one of his followers pulled her forward and pushed her into a kneeling position. When her husband tried to intervene he was roughly smashed in the chest with the butt of an AK. Gasping, he fell to the ground, his cheek grazing on the hard dirt. The leader turned back to Mandhla and again gave him the rifle.

"The child – or the woman, and then the man, and then all of them."

Mandhla felt the sweat running in rivers down his body; he was wet with sweat, and he smelt his own fear. He looked at Nada; her eyes were huger and blacker than he had ever seen them, and her head moved from side to side, as if to deny to herself what was happening. He looked at the Elliots, parents to him for almost as long as he could remember; their faces white, terrified, yet a message there in John Elliot's defiant eyes, a slight shake of the head, *No!*

The youth looked back at Chela's eyes – pools of fear.

Chela ... or all of them.

Chela, then. As if hypnotised, dreamily, slowly, he pointed the rifle at the sobbing child.

Then he realised he didn't know what to do with the it; it was all he could do to hold the heavy gun level. He looked helplessly at the weapon, and the commander indicated the trigger, placing his finger on it.

Mandhla looked at the tiny, terrorised girl. Her eyes stared at him, not believing, not understanding.

As he pulled the trigger he wasn't sure which of them screamed; or perhaps it was all of them at once.

The rifle kicked him into the dirt. The unexpected power

behind the shot had surprised him; the men laughed uproariously, as he sprawled in the dust. Shaking, he picked himself up and saw what had once been Chela; little Chela who had gone to greet the sun each day, and to watch the birds.

The other children were weeping, looking away, some screaming, some sobbing, some wailing, but Nada was still staring at him. Her skin was grey, the colour of the putty he had used to replace the dormitory window last week, her eyes told him she no longer knew who he was.

Ruth Elliott keened a prayer; her husband tried to stand and was knocked to the ground again, stunned. The officer, grinning still, gestured at the guerilla with the woman at his feet. As Mandhla watched, a burst of automatic fire ripped her apart.

When they were all dead except for the selected group, the march began.

The fly rested its shiny blue-green bottom and began to salivate onto the blood, starting the digestive process before the food entered its stomach. The black bristles on its legs scraped on the dried brown clots as it moved lazily forward, sucking and spitting and sucking, over the ragged skin and the dull white bone protruding from it.

Peter Kennedy watched the fly dispassionately for a moment, listening to the newest of his men retch in the bush behind them. How long, he wondered, how long since he had done that?

His gaze rose to the dirty white walls, caked with red-brown dust and splattered with blood. Elliott's Mission. He looked down again at the fat, glistening fly. Elliott's wife. His eyes travelled further. Elliott. And fifteen black kids, none of them yet in their teens.

The same pattern as all the other mission attacks. A small group of buildings surrounded by bush, at the end of a very long dirt road and twenty miles from the nearest outpost. Close enough to the Rhodesian border for a quick strike-and-retreat; smash-and-grab in human trade – and lives. Smashed lives; smashed bodies, like those scattered around him now; black children, black bodies, black killers. Their own people. Maybe even their own clan, their

own kin. But the blood ran the same deep red, from the Elliotts and their young charges alike. Maybe the terrorists were the ones who were right; maybe skin colour, tribe, affinity, didn't matter in a killing spree; all that mattered was the killing itself.

He shook himself. "All right boys, we're here to track. Let's track. Wright, you lead."

He looked at the white face of the latest recruit; the boy was shaking but trying bravely to ignore it. He was not, Peter noted wryly, looking at the bodies.

"Beridges, follow Wright. If you don't agree with him, speak. Let's get this right."

Beridges nodded miserably and took his place behind Wright. He knew his commander was trying to make up for the shame, and briefly wondered why. The man was a paradox; harsh and pushing his men to their limits the one moment, compassionate the next. He shook his head slightly, tasting the acrid vomit in the corners under his tongue, and spat into the bush.

The other six men fell into formation and the tracking began. It wasn't too difficult; twenty-four people moving fast hardly merited the skills of a tracking force such as the Sparrowhawks, but the Elliotts had been friends of someone with a lot of influence – someone who had been inflamed enough to demand that the best unit available be put on the job, and influential enough to get it.

Now and then Wright or Beridges (good lad that, in spite of his inexperience) warned of mines that had been placed to deter follow-up operations. Systematically they worked their way through, but Peter was frustrated. He knew that they were not keeping pace with the fleeing children and their captors.

Strangely, although the terrorists were taking the time to lay anti-personnel mines (and a few Claymores for good measure), they were not taking the time to attempt to cover either their tracks or their destination – the Botswana border. The children would have to rest and that would hinder them, but Peter assumed that those were the periods when the laying of the explosives took place.

He straightened suddenly and called his men's attention to himself. They bunched and he spoke quietly to them.

“We’re cutting a right angle that way,” pointing, “and when we’re far enough over, we’re going to move in the direction they’ve been holding. Wright, take the left flank with Grant; that’s the side we’ll keep them on. And watch out for ... well, everything,” he concluded lamely, knowing that Wright and Grant were the best men he had and that they knew precisely what to watch out for.

They began to move silently to their right, and their pace quickened. When they were close to the border, Peter knew they must have made better progress than the terrorist force with their burden of children. He had taken a risk but he hoped the gamble had paid off. They began to move left again.

**E**ven with the good time they had made, they did not have time to set up the ambush before the group was in their midst. Confused, both sides opened fire at first sight, but Peter’s keenly trained men immediately disciplined their shock. Dropping onto their stomachs, they tried to sort out how many there were, but it was hard in the thick bush. The children were screaming and although they, too, had lain down, it was difficult to assess where each was, and which movement was that of the enemy and which that of a captive.

After a minute of panicky firing, mostly AKs, both sides stopped and there was an uncanny silence. The children had quietened, but Peter could smell their fear and feel their tension. He waited, and his men waited.

A head lifted slowly from behind a bush. It was the boy Peter had noticed first; the boy who had pushed the children nearest to him to the ground when the shooting had started. Probably the oldest there, he decided. He wondered what side the boy was on, whether he was with the terrorists willingly, or a reluctant prisoner.

Then the strain snapped something in one of the children, a girl of about seventeen. She leapt up, wailing in Ndebele.

Instantly the firing began again. Peter was never sure who fired first, but he did know that the girl was killed by bullets from one of his own men. At a guess, young Beridges.

He was surprised at the tenacity of the terrorists; usually they avoided such confrontations with security forces, breaking ranks and running, each man for himself. The fact that these men were sticking to their guns, as it were – he allowed himself a humourless smile – intrigued him.

And then he found out why. From nowhere – no, from behind the Sparrowhawks, from the Botswana direction – a new attack was launched, and suddenly the trackers were caught between two groups of ZIPRA forces. As they had been trained, half his men turned to face the new onslaught while the other half remained in their positions, but Peter realised it was hopeless.

He had to make a fast decision. His highly-trained men were, when it came down to it, more important than the children; to sacrifice a vital stick of fighting men uselessly was stupid and, at this stage of the war (in a sickeningly cold but necessary calculation), uneconomical. He and his men were necessary to the rest of Rhodesia.

He signalled them to pull out.

Beridges was missing. Peter hoped he was dead and not injured, for his own sake. Bitterly he berated himself for not protecting their rear. They all did; yet they also knew that their situation had been one in a million, unprecedented to their knowledge. An uncanny coincidence.

There is no room in war for error. Beridges had paid for his commander's mistake. Peter Kennedy filed the knowledge in his private file, the one at the very back of the cabinet in his mind. And then he set about getting his men back to base, from where he would order a retrieval of Beridge's body.

He really should think about taking a holiday.



## Chapter 2

*She wondered why she was still conscious, her mind still wandering, still fighting against the pain, the haze. The ancient amulet was like a vice on her arm, coiling cold above her elbow, the serpent's head nestling flat against her flesh, blood spatter blinding one eye. Words, a tune: "... these are the times when I know how alone one can be, and I yearn to go once again, back to my home down in ..." She could hear her father's voice, singing the Belafonte ballad, but she couldn't remember where home was.*

### Tsimbaboue, 1352

**T**he plump, dusty fingers reached out carefully and lifted the horny black beetle from the ball it was rolling. The dung was tight-packed and fibrous, a dry bunch three times the size of the persistent insect; the child set him down a foot away from his prize and watched him hunt frantically for a moment before he latched his clawed feet into the yellow manure again, pushing and clinging, flipping over as the ball rolled, now under it, now over it, in constant motion.

The child laughed with delight, her milky teeth glistening wetly. "Now you may go, Beetle, and take your food to your wife who will scold you if you're too late. You must hurry!"

She laughed again as the beetle rolled the ball against a rock, re-orientated himself, and began his homeward battle once more.

"Xalise! I've been looking for you. Help me to fetch water - we're late!"



The child looked up at her elder sister, then down at the pan in the girl's hand. She pointed to the beetle. "He'll be late too, and his wife will scold him."

"Not as much as the Priest will scold me if I'm late! Come, Xalise, you know that today's not like other days."

Obedient, the child stood and took the proffered container. "Tcana, what will they do to you ... up there?" Fearfully she looked towards the Hill, and quickly away again.

"I don't know, little sister. That's why I'm going there - to find out." Tcana turned and led the way swiftly down the path to the spring, where the water welled up clear and cold from inside the ground.

Xalise followed more slowly. She was afraid for her sister - and for herself; in eight years she, too, must go up the Hill.

She washed carefully, meticulously. Her mother helped; she was the only one permitted to do so, and it was the last assistance she would ever give her daughter with her toilet. Knowing this, Lila was slow, and Tcana became impatient.

"Mai, I'm late already. We must hurry!"

Her mother moved more quickly, drying Tcana with soft suede, and rubbing the calf-fat in gently to make the purple-black skin smooth and shiny. She understood her daughter, and knew she was afraid. When Tcana feared, she became impatient to find out what it was that frightened her, to face up to it, conquer it.

"There." Lila straightened and stood back.

Tcana's body gleamed in the last rays of the sun that filtered through the rough cloth at the windows; even her eyebrows were plastered flat against her forehead, like spiders in the rain.

The mother looked longingly at her child. She recognised suddenly that her daughter was beautiful - when had she become so? The tiny, chubby, dirty-faced, laughing urchin - when had she become a graceful buck?

Lila sighed, deftly slipping the white cotton robe over Tcana's head and adjusting it to fall easily to the floor; in places it clung damply to the calf-fat. Cloth was expensive; the weaving looms were big and ungainly, the weaving itself tedious and time-consuming. Thus, woven cotton was prized in a fashion

not unlike cattle. This traditional initiation gown was planned for from the moment a girl was born.

She lifted the hood over Tcana's head and hesitated. Their eyes met, Tcana's apprehensive and excited, her mother's pained. She dropped her fingers to touch the girl's cheek, stroking the line of the dove's eyes, and deliberately smiled to ease the worry lines on her forehead.

"Remember, you must not speak, nor cry out, whatever happens. Whatever happens. Speak only when spoken to, until your hood is removed."

Tcana nodded seriously. They had gone over this a thousand times - ten thousand. It was all her mother was permitted to tell her, and it was not enough, but Tcana knew it had to suffice. And it was this inadequacy that made Lila repeat the warning so often; there was nothing else she could say.

They both looked toward the Hill as the wailing began suddenly. It was the first wail, a high-pitched, thin, keening note, and as it died away the mother quickly slid the hood over her daughter's head. They turned and walked to the other room, where Tcana's father was waiting.

Roro looked through her, and not at her, but Tcana knew he saw her - or saw the white shape she had become. *He's already put me from his mind*, she thought. All that showed were her hands, her bare feet, and her eyes through the slits in the hood.

She kept her face averted as he recited to Muali, the creator:

*Muali, great king, here is my seed.*

*Muali, here is your seed.*

*Take our seed and make it anew.*

*Take your seed.*

Then he turned his back on her, and Tcana walked to the doorway of the hut. She looked briefly at Xalise, huddled in a corner, frightened, weeping; at her mother, anxious, fretful, loving. She smiled at them, to encourage them, but they could not see through the hood. She looked outside again. The sun was almost gone and the only figures she saw were white shapes. No other was allowed in the streets now, until dawn. She saw a ghost pass quickly towards the meeting-place and wondered

briefly if it could be Niswe, her friend since babyhood.

The wail came again, a mournful echo across the valley. Tcana softly touched the red clay wall of the hut, wistful. She would never live here again. When she came back, her father would have built a smaller one, beside his own, for her to possess until she married.

Breathing deeply, she stepped out into the gathering dusk. As she did so, she heard her mother begin to weep for the loss of her child.

**T**here must have been at least a hundred at the meeting place, standing still and silent, waiting. Tcana joined them, eyes cast down; they must not recognise each other. It was only a few minutes before the third wail was heard, and as it died away a Priest appeared in their midst. Tcana didn't see where he came from and none of them had heard him approach, but though some jumped, none cried out. He looked them over carefully, then turned, heading toward the Hill. In silence, the white-robed girls followed him, falling into single-file.

When they reached the steps that led to the top of the bouldered cliff, the Priest turned and surveyed them, as if assessing them. Which was ridiculous, thought Tcana, since he couldn't tell who was who. Could he? Hurriedly, she lowered her eyes again as his glance fell on her; she felt him look long and hard before he turned again to lead them into the passageway and up the stone steps. Here there was only room for them to walk one after the other; perhaps, had they met someone coming down, if they had flattened themselves against the rocky walls, they may have been able to pass. The way was steep, and before long Tcana could hear other girls breathing heavily - especially the heavy one labouring in front of her. Oddly, the climb didn't bother Tcana. The excitement was too great.

They were there, suddenly. They poured into an open space beneath the great walls that hid the Hill from sight of those in the Valley. Looking around as they assembled, Tcana saw twelve or fourteen dwellings built in the arena. At the doorway of each stood a Priest. They were all dressed alike, in long white robes that left one shoulder bare and fell to the ground, held in place by a wide leather belt at the waist. The robes were split up

either side to mid-thigh, and the Priests wore leather thongs around each ankle, symbolically joined by a long chain fashioned from more leather, to signify their servitude to Muali. At their throats were copper necklets, from which hung tiny soapstone representations of Muali - the eagle, squatting, watchful.

Tcana suddenly realised that she was staring, and that they were staring back. Uncomfortably, she looked down at her feet.

When no more came from the narrow passageway, they moved on again, but this time the other Priests fell in behind the initiates. Although some of the girls were panting heavily, none spoke. Tcana silently congratulated them.

The procession wound its way between boulders and passages until, abruptly, it stopped in another open area. Here there were no dwellings, but an abundance of monoliths - pillars of stone that rose vertically from stone platforms, some topped with Muali's squatting form, others with patterns carved into the grey rock.

The girls gazed around them, awestruck, and for a few minutes nothing happened. Then suddenly there was movement at the top of the protruding rock that stood out above them, forming a balcony. Another Priest stood there - Tcana knew he was a Priest, because he was dressed like the others, but this man wore a mask fashioned in imitation of Muali, moulded from thick calf-skin and decorated with the green soapstone used for so many of Muali's images. He carried a long, carved stick, headed again with the eagle.

He raised the stick against the thickening light and spoke, his voice muffled by the mask, and the sound quivered in Tcana's spine.

"It is your time. Thus far, it is good. But we are a strong people, amaTsimbaboue, the People of the House of God. If any one of you weakens, you will no longer bear that honour and your death rites will be performed without hesitation. You will ask no questions. You will speak only when given permission. You will make no sound, lest your weakness betray you. Muali sees and hears all.

"You will remain here for two weeks, and at the end you will leave us, no longer children, but women of Tsimbaboue. Be worthy of yourselves. Be worthy of your mothers and your

fathers. Be silent, be respectful, be dignified. You are in Tsimbabwe - the House of God.”

The High Priest was gone as quickly as he had appeared. The girls were led away to their sleeping quarters.

The shuttered, blind rocks stood sentinel in the purple-black night, guarding the plains below. Now and then the cool breeze shifted the grasses that stretched and stretched away from the feet of the kopjies. Somewhere an owl slid through the darkness and a mouse cried out in fear, its life cut suddenly short.

On her hard mud bed, Tcana heard.

For three days they ate nothing, meditating, drinking water three times daily. No-one spoke to them and they spoke to no-one. They only saw the Priests who brought the water to their chamber, and were only allowed out to relieve themselves - and even then, they were accompanied by a Priest.

It really wasn't that bad, reflected Tcana. Not after the fear.

Then, just as they had begun to relax in their fast, they were fetched. It was before dawn, and the grey morning chill clung to them; they were taken to a washing area and told to cleanse themselves. The Priests turned their backs, but did not leave them. Afterwards they were led to a great room draped with cloths that had chevron patterns at the hems, and made to sit in two long lines along the walls, facing each other. Here, too, were the eagles, carved into the dagga clay or sitting regally on poles or altars.

The High Priest was waiting for them, and with him another man. This one wore a dark red robe, patterned with brown at the hem, and carried sharp blades in his hands. The High Priest sat on the mud throne at the top of the long room, watching as the red-robed man walked silently between the two lines of initiates.

He moved slowly, staring hard at each girl as though he could see through the cotton hoods that covered their heads. Though her eyes were cast down, Tcana felt him examine her and pass on. He went to the end of the room and then came back again to the top, where he stood and looked them over imperiously. Tcana shivered under his gaze, apprehensive. He nodded, and

two Priests lifted the two girls at the head of the lines, gripping their elbows roughly and making them stand. Tcana, twenty-first in line, trembled for them.

They disappeared through a door Tcana had not noticed before, and after a few moments a scream split the hush in the room. The girls jumped, and one cried out. Instantly she was pulled from the ranks and taken away. Tcana bit her lip, and waited.

Several others screamed before it was Tcana's turn. With the girl opposite her, she walked into the anteroom, praying earnestly to Muali that she would make no sound. The room smelt faintly of something ... iron? She was made to lie on a raised mud couch. The lighting was dim, but when she felt the wetness beneath her bottom she instinctively knew it was blood.

Her robe was pulled roughly up to her waist and her legs spread-eagled; the Priests chanted in low voices, praying, and she heard Muali's name over and over, inside her head and out. They held her, one at her knees, the other at her shoulders. She saw the stranger in the red robe bend over her, and suddenly knew why he did not wear white. Hands pressed deeply into her thighs, creating a dulling pain, so that when the blade first touched her she hardly realised it. Then she almost screamed, and thought she would faint. But the knife was sharp, and the small foreskin at her clitoris came away easily.

Just when she thought she could bear it no longer, a cool balm was applied and the pain went, almost immediately. Her head swam as she was helped to stand, and a padding of cloth was tied around her waist and looped between her legs, spread liberally with the balm. She could not see, though her eyes were open; she felt a mug pushed against her ravaged lips and teeth, and she drank deeply.

The liquid was warm and sickly sweet, honey with spices and ... something else. She knew she was being led away; knew her legs were walking; she felt nothing but a cushion of feathers all around her. Muali's feathers, she thought, and almost giggled at her irreverence - but remembered in time.

I did not scream. Thank you, Muali.

Her dreams were restless, and seemed to go on forever. She saw the Priests, and the One in Red, and the High Priest wearing Muali's mask; their faces came and went, purple and fuzzy, and sometimes there was music. Sometimes she dreamed of the screams from the anteroom, and she dreamed of girls she had grown with and played with and learned with, but they were in a place she could not reach; she could not touch them ... somehow, she did not dream of Niswe, and vaguely tried to, but nothing came except the High Priest and the One in Red. And she dreamed often of the sweet drink she had taken before she slept, the haunting taste of something that eluded her ... over and over she dreamed of the drink.

When she awoke it was dawn again. She sat up groggily, her head thick, her teeth and tongue furry. She was on her mud couch in the sleeping chamber. The padding between her legs was clean - the Priests must have changed the dressing while she slept. Looking around at the other beds, she realised that a third of their number was no longer there. She remembered the screams, and shrunk inside her belly.

She was the only one awake, and as she sat up a Priest moved swiftly toward her between the other beds. He knelt beside her and in the morning light she thought she saw, briefly, a kind of pity in his eyes. Then it was gone, and he pushed aside the cloth of the hood and held a mug of clear water to her lips. She drank and drank - how thirsty she was! How her head ached!

She smiled gratefully to him when she had finished, then remembered the hood. She inclined her head instead, lowering her eyes, and he moved away. Suddenly she felt the urge to relieve herself, painful in her belly and loins. She rose quietly and went to the doorway, linking her fingers and touching her forehead to the Priest there. He nodded, and followed her to the toilet area, where he turned his back.

She tugged tentatively at the dressing, but it came away easily and the pain was only a sharp sting which increased with the stream she released. It was bearable. Anything, after all, was bearable.

They assembled again in front of the balcony and the High Priest. He looked them over, and for the first time his voice

was gentle. It made Tcana want to cry, and she didn't understand.

"Children of Tsimbaboue, Muali greets you. He welcomes you as women, to be wives and mothers. You have done well. Truly, you are worthy to be called amaTsimbaboue."

The Priests came forward, kneeling at the feet of the girls to remove the ankle bracelets they had worn since birth, each new harvest having two more iron beads added. Twenty six now; thirteen years.

The last two beads were very different to the others. They had been bought by her father from the pale Traders who had come from the north one year past, and had a decoration on them that was strange and had filled Tcana with their strangeness - each bead carried the simple outline of a fish, crossed at its tail. Seeing his daughter drawn to the design, her father had indulged her, and these had become the mark of her thirteenth year.

Now Tcana felt her ankle beads drop away and for a moment wanted to cry out, to beg the Priest to leave them on.

"Women of Tsimbaboue, I salute you. Mothers of the amaTsimbaboue, I greet you."

To Tcana's astonishment, the High Priest went down onto both his knees, crouching, his forehead touching the rock face of the balcony. Instantly, the other Priests around them dropped too, and took up the High Priest's greeting.

Nervously the girls flicked glances at each other, embarrassed.

When the Priests stood once more, the High Priest raised his hands to his mask and lifted the calf-skin from his face. "Know one another," he commanded. And the Priests reached out to help the girls remove their hoods.

As the fresh morning air touched her cheeks, Tcana breathed deeply, thankfully. The initiates were looking desperately at each other, searching for friends; Tcana hunted, too, and at the same moment they saw each other.

"Niswe!"

"Tcana!"

The girls gripped each other's hands, laughing, and there was an air of festivity. The Priests smiled, too, but here and



there some girls tried to hide their dismay that a friend was no longer there. Those who had broken tabu no longer had names; they could never be mentioned again, or acknowledged, either by friends or family. They had never been a part of the amaTsimbaboue; they had never lived.

The High Priest spoke again and the girls fell silent. "Go back to your families, to your new huts. Your two weeks here were well served."

Astounded, the girls looked at each other. Tcana mentally calculated and decided that at the most they had only been there five days - three of fasting, one of drugged unconsciousness, and this one. Then she realised that they could never have healed so well in such a short time. She remembered the dreams, the drinks ... they had been drugged for over a week while their bodies adjusted and repaired; it also accounted for the weakness she had felt on standing.

Silently, the young women, unmasked, with naked ankles and stripped womanhood, made their own way back down the narrow steps. They had brought nothing with them, and were leaving with less.