

The Adventures of Zogi

The Harlem Beast

A T Sonola



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What do you see when all is dark?

What do you hear when all is silent?

What do you say when there is no one to listen?

What do you do when no one is watching?

To my children – Kasope, Mobola, and Tamilore.

Prologue

The Harlem Magical Playground was popularly known and called the ‘HMP’ by the citizens of Harlem.

HMP became so widely known that people came from far and near to play there. It was the place to be, having put the Kingdom of Harlem on the regional map; it gave it an edge over the other regions. The story of how the HMP came to be was more fascinating than the HMP itself. The story had been told repeatedly and people had put their own spin on what happened behind the Hago Gate.

It was a beautiful day at the HMP: it was fun and exciting with a peaceful green surrounding. The palm and casuarina trees shimmered in the sun. Children played in the sand pits with the tall palm trees casting shadows over their heads. Casuarina leaves blew gently in the wind.

The sounds of the swings and children at play echoed in the HMP— stomping, running, and laughing. None of the worries of adults crossed the children’s minds, only how to enjoy the now

and present. The rhythmic clanging of swings went back and forth, and some of the children tried to time their jumps from the swings to the rhythm. Some children were on the swings, while others were having a picnic; it was as normal as it could be. The adults sat reclined on the wooden benches, chatting and occasionally glancing around to keep an eye on the movements of their children, gazing at their innocence and quietly longing for the past.

The creaking and clanging sounds of the swings going back and forth was very soothing for babies who soon fell asleep.

“Come on, Rikoh and Farah, let’s go to the swings,” shouted Nana over the noise at the HMP. Rikoh waved her hand to acknowledge Nana, hopping and pulling Farah towards Nana.

“Zadua, this is your last round on the swing, we need to go home.

I have to run an errand for your father.” “Thank you, Mother, I will be back soon.”

As Zadua headed towards the swings, he noticed, without any warning, that the peaceful atmosphere at HMP had changed. Parents were running around helter-skelter looking frantically for their loved ones while children fell over each other in panic, struggling to find their siblings and parents. He stood gazing at the scene before him in horror as a dark cloud hovering over HMP thickened.

“Zadua, where are you?” shouted Mona, his mother. “We must get out of here this minute,” she continued.

“Tammie and Tommie, come quick, we need to get out of here, and now!” screamed Dammie, running towards the entrance of the HMP.

“But why?” asked Tammie, trying to finish the sandcastle she was building.

“No questions. Come with me this minute, I think we may all be in danger.” Tammie and Tommie jumped to their feet as they heard the word ‘danger’ and began to run, following Dammie towards the entrance of the HMP, without waiting to see the apparent cause of the danger.

“Who has seen my baby?” cried another woman. “She was here...”

Children and adults were screaming; some were crying uncontrollably and pointing frantically towards the direction, north of the HMP.

“Father!” cried Jono, with a sense of urgency. “It’s strange, Father, can’t you see it? It’s a monster...no, a beast...no...a dragon!” he continued.

“I don’t see anything,” replied Toga. “Perhaps we ought to leave now; we have a long way to travel.”

“Turn round, Father, it’s there!” “What is it?” “Just turn around, right behind you.”

Toga turned, very slowly, not knowing what to expect and then he froze after making a full turn. He couldn’t move and instinctively covered his face with his hands. He was so terrified that his knees knocked uncontrollably, and he began to tremble on the spot.

“What’s this thing?” he muttered to himself. “Jono, run!” he screamed. “Run,” he continued frantically, as if regaining consciousness from a recent blackout. But Jono remained on the spot, as if frozen in time; he couldn’t move.

Right in front of Toga was a creature that he was sure had come from hell to punish the citizens of Harlem; he was convinced there was no other valid reason for it.

“Where did it come from?” he shouted, asking no one in particular.

“How did you get here?” he continued, speaking directly to the beast. When Toga tried to run, suddenly, he found that he could not move. Looking at the thing, he was sure he was in a bad dream; it just couldn’t be real. He’d never seen anything like it before.

The terrifying creature was a four-legged, five-armed, winged monstrosity. Its head hung loosely from its thin neck, and when the creature moved, it appeared as if his head moved like a blade of grass which was blown by a gust of wind. On its head were blood-shot eyes and a scratched face that ‘oozed’ yellowish slime. When the creature craved attention or wanted to scare other beings it howled loudly, a howl that could topple an oak tree with its vibrations. This mighty howl also revealed the creature’s fang-like teeth, which could slice through lead with immense ease. This creature was ugly. It was simply impossible to look at. The creature stood in one spot, surveying its prey, as if on purpose – it seemed to want to be seen by all. As if making a warning sound, it flapped its wings and arms, howling, bearing its fang-like teeth. It seemed happy that the peace at the HMP had been destroyed.

Suddenly, Toga and the beast began to move at the same time. The beast lunged at him, and he dodged, barely escaping it; the wings of the beast scraped his hand as he ran sideways.

Without stopping to think, the man ran towards his child, yanked him up, and began to run towards the entrance of the HMP. His run was impeded by his tripping and stumbling on a large stone, partly covered by debris. Trying to avoid a blackout, Toga held on to his consciousness as he hurriedly got to his feet, and without looking back, continued to run, just as the beast made a final attempt to grab him and his son. They had a lucky escape.

“Arh...” Toga exclaimed, breathing out a sigh of relief between his wheezes.

“Why are you all screaming and making so much noise?” shouted Ferado. He had just begun to make his way into the northern part of the HMP, while finishing his sandwich.

Ferado’s voice was so loud it made everyone stop in their tracks. Nobody answered, but people looked at each other suspiciously. Ferado looked embarrassed because he didn’t know his voice could be that loud. But was it his voice? He was sure it wasn’t.

Without warning, those playing at the southern part of the HMP looked up, since Ferado seemed to have drawn their attention to what was going on in the northern part of the HMP, but they couldn’t believe what they saw.

“Mother, did you see the...?” whispered Zadua, as if he feared being heard.

“I didn’t see anything and don’t go around telling tales... You hear me?” replied his mother, Mona. “Remember how you got your father and me into trouble after your involvement a few years ago at the event behind the Hago Gate?”

“Mother,” he said hesitantly, “I saw...it, hmm...a beast, no... dragon; it’s a monster.”

“I repeat; no tales!” shouted Mona.

“I know what I saw, Mother!” insisted Zadua. “No tales; you must listen to me.”

He eventually yielded, “OK Mother, I didn’t see anything.”

“That’s better. Don’t go getting us into any more trouble, not after the last time, you hear me?” instructed Mona.

“Yes, Mother,” said Zadua, knowing he didn’t stand to gain anything by arguing with his mother. “I know what I saw anyway,” he muttered under his breath, so his mother wouldn’t

hear him. *But, Mother is right*, he thought. *It wasn't their place to tell the King, or was it?*

As Zadua and his mother ran to get out of the HMP, they instinctively ducked in shock as the Harlem Beast flew unexpectedly and very low above their heads, carting away a man who was screaming for help. "Someone help me!" he cried. "Stop this thing from taking me away..."

People yelled, some cried, others ran for cover, some ran after the beast, which was flying away with the man. "It's Brek-sit," cried a woman, right beside Mona, who turned to her to ask, "Who is he?"

"He's one of the Elders from the Kingdom of Ekity, where I come from...well... I must say," she continued in a whisper, "nobody will miss him."

"Why is that?" asked Mona.

"It's a long story. The Kingdom of Ekity is currently in turmoil because of his difficult rules, creating hardship for our—"

"The beast, the monster..." shouted Zadua, interrupting their conversation.

Mona, Zadua, and others moved quickly to conceal themselves further, watching helplessly from their hiding place, as they couldn't stop the beast from carting away the man who was crying to be set free.

No one could save him.

The Harlem Beast had made a normal and good day turn into a very bad one for everyone who was at the HMP that day.

No one saw Zogi as he hid behind a metallic frame, partly covered by a gigantic sycamore tree on the west side of the HMP, watching what was happening with interest. His apple had been flashing intermittently, but he had refused to give in to the urge to bring it out.

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This wasn't the first appearance of the beast, and it wasn't the last. Some people saw the beast and others didn't. No one knew when the beast would appear or what provoked it to appear, no one could give an accurate description of what they saw. No two descriptions of the creature were the same.

It seemed like a day some would never forget.

Part One

Mixed Feeling

Chapter 1

Princess Bibaje

King Bantu Banujala IV rushed out of the main area of the palace without shutting the door behind him. He simply needed to get away, and fast. At the same time, the royal maids ran from different directions, leaving their duties temporarily to attend to the matter at hand. Queen Binta ran out of the kitchen area and was right behind the royal maids, sprinting to catch up with them.

While the royal maids and Queen Binta ran towards the Princess' room, King Bantu ran towards his private chambers, afraid.

It was Princess Bibaje Banujala again. She was wailing so loudly it seemed that the piercing noise would bring down the roof of the palace. "Our Princess is at it again," whispered Royal Maid One in a malicious tone.

"You mean our strange Princess?" asked Royal Maid Two. They both burst into laughter before continuing towards the Princess' room. It was important that they were both seen by

Queen Binta to be doing something, even if it was only eye service – they prided themselves as good pretenders if the occasion warranted it.

“Why is my Princess crying?” asked Queen Binta, catching up with them.

Royal Maid One answered, “I don’t know... I checked on her a while ago and she was asleep.”

“You are never to leave her by herself, even when she is sleeping.”

“I am sorry, Your Highness, I had to go and prepare her food...” “Save it, I am not interested. This is not your first time, and I have warned you before about this. If you’re not careful, you will leave this palace.”

“Err... I am sorry, Queen Binta, I only left the Princess for—”

“Enough of your storytelling,” snapped the Queen. “We will sort this out at a later time.”

Queen Binta and the royal maids reached the Princess’ room at about the same time. The Queen pushed open the door and rushed to the Princess’ bedside but was shocked to find the Princess was sleeping.

“Are you sure the noise we heard was from the Princess?” asked Royal Maid Two.

“Was it the Princess? How can we be sure?” added Royal Maid One.

“Why do you ask such questions when we all know it is,” replied Queen Binta.

“We’ve all had to endure this unexplained wailing and howling from the day the Princess was born. She is now five years old and nothing has changed. We appear to be the crazy ones, but we know better,” whispered Royal Maid One to Royal

Maid Two as the Queen moved closer to the Princess and away from them.

The royal maids hurried to stand beside Queen Binta, with Royal Maid One asking, “Your Royal Highness, when you spoke to The Wise One about the Princess, what did he say?”

Queen Binta moved very close to her in anger, wagging her finger right in the royal maid’s face, before screaming at her, “Never are you to ask me any stupid questions about my daughter again. Never, I tell you. Your days in this palace are numbered,” and with that the Queen stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

The two royal maids looked at each other and burst out laughing, with Royal Maid Two saying, “The Queen is becoming as crazy as ‘our Princess’.”

King Bantu rested heavily on the door of his private chamber, as if trying to stop someone from coming in. He had clasped his hands against his ears to block out the noise from the howling Princess but soon realised that he didn’t have to, things had quietened down in the palace. He heaved a sigh of relief, muttering under his breath, “I am better off without this Princess... better off not having a child,” before slowly moving away from the door. He strolled to the window and looked into the fields, thinking back to the past five years. “I blame Zogi and his friends,” the King whispered to himself. Since the episode and the events behind the Hago Gate, it had been a rollercoaster ride of joy and sadness for him. He didn’t know what to think anymore. He was quite sad that the little fools had been disobedient, and in his mind, they got away with it; notwithstanding what anyone else in the Kingdom of Harlem thought.

“The King is very kind,” some had said.

“No, he’s forgiving,” others had responded. Some even felt

that he had lost his touch. But, the simple answer to the event, which was over five years old, was that he hadn't been happy to release Zogi and his cohorts from the dungeon but had released them against his wishes. His hands had been tied – no thanks to The Wise One and the Queen.

The Wise One and Queen Binta had forced him to release them, but one thing was certain in his mind though, the birth of the Princess was connected to whatever had happened behind the Hago Gate. He couldn't deceive himself that it was a coincidence. For him, it was a day he'd been trying to erase from his mind, with no success. How could he when Princess Bibaje was a constant reminder?

“Is the Princess a blessing or a curse?” King Bantu asked himself in the quietness of his room, throwing his hands into the air. “Only time will tell,” he continued. Moving away from the window to his favourite couch, he sat down and rested his head back, continuing with his private thoughts. Strange things had happened since then which he'd been afraid to share with anyone. One day, he had carried the Princess and her eyes had pierced right into his with such intensity that he had been temporarily blinded. With cold sweat breaking out of his forehead, he had almost dropped her but for one of the royal maids, who had caught her right on time. “You are tired, Your Royal Highness,” she had said before taking the Princess out of the room.

The King continued with his private thoughts and on occasion spoke out in whispers, “So help me, how do you tell anyone that your daughter's face changes to that of your grandmothers' – seriously?” How could he tell anyone his daughter's face sometimes took the form of the old woman who had tormented him for so long in life and in his dreams? “OK, it's been a while

since the old woman has appeared to me, but the Princess seems to have taken her place to torment my life,” he continued to speak to himself. He’d always known the identity of the old woman, but there was no way he could tell anyone what had happened. The Wise One also knew, but he had been wise enough to stay out of his business.

“You will not get away with it,” was the voice he’d heard when he was rocking his Princess, shortly after she was born. “What?” he had screamed, thrusting her towards the Queen while struggling not to drop her at the same time. He was certain that the Princess had spoken directly to him.

One day, he had been resting in his private chambers when he saw what looked like a strange creature. He hadn’t waited to work out what it was but ran so fast, with his heart pounding hard against his chest, he banged his head on the wooden door as he struggled to get out. “Ouch!” he had exclaimed, but there was no one to sympathise with him. He, at least, had been saved from any embarrassment.

He never touched the Princess if he could avoid it and stayed away from her as much as possible.

“I notice you don’t play with your daughter as much as you should,” Queen Binta had said to him on one occasion.

“Hmmm...err...” he had muttered, not knowing how to respond. “She is too fragile for me to handle...” he had replied eventually.

“But she is your daughter.”

“Trust me, it will get better...you know...when she gets older,” replied the King, unconvincingly.

He knew Queen Binta had her suspicions, but she played along regardless. King Bantu simply couldn’t tell her the real reason why he avoided the Princess at all costs. What was worse

for him was that he had to pretend everything was fine, even smiling sheepishly at the Princess when all he wanted to do was to run away. Unfortunately for the King, no one else had voiced any of his concerns; but he was sure it wasn't his imagination, or was it? He didn't know. The King had snuck into his daughter's room on a couple of occasions, looking for anything hidden that could explain the Princess' strange behaviour, but he had found nothing. The King had oftentimes lifted and shaken the two pink woven pillows on the Princess' white and pink king-sized bed, as if something could fall out of them. Sometimes the King would open the drawers of the princess' antique oak wood bedside table, throwing out her clothes, looking for any strange object he could associate with the Princess' behaviour, with no luck.

There was nothing he could do with the matching chair and vase of white flowers. He had looked under the couch and found nothing. He usually would not leave the room until he had convinced himself there was nothing hidden in the flower vase – the King would lift the flowers out of the vase to inspect, almost spilling the water in the vase on occasion. There was nothing hidden behind the half-pink and half-white wall and nothing on the laminated wood floor. One day, the King took Paga to the room and asked him to lift the light, brown-coloured rug with Egyptian patterns on it.

“Are you looking for a lost item?” Paga had asked. “Do as I ask and don't ask me stupid questions,” barked the King in response.

Paga lifted the rug and following the King's instructions, partly parted, dusted, and shook the curtains that had the colour of charm pink, but he found nothing. Paga was dismissed from the room while the King continued his search.

The King lifted the portrait picture of Queen Barta from

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the wall, looking behind it for any clues, but had found nothing.

“Who will believe me if I say that my daughter is strange?

Is she? Is it my imagination? Am I going crazy since no one else has complained about her?” The King’s shoulders dropped as he suddenly felt lonely: there was no one to answer his questions.

Chapter 2

Harlem Heroes

Zogi, Loga, Ferado, Zadua, Nana, and Twinkle became heroes in the Kingdom of Harlem and everyone wanted to be friends with them. They were often collectively referred to as the ‘Harlem Heroes’ when the citizens of Harlem recounted the event that had happened behind the Hago Gate a few years ago. Some called the event the ‘Rescue Mission.’

Zogi and Nana were in the kitchen trying to sort out lunch when Nana blurted out to her brother, “I don’t like the attention I get, you know, since the Rescue Mission.” “What do you mean?” asked Zogi.

“Since the rescue mission, you know, all the girls in Harlem have fought each other to be my friend.” “So, what’s the problem?” asked Zogi.

“Well...the other day, Rikoh called Farah a cow, because she couldn’t sit beside me on the bench when we were at the HMP.”

“Really?” asked Zogi, pausing to take in what Nana had said before he responded. “Since when have you involved me in your girly talks? Sort it!” Zogi turned to walk out of the kitchen, looking annoyed. Nana was bewildered; it was obvious to her that Zogi had something on his mind.

“But not my problem anyway...” Nana muttered under her breath, and determined to spoil Zogi’s day, added, “Do you think the Harlem Beast is a consequence of us going behind the Hago Gate?”

Zogi stopped and froze on the spot. He sharply turned around and asked, “Why are you saying this?”

“A girl named Harsha said that’s what people are saying.” “Who is Harsha?”

“I don’t know – she plays with us in the fields when she is visiting her uncle. She is slightly older, about your age, and lives in the Kingdom of Ekity.” “Really?” asked Zogi.

“Yes, and she reminds me of you a little bit.” “How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hmm, I’ll have to see for myself.”

“Well, some people in Harlem have said that the birth of Princess Bibaje is a result of us going behind the Hago Gate.

They think we broke the curse placed on the King.” “Nana, I do have to go, I have no time for your chitchat. Be careful about spreading rumours that could get us into trouble.”

“OK, by the way, Harsha really does remind me of you.” “How do you mean?” snapped Zogi, irritated that Nana was repeating herself.

“I can’t explain it... But when I see her, I see you.”

“Enough of this!” Zogi ordered and left without waiting for her to respond. The trouble was that Zogi had a similar opinion about the Princess and the Harlem Beast, but can a broken curse

have a good *and* bad effect? He didn't know. He made a mental note to create time to meet Harsha.



King Bantu had invited the 'Harlem Heroes' to his palace on a few occasions, but for some reason he couldn't explain, he had found himself drawn to Zogi more than the others. He felt that Zogi resembled him in character when he was at a younger age: defiant, curious, never taking 'no' for an answer. He liked people who were bold and confident with a drive to get what they wanted. He, however, did not let this show. Zogi seemed to be the son he never had. The boy wasn't like his wife, Queen Binta, who had high hopes about a lot of things but never achieved anything because she was too afraid to take the first bold step; Zogi was bold. He tolerated the Harlem Heroes' company and listened to how they recounted the events that happened behind the Hago Gate repeatedly. He saw different expressions on their faces when they talked about 'that day.' Sometimes, he saw fear, happiness, a little frown here and there, and sadness. Sometimes, he saw regret, but the King never interrupted. He knew all about it, how they went behind the Hago Gate, the rescue mission, what they encountered in the Hago Region, the Hago House, the bats, monsters, the bubbling stream, flying trucks – an unbelievable story, but they had the HMP to show for it.

On one occasion, out of curiosity, he couldn't help but ask the ringleader Zogi, "Why did you ever go to the Hago Region in the first place?"

"It was my dream and the conviction I had that the region had hidden treasures."

"How could you have been so sure?" asked the King.

“I wasn’t sure,” Zogi had replied, before continuing, “I took a chance.”

“Didn’t you think about what your disobedience would do to you, your friends, and your family?”

“I did, Your Royal Highness, but sometimes I believed I wasn’t in control of my actions. I was convinced that the children of Harlem would benefit from the treasures, if indeed they were there... So, you see, my dreams and treasures... I had to go.” Zogi had given the King a long response. King Bantu wasn’t convinced. He believed Zogi was working with his enemies in Harlem to ruin his life, he, however, couldn’t prove this. Therefore, the King resolved to keep his eyes on Zogi and his friends to avoid any surprises in the future. Over time, the King had become bored with their story, but he had to indulge them; ‘keep your friends close and your enemies closer,’ was the strategy the King had adopted with them. They didn’t know that he still had a grudge against them. He particularly didn’t know what to feel anymore. He had sworn not to forgive them, even though he deeply believed that his having a child was linked to the events that had happened behind the Hago Gate; he knew it in his soul. His unanswered question was this though: was the Princess really a blessing or a curse? He didn’t know.

Having people around him gave him comfort sometimes, but not today, though. There were too many people in the palace, with too many activities, and he was feeling irritated with the Princess, but who could he tell? *What will it sound like if I say, ‘listen everyone: I sometimes think my daughter is not real.’*

King Bantu drifted back to an awkward time when his wife had found him muttering out loud when he was pretending to play with the baby. “What are you doing, Bantu?” Queen Binta

had asked. “Give me the Princess this minute, do you want to drop her?” she had continued, without waiting for him to answer.

Queen Binta grabbed the Princess from the King without waiting for his response.

The King stood still, muttering, and sweating profusely.

“What is it, Bantu?”

“It’s the Princess,” he said, pointing at her. “What about her?”

“I don’t know... It’s my grandmother... I saw my grandmother...er...mmm... I see my grandmother—”

“So? You told me our daughter looks like your grandmother...” she interrupted, without allowing him to finish his sentence.

“Not in that way.”

“In what way? What do you mean?”

“It’s the old woman I used to see in my dream.”

“Are you saying the old woman and your grandma are the same? You are not making sense and I can’t remember you saying the old woman was your grandmother.” He didn’t respond.

“Well, you won’t understand, please let’s drop this conversation.”

“Is this about The Wise One and the secret he claims you know?” Queen Binta quizzed further.

King Bantu gently walked out of the Princess’ room without answering, his shoulders dropping low.

The King had walked slowly back to his private chambers, muttering to himself, “Why does my daughter frighten me so much?”

The King continued whispering under his breath, “Only I know that the Princess talks to me when no one is watching.”

“You must confess,” she had whispered to him on a particular occasion. He wasn’t dreaming things. It was real. “You killed your grandmother,” Princess Bibaje had whispered on another occasion. This time, the wind had carried the words so quietly that he thought he had imagined it.

The first day he had such an experience felt like yesterday, when he rocked the Princess and was singing to her in their native tongue. He had been tired and so he sat down for a while, holding his baby close to his chest. The baby’s face had changed to that of the old woman in his dream: his grandmother; he couldn’t work out if he was dreaming or if he was in a trance.

He had not dreamt in a long time and had been happy for it. The old woman and him falling off the cliff had become a distant memory, until that particular day. He had almost dropped the Princess before the royal maid ran towards him to rescue the baby. Luckily, the maid had thought he was half asleep and had not suspected the reason for his sloppiness.

The King had not shared this with his wife because he would simply sound stupid and didn’t know who to tell. He had said a prayer to his ancestors, but nothing had changed, and he’d begun to sound stupid to himself.

King Bantu had sent for The Wise One to confide in him. However, his wife had been up and about refusing to give them the privacy they wanted. The Wise One had been sent away, with King Bantu unable to disclose his reason for sending for him.

King Bantu continued to avoid Princess Bibaje as much as possible, to the extent that it became obvious in the palace, leading to ‘palace rumours.’ Some whispered about how the King couldn’t even look at his Princess. King Bantu asked

Paga, who confirmed the rumour, “Most say you find her too fragile to handle.” The King didn’t respond, he simply didn’t

care, and the story worked for him. The recent shriek from the Princess was extraordinary but had become a norm in the palace. The King was certain something was wrong, and he was determined to find out why.

King Bantu had no way of knowing that the events that were to unfold were simply not within his control.

Chapter 3

The Sightings

“Come on, Zogi, let’s go to the HMP before the sunsets,” said Loga, tugging at Zogi’s hand.

“Not today, I don’t feel up to it. What if we go tomorrow?” Zogi suggested.

“We can go on your favourite ride once and return in no time,” implored Loga, still trying to persuade Zogi.

“OK, let’s go.”

Zogi and Loga walked in silence for a while, when, suddenly, they both spoke in unison, “Zadua...”

“Yes, Zadua,” Zogi said. “What about him?”

“Well, have you heard about his recent experience at the HMP?” whispered Loga as he moved closer to Zogi, glancing around him briefly to make sure no one was there to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“Yes,” replied Zogi. “He told me the story as well, but I don’t know what to believe He had said to keep it a secret, so he doesn’t get into trouble with his mother.”

Zogi and Loga soon got to the HMP, and both went their

separate ways to play. Zogi sat on one of the wooden benches, gazing into the distance and taking in the environment.

Truth be told, Zogi had been at the HMP when the beast had attacked the last time around, but he had kept quiet about it, because no one had seen him at the HMP on that day. He was also happy that his name had not been mentioned when the events of the day had been recounted. His apple vibrated every time he visited the HMP to play, which made him think that whatever happened at the HMP was connected to the events behind the Hago Gate. What did the Harlem Beast want? Was he the cause of it? Did he unleash the beast by going behind the Hago Gate and the Hago House?

He had been tensed and on the lookout for danger every time he went to the HMP, because of his apple's reaction; but he had stopped taking any notice of it. Of course, Zogi became worried about the stories and people's sighting of the beast, but it wasn't his problem, or was it?

Zogi remembered seeing Zadua with his mother. He was rushing to meet up with his friend when the chaos had started. He had hidden and waited to observe the details of what was happening before fleeing from the scene. No two people at the HMP that day had given the same account of what had happened. Depending on who was telling you the story, the description of the beast was slightly different.

Zogi hadn't told anyone he had seen the creature before or admitted to anyone that he was there, let alone share what he saw, and this wasn't the first time he had seen the creature. He knowingly listened to the argument about the beast being the imagination of people, meaning that it simply didn't exist. Of course, Zogi knew what Zadua had seen, because he had seen the monster too, or whatever you wanted to call it, more than once.

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He would have to share his sighting of the creature with someone, but at least not now.

After the episode of going behind the Hago Gate, a few years ago, Zogi had been grounded by his parents. However, after a while, his parents lifted all the restrictions placed on him. His parents were sort of happy that he was now ‘friends’ with King Bantu – which they found unusual.

On his first visit to the HMP, Zogi had taken his apple and the apple had started doing crazy stuff all over again: vibrating, glowing, and bursting to get out of his bag. Restraining himself from bringing it out was tough and he barely succeeded, but he succeeded regardless.

When Zogi left the HMP and went to the fields to play the reaction had been the same. With his past experience in mind, the next time he had gone out to play, Zogi left the apple at home to avoid any trouble, and that’s when he’d encountered the beast.

One minute he was playing, the next minute he had looked up and frozen. Coming towards him was this creature. What Zogi saw then had differed slightly from what Zadia saw. At first glance, the creature seemed to have taken the look of the woman who tormented him behind the Hago Gate, back to haunt him. On a closer look, the creature looked different. *The creature had four legs and five arms. It was seven feet tall, with muddy-looking feathers. Its eyes were bloody, and its face looked so scratched that it seemed that yellowish slime was coming out of it. Its head was bald and held gingerly, as if it was going to drop. The beast howled, showing off its fang-like teeth.*

Zogi made a run for it as soon as he saw the beast, but this wasn’t necessary, as the creature didn’t make an attempt to go after Zogi or attack him. As Zogi ran o,” the creature had

howled, “Do you know the secret? Ask your mother and King Bantu.” The creature then flew o.”

When Zogi was running, he didn’t look back, convinced it was his imagination. *It couldn’t have been real, could it? How can a beast tell me that I have a secret?* He thought.

Sightings of the beast were becoming more frequent and Zogi was worried that this was connected to him in a way, even though he didn’t know how.

“Zogi,” shouted Loga as he walked towards Zogi, “it’s time to go.” Twinkle ran towards Zogi, barking and jumping on Zogi, licking his face at the same time. Zogi patted Twinkle’s ears. They left the HMP without seeing the beast.

Chapter 4

The Birthmark

Zogi was in the fields, sitting under an oak tree, deep in thought; he didn't think growing up would be this difficult, never mind that he was only a teenager. He knew he'd changed – maybe just a bit. He was always tired, annoyed, without having the energy to do much. As much as he enjoyed the company of his friends, he was quite happy to be alone and have the green woods to himself. He wasn't sure what to do or who to turn to, but he had become extremely disturbed about what he'd discovered at the palace during his last visit. What had started out as a normal day at the palace for him had turned into a disturbing one.

He remembered vividly. He had been at the palace with his friends on a particularly busy day; the King was attending to his guests while Zogi and his friends played at the reception area of the palace. Things appeared normal, when suddenly, everyone heard a shriek. At first, Zogi and the others didn't know what it was or where the noise was coming from, but they heard one of

the royal maids shouting, “It’s Princess Bibaje!” The shriek and barrage of noise was so loud and unnerving that no one had stopped to think. Everyone jumped up and ran in different directions around the palace. People ran helter-skelter without heading towards a defined destination.

Zogi ran, not sure where he was running to. “Come this way,” Royal Maid One commanded, pulling his hand, as if to get him out of danger, and slowing him down.

“No, she’s not there, come with me, When I last checked, she was in the nursery,” confirmed Royal Maid Two. The titles ‘Royal Maid One’ and ‘Royal Maid Two’ were given to the royal maids most trusted by the Queen at any point in time in the palace. They were assigned to the care of Princess Bibaje in the palace and only if they had their day off were other royal maids asked to look after her.

“Really? I checked on her a few minutes ago and she wasn’t there. I thought she had been moved by the Queen... anyway, hurry.”

“The Princess’ cry upsets the King – why she cries this way baffles me.”

“I agree, it’s...err...unusual.” They continued with their conversation as they hurried to the Princess’ room.

“Well,” she whispered, “I think the family is consulting The Wise One for help. Don’t say I told you, and if you do, I will deny it.”

Zogi continued to follow the maids without thinking, remembering vaguely that he’d been asked to come in a particular direction amid the confusion. He listened to their conversation with interest but was alert at the same time since he didn’t know if they were out of danger yet. He didn’t stop to think until they had entered a room and the maids had stopped. Zogi found himself lingering behind, not certain as to what they

would find; he'd never been to this part of the palace before and indeed not this room. He soon realised that it was Princess Biba-je's room and relaxed a little.

Royal Maid One had rushed to pick up the Princess, while Zogi looked around the room. He instantly fell in love with the colours in the room, wishing that he lived here. The pink wall, the duvet lace, everything was beautiful. He looked at the maids as they fussed over the Princess – they seemed to have forgotten that he was in the room with them.

Royal Maid One wiped o" the beads of sweat from the Princess' forehead, feeling her temperature at the same time.

"The Princess is hot," she explained, looking in the direction of Royal Maid Two, "I must wipe her body."

Royal Maid Two was not particularly bothered, so she looked away, muttering, "Carry on."

Royal Maid One took o" the first layer of the Princess' clothing. It was when the second layer of clothing came o" that Zogi noticed the Princess' birthmark and he gasped. He clasped his open palm over his mouth, muttering, "I must not be heard." He found himself moving forward instinctively, as if drawn by the birthmark, he needed to examine it. "Oh no, this can't be," he said loudly, forgetting for a minute that he wasn't alone. "What can't be?" whispered Royal Maid One. "What is it?" asked Royal Maid Two.

"What have I done wrong?" asked Royal Maid One, turning back to look at Zogi with a raised eyebrow.

"You, what are you doing here?" interjected Royal Maid Two, as if seeing Zogi for the first time and forgetting that they had asked him to come along. Zogi had stood very still, speechless, pointing at the Princess.

"What are you pointing at?"

“Emm...it’s the birthmark,” stammered Zogi. “What about it?”

“Hmm, just that...”

“Don’t worry about it. All children born into the royal family have this birthmark, which can appear on any part of their body,” explained Royal Maid Two.

“Oooh, really, my...” Zogi said, touching his birthmark through his sleeve, but he couldn’t continue. He immediately decided that the royal maid didn’t know what she was talking about. As he summoned the courage to ask more questions, Royal Maid One interrupted him, not wishing to hear anything he had to say.

“I don’t know what you are still doing here, but you may want to get out of here this minute. You don’t want the Queen to find you here.”

“Err...hmm...” Zogi mumbled, looking at the royal maids and the Princess, undecided about what to do. He was thinking about the birthmark as more questions came to his mind.

Royal Maid Two reminded Zogi by saying, “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I’m sorry, but the birthmark—”

“I say get out of here this minute... Just go.”

“Hmmm...” said Zogi, hurrying towards the door in a state of confusion.

Zogi ran out of the room, down the corridor, sneaking out of the area unnoticed, and into the open space and out of the palace. He ran...until he couldn’t run anymore.

He stumbled and fell under the oak tree and clasped his hands on his face, speaking into his palm. “But how can it be? I am ordinary and so are my parents; no one in our family was born into the royal family. So, how come the Princess has the same birthmark as me?” “Can the royal maid be right? Princess

Bibaje and I cannot have the same birthmark, it's impossible; I am not from the royal family. We are not related in any way. I have to ask Mother, there must be an explanation for it. She must tell me what I don't know if there is anything to tell."

Zogi used the trunk of the oak tree to steady himself as he got up to make his way back home. Zogi was confident he would ask his mother, but he wasn't quite sure how to. He recited the different questions in his mind: *Mother, are we from the royal family?* "Hmmm," Zogi muttered to himself, saying,

"I don't think that sounds right." Trying again, he said out loud: *"Mother, is Princess Bibaje my sister?"* Zogi burst into laughter as he thought about the awkwardness of this question. He tried again and continued, *"Mother, how come the Princess and I have the same birthmark? Mother, is it true that only those born into the royal family have my birthmark? Am I royal? A prince?"* Zogi replayed the order of the questions in his mind, knowing that, at least, he must ask one of these questions. He tried to work out the order of his questions, recognising how difficult the conversation would be.

When Zogi got home, he yelled, "Mother!" with a sense of urgency.

His mother responded, saying, "Yes, Son, what is it?" "Why does Princess Bibaje...?" Zogi stopped speaking, as he noticed that his father was at home as well. He had hoped to speak to his mother alone and had not practiced joint questions for his parents, thus Zogi was upset to find his father there. "Father!" exclaimed Zogi, surprised to see him and not willing to complete his question.

"Yes, Son, can we help?"

Changing his strategy very quickly, Zogi said, "I have a question for you."

"And what's this question, my son?" asked Statisch.

“Am I an adopted child?” This wasn’t one of Zogi’s prepared questions, but he didn’t know his father was going to be at home and had to go with the flow of the moment.

Statish and Meena, without thinking, rushed towards Zogi and held on to him tightly. Zogi shrugged them off, feeling embarrassed with the shows of affection from his parents towards him.

“What has King Bantu said?” asked Statish. “What have you heard?” implored Meena. “Son, you know we love you?” asked Statish.

“You haven’t answered my question,” said Zogi, shaking them off and moving slightly away from them. “Are you my biological parents?”

“Well, we were going to tell you, but you know—” “Help... help, please help me!” came a loud voice from outside their home, rapidly interrupting their conversation. “I’m dying.”

Meena and Statish ran towards the door, forgetting for a moment about Zogi and his questions. They were glad of the distraction from Zogi’s questions, which were a bit intense. “It’s Nana, I think she’s in trouble,” they said in unison, rushing outside their home.

“She must have hurt herself...” Meena continued.

“No...” said Zogi, frustrated that Nana had given his parents a way out. “She’s probably seeking attention, as usual. How annoying, raining on my parade this way,” he muttered.

Nana had sprained her ankle from jumping on the stump of the sycamore tree a few yards away; she had bruises on her arms and legs. By the time they had finished examining Nana and cleaning her bruises, they noticed that Zogi was nowhere to be found. Heaving a sigh of relief, they realised that they had a lucky escape, with more time to come up with a convincing story to tell Zogi.

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Zogi had snuck out without being noticed, resting his head against a wall, and staring at the cloudless blue sky with conflicting thoughts about the birthmark and the royal maid's explanation for it. He was certain she was mistaken.

Chapter 5

The Hago House

Zogi soon forgot about the questions he had lined up for his parents, thinking how foolish they were. “It’s good that I didn’t embarrass myself,” he muttered, and continued, “What would have happened if Nana hadn’t interrupted the conversation?” Merely thinking about it made him shudder. He concluded in his mind that there was a logical explanation for it, saying with a whisper, “What does the royal maid know about birthmarks anyway?” He decided to forget about the birthmark, because one thing was certain, his parents were not from the royal family and he was no prince, so the matching birthmark on the Princess was simply a coincidence.

Zogi remembered when he tried to convince his friends to visit the Hago House with him, but they refused.

“Why do you want us to go there?” Zadua had exclaimed in horror.

“Why spoil things with the King?” asked Ferado, adding, “What about the monster?”

“You mean the dragon...?” Asked Zadua. “No, it’s a beast...” teased Zogi.

“Be serious,” Zadua had implored.

“Remember the trouble we brought on our families when we went behind the Hago Gate?” interjected Ferado. Nana didn’t join in the conversation; she couldn’t pretend to share the concerns of others. She was more interested in finding out the state of the Hago House since the Rescue Mission. Loga was frustrated with the siblings for insisting they go back to the Hago House. Without thinking, he blurted out, “I’m not going anyway; it doesn’t matter what you say!”

“It’s just good to look around,” said Zogi, adding, “aren’t you curious to discover whether things have changed in the Hago House?”

“What if we find more treasures?” Zogi continued, laughing at his own joke.

“No!” they all said in unison. “Are you sure?” “No!” they repeated in unison.

“Don’t you want to have a ride in the pots again, and seriously, what if we find more treasures in the Hago House and—?”

“No!” they interrupted, without allowing him to finish his sentence.

“OK, chickens, I will go alone,” Zogi said to them. “I will come with you,” Nana whispered. “No, you can’t,” Zogi responded.

Zogi subsequently went to the Hago Region on a few occasions by himself. He didn’t blame them for not coming along, for obvious reasons. Having the paths outlined in his brain meant there was no getting lost this time. He walked through the paths, the fields, and overgrown bushes. He stood very briefly, staring over the windy forest, remembering all the incredible things that

had happened there. But for some reason, everything looked ordinary. There was no sense of danger in the forest and his apple wasn't beeping any warning signs, so Zogi played with his apple.

He discovered a *hideaway* during one of his visits. After pushing open the Hago Gate, he had been cautious in his approach, expecting to see the bubbling stream, but everywhere looked peaceful. Walking towards the Hago House, he found a dilapidated wooden door a few yards away from the Hago House. On closer inspection, Zogi realised that it looked like a part of the house. He saw that the door was barely hanging with a loose hinge, making the doorknob look as if it were about to fall off. Zogi poked the door with his finger, as if trying to avoid being infected.

As he opened the door to enter the room, soot and grime lifted from the floor, creating a temporary smokescreen between him and the rest of the room. When it cleared, he saw a small decent room hidden at the back of the Hago House, with broken windows. It seemed to him that whoever had previously occupied the room had been well looked after. He wondered why the entrance from the side of the Hago House wasn't visible to the naked eye, unsure why he'd missed it on the few occasions he'd been there. "Did I miss the door, or did it just appear? Was it concealed?" Zogi contemplated.

He saw dirty curtains torn in parts, grime flowing in from the broken window, and was surprised to see that the room looked inviting, despite the dirty nature of it. There was a mahogany bookshelf with dusty scrolls and books. There was a wooden couch with a side table on it and an antique lamp. Zogi moved forward, dusted the couch, and sat on it.

On other occasions he had visited, he had tried to read a scroll, without understanding the contents. On one of his visits

to the place, he was setting back home, when he decided to inspect what was left of the treasure room. As he was walking down the corridor, his apple began to vibrate, and so he left in a hurry without waiting to see if anything strange was lurking about.

On his last visit to his *hideaway room*, he was taking brisk steps towards the Hago House when he slipped. Before he knew what was happening, he was ankle deep in the muck of a swamp, struggling to stay upright and battling with a colony of bats that whined around his face and arms. They had appeared from nowhere. "Help!" he had screamed. "Someone help me..." But his voice had echoed in the forest, with no one to respond.

Suddenly, there was a whoosh of cold air blowing from beneath him. It seemed like bubbling wind; it started from underneath his feet, lifting him up from the muck of the swamp in such a way that he began to twirl in an upward manner with the mud and muck of the swamp forming a twirling circle around him. He had no control over what was happening, and he was only able to thank his apple when he had been thrown out of the swamp. He decided to head back home, but he couldn't keep away from his *hideaway room*. So, Zogi trudged along with his arms and legs feeling heavy from some of the muck and mud still stuck to his body. His vision was blurred, but he was determined to continue. When he entered the room, it felt lonely and empty, but he took careful steps to the window, pulled up the dusty curtains, selected a scroll to read, used some old fabric he found in the oak cupboard to clean himself, and then settled down to read. The scroll dropped from his hands as he fell asleep, tired from his ordeal.

On reflection, visits to the Hago Region had been without incident and he felt it safe to take his friends. He flaunted the existence of the *hideaway room* and swore to others that it was

real; he had dared them to see it for themselves. They still refused; however, Zogi knew it was a matter of time before they would have a change of heart.



One day, Loga, Twinkle, and Zogi went to the fields, playing with the apple; this brought back many memories for Loga; he ended up blurting out, “Let’s go to the Hago House.” “What?” asked Zogi.

“Yes, the Hago Gate, you know ‘what,’” Loga responded. “You mean the old palace in the Hago Region?” asked Zogi, chuckling at the same time and making fun of Loga.

“Yes, that place,” replied Loga with a smile.

Zogi became serious, enquiring, “Why have you changed your mind?”

“I don’t know...” Loga answered.

Zogi tried to reassure him by saying, “Well, there is no longer a pronouncement from the King that no citizen should go there, is there?”

“Um, how do you know?” murmured Loga.

“Have your parents told you not to go?” asked Zogi.

“No!” exclaimed Loga.

“Then that’s it,” concluded Zogi.

“Well, maybe they expect that we won’t go, following on from our last experience and our unpleasant encounter with the King?” Loga stated, not able to convince himself. “Zadua told me on the way to school that he overheard his father discussing with the other royal guards that security around the Hago Region is now very relaxed. Apparently, the King doesn’t care.”

“Err... I have been going there anyway...” Zogi reminded Loga.

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Loga played along, pretending he didn't know about this, "You have? Did anything strange happen?" asked Loga. "Nothing serious," replied Zogi, before finishing, "and I have a new hideaway to show you, there are scrolls and books to read. It means the King doesn't care anymore."

"But what about the monsters we encountered in the Hago House?" asked Loga.

"Well, we had magical help, didn't we?" Zogi asked. "Who says we will not be helped out again?" he added. "Let's speak to the others and see if you can convince them to come." "I will," answered Loga.

"I'll speak to Nana," added Zogi. "Tell them to keep it a secret; there is no need to go mouthing off to people who shouldn't know our business."

"Seems we have a plan, please remember that the apple remains a secret between you, Twinkle, and me," said Zogi, pulling Loga closely to his side to remind him.

They both laughed, throwing a stick at Twinkle as they strolled back home.

Zogi couldn't stop Nana from coming, not with the pressure she had put on him at home. Also, the affection that had grown between her and Loga made it more difficult for him to refuse, so he discussed his plans with Nana, who didn't need much persuasion. "You can bring three of your friends," Zogi had added.

Nana was ecstatic and had been eager to go with him. She couldn't wait to tell her friends. "Who will I bring with me?" she had whispered to herself, realizing that choosing three of her friends would not be easy.

Previously, Nana knew that Zogi was going to the Hago Region without her and begged him to take her with him, but he did not succumb to her plea, saying, "I don't want to have any

responsibility for your safety, not after the last time.” He’d also warned her not to go with any of her friends, threatening to report her to their parents if she disobeyed his instructions.

After a lot of persuasion, Zogi convinced his friends and they all decided on a date. Pongo found out what was going on from Zadia and he asked Zogi and Loga if he could come along. Loga was hesitant in his refusal, contrary to Zogi, who said point-blank to Pongo that he couldn’t come. “Not after what you did on the way to the Rescue Mission five years ago. We will continue to hang out in Puta, but not in the Hago Region. You can go there if you want; however, it won’t be with me.”

Chapter 6

Friends visit Hago Region

They all met up as agreed and began their journey to the Hago Region, and the Hago House, behind the Hago Gate.

Zogi, Loga, Ferado, Zadua, Nana, Rikoh, Farah, Harsha, and Twinkle set off to go to the Hago Region, with Ferado occasionally bringing out different snacks from his bag to eat. Nana remembered being forced to run endless errands for Zogi and Loga for a week in exchange for bringing her friends on the trip to the Hago Region. She did it, knowing her time would come to pay them back.

Harsha lived in the Kingdom of Ekity and was visiting her relative, Uncle Jaja in Harlem for a few days. Nana was happy that she had agreed to come with them, and Zogi was looking forward to meeting her – he couldn't wait to see her again. He'd seen her before in passing but didn't think they looked that much alike in the way Nana had made him believe. Nana had previously tried to arrange a meeting between Zogi and Harsha,

but at the very last minute, Harsha had excused herself, saying to Nana, “I can’t come this time;

I need to run some errands for my uncle.” After they all gathered for their journey to the Hago Region, Zogi walked over to Harsha, saying “Hello, Harsha, my name is Zogi, Nana’s brother.” Walking closer to Harsha, he saw little resemblance to himself and couldn’t help but notice that Nana had exaggerated her description.

But Harsha had averted her eyes before responding with a weak, “Hello...” Her heart was racing – it was as if she’d known Zogi all her life. Harsha put this down to the excitement of visiting the Hago House.

Harsha didn’t understand the fuss about whether to go to the Hago House, but she was happy to be part of the gang. The only problem was this: she had intentionally ‘forgotten’ to mention to Uncle Jaja where she was going and was worried, he would be looking for her if they didn’t get back in time. She secretly hoped they would get back on time.

They walked back towards the familiar path leading to the Hago Region.

All was quiet, the forest looked peaceful: a rustling in the underbrush, a crackling of twigs, animals scurrying away, but nothing alarming happened, and they made it to the region without any problems. Zogi saw birds fly away in alarm but took no notice. Everyone walked on in oblivion, each person in their private thoughts.

Zogi watched as Loga, and Nana walked hand in hand without being conscious of their surroundings. Though it was obvious to everyone that Loga and Nana’s friendship had blossomed after the Rescue Mission, they had denied any such romantic feelings. Loga had been teased by his friends a couple of times about his affection for Nana, which he simply ignored.

Zogi couldn't help but smile at the thought of his best friend being his sister's 'boyfriend'. "I don't mind, though I like Loga – he is a good guy," he had said to no one in particular.

Eventually, they got to the Hago Gate without any major incidents, when suddenly, the apple began to vibrate. Upon arrival at the gate, Twinkle started barking, insistent, urgent, annoying barks, making some members of the group slightly uneasy, but Zogi was unshaken.

He ignored the apple and Twinkle and focused all of his attention on his surroundings, looking for anything unusual or any threats. He needed a sign to tell him to go back, but he couldn't find any.

They stood in front of the vast, aged, and gigantic gate. The oak tree shimmered in the sun, casting a shadow over them. Zogi was proud that he was now taller, even though his new height couldn't match the length of the gate; he was certain that he could never grow as tall or even up to half of the height of the gate.

After seeing nothing, Loga confidently pushed the ageing gate open, without a lot of effort. There was only one thing that was strange: he didn't see any of the strange things to remind him of the Rescue Mission.

Zogi wouldn't tell anyone about his disappointment of not having the opportunity to see the conspicuous bubbling stream with the array of different colours again. Had he imagined the stream or was this strange land setting a trap for them? He hadn't seen it on other occasions he had visited by himself though, so he dismissed the thought that its absence was strange.

"Come on, guys, let's go in," said Zogi, beckoning the others to fall into line and follow him.

"Are you sure we shouldn't go back at this stage?" asked Ferado. "I'm hungry." No one responded to Ferado.

Farah, who had been silent throughout the journey, questioned the group, “What will we do if something bad happens to us?”

They continued to protest but simultaneously continued to move towards the gate, entering and following Zogi. They needed to know what had changed, if anything.

Despite their reluctance, they walked briskly over to Zogi and Loga, now leading the gang, and climbed gingerly over the broken steps to get in.

When they got in, they noticed that the old house was damp and airless. They crept into the room and couldn’t help looking around, as they were very curious, especially Loga. The last time he was here for the Rescue Mission, everything had happened in a rush, which didn’t give him too much time to take anything in. The picture of the old woman was still on the wall. The damp and stagnant smell in the air was still the same. “It’s difficult to see how something like the Harlem Magical Playground can come out of this dilapidated house,” Loga stated to no one in particular.

Ferado looked around briefly, expecting to see the magical pot, and noting that it wasn’t there, he asked, “Where is the pot?”

“Yes, where is the pot that rescued you from the monsters?” echoed both Rikoh and Farah.

“Look, it’s over there,” Loga answered, “at the exact spot we found it the last time.”

They ran and looked at the pot in excitement. “Do you think it will transport us like the last time?” prattled Nana. “I don’t know, let’s try,” responded Zogi as they all tried to scramble in but soon realised that only the smallest of them could fit into it.

Rikoh and Farah couldn’t believe that they missed out on

the adventure and the moving pot. They were disappointed. “Moving pots?” vociferated Rikoh, almost certain that Zogi and the others had lied about their story.

“Let me at least get into the pot, even if that’s all I get to experience,” sighed Farah.

“What about all the corridors you saw?” enquired Rikoh.

“I see only one corridor now,” exclaimed Nana. “We didn’t make it up, there were seven doors leading to seven corridors.” “Really?” Rikoh queried.

“Yes,” Nana snapped, irritated by the endless questions.

“Are you sure you didn’t make up the stories you told us?” Farah goaded.

“Yes, I swear, we saw seven corridors,” Nana repeated.

“So, how come there is only one now?” Rikoh persisted with her questions.

“I don’t know.” Nana whispered, totally fed up with Rikoh.

“Zogi and Loga, do you know why the other corridors have disappeared?” Rikoh blurted out, desperate to know what happened. “No, and I simply don’t care!” Nana screamed in frustration, replying instead of Zogi and Loga.

“But why don’t you care?” insisted Rikoh.

“Err...because it doesn’t matter, just enjoy the moment...” replied Loga.

Reminding them of the main reason of their visit, Zogi said, “If you want to see my *hideaway room*, you have to hurry so we can spend some time reading a few books before we leave.”

Looking determined, Farah replied, “We want to, Zogi, but we must walk down this corridor to find the treasure room...”

They walked down the corridor, which looked narrower than before, and came to a door. Zogi opened the door carefully and they stepped in.

The apple was now vibrating in Zogi’s bag, trying to warn

him of the danger that lurked ahead. The force of the apple's vibration was so much that Zogi blurted out, "We have to get out of here."

"Why?" asked Rikoh, unhappy that they had come this far without any action.

"I don't know, but I sense danger." Zogi said. "You do?" Farah asked. "Yes, let's go, quick!" shouted Zogi, with a sense of urgency. Zogi turned quickly back towards the corridor. Twinkle had started to whimper, as if in pain. "Nana, please ask your friends to move...fast... Run, everyone, run! We're in danger!" shouted Zogi. As they made it to the entrance of the house, they froze as they saw the Harlem Beast blocking their way. They couldn't escape. Nana and her friends ran back into the heart of the house and down the corridor, shouting and crying for help at the same time. Zadua and Ferado ran after the girls. Loga stood behind Zogi, not knowing what to do but certain that he didn't want to leave Zogi alone in case he needed his help.

The apple leapt out of Zogi's hand and turned into a dark cloud of coloured smoke. This soon turned into a smoke ball, hurling itself at the beast and attacking the creature at the same time. The beast realised that it had been trapped by the powerful smoke emanating from the massive ball. It felt dizzy, struggling to stop its massive weight from falling to the ground. The beast tried to swing at Zogi and Loga, but it was too weak, so it flew away. "Come, quick, the coast is clear. Let's get out of here!" screamed Zogi with a sense of urgency in his voice. But there was no answer. Amid the confusion, they had all become separated.

Zogi and Loga ran into the house and down the corridor to look for the rest of the group but only saw Nana, who was crying, with Rikoh and Farah pointing in a particular direction.

“What is it?” asked Zogi, his eyes frantic, searching their faces as he panicked.

“Harsha is missing; we think the beast took her,” cried Rikoh. “Are you sure?” enquired Zogi.

Loga moved closer to them, saying, “The beast was in front of the house, where we were.”

“No!” shrieked Farah, “the old woman in the picture frame in the Hago House took Harsha.”

“How is that possible?” probed Loga.

“I don’t know, she sure looked like her,” hissed Rikoh. “I saw her, she was half in flames!”

“Maybe there are two beasts?” implored Zogi, trying not to get carried away with his imagination. “We have to go, and now!”

“What about Harsha?” asked Loga.

“I don’t know,” snapped Zogi. “What do you want us to do when we can’t find Harsha or the creature?”

“Did her uncle see her going out with you?” asked Loga.

“No, she came to the fields to join us,” murmured Nana. “At least that gives us time to work something out. We must leave now, before someone else gets taken away by this thing...”

“We can’t leave Harsha behind,” cried Nana. “We must find her, please,” wailed Farah.

Zogi pulled both Nana and Farah towards him, pleading, “If we don’t leave now and someone else gets taken, it’ll be a bigger problem for us, come on and let’s go.” They followed him unwillingly.

As the group made their way out of the house, they heard a loud roar, but they didn’t even pause to look back and made a run for it. Only Zogi looked back, and he froze. It was the same

creature he had seen only a few minutes ago and the one he'd seen at the Harlem Magical Playground. A sudden darkness cast the beast's face into shadow, but somehow, Zogi could see him clearly. He couldn't miss the glare of the powerful, scruffy creature that stared at him. The monster's words were carried to him by the wind: "The secret – you must find out," before it disappeared.

Outside of the house, they found Harsha on the ground with traces of ash on her face, messy hair, a few bruises on her hand, and one or two holes in her dress. "Oh, Harsha, we thought we had lost you," said Nana, running to hug her and pulling her up. "What happened to you?" asked Nana.

"Put it this way, the beast thought I was easy prey, but I gave it the fight of its life."

"How?" Nana pressed, confused.

Harsha smiled, before saying: "Come on, let's get out of here..." adding, "there's a lot to me you don't know, but you will find out in time..."

"What do you mean?" Nana asked.

"Never mind, Nana," Zogi interjected, "let's get out of here."

Chapter 7

Code Red

King Bantu paced up and down, not knowing what to do. Paga had sent an urgent message to him again; he'd called it a 'Code Red'. This had worried him, because 'Code Red' hadn't been used in a long time. "What now? I thought it was all over," he had muttered under his breath. He'd never understood how his ancestors came about giving the coloured codes for different situations.

He'd grown up watching his father deal with the 'RAG Codes'. They represented three levels of urgency or emergency: red, amber, and green. A 'Code Red' was the highest form of alert because this meant an external danger existed that threatened the King and the Kingdom of Harlem as a whole. 'Code Amber' meant an internal uprising within the Kingdom among the citizens, posing a direct threat to the King's reign – this was the most popular of the codes. 'Code Green' meant that the King's attention needed to be drawn to the plight of the citizens, which if not curbed or addressed quickly, would threaten the King's reign, turning to 'Code Amber'.

King Bantu couldn't think of what it might be this time since the Rescue Mission over five years ago had resolved the threat of the Hago Region; did it? As a matter of fact, he had relaxed the security rules for the Hago Region, as it no longer posed a threat to him, removing any alert from there as Code Red. He had seen the worst that could come from there, he thought.

He knew this had to do with the Harlem Beast. He'd been told about this beast, but he didn't know what to make of it. Some citizens had sworn to have seen it, on the one hand, while on the other hand, some hadn't seen it. What he found interesting, when the story had been recounted to him by some citizens, was that two people at the same place and same time had given different accounts of what they saw, including the description of the creature. Some people recounted seeing a monster, some saw a beast, and others swore that they never saw anything. He'd dismissed the sighting of this creature as something of no importance and no threat to his person and his family, but it seemed all that would have to change.

"Your Majesty! Long live Your Royal Highness," greeted Paga. This brought the King back to the present. He walked up to his throne and sat down.

"Paga, another 'Code Red'? I thought Code Reds were gone forever?" mimicked King Bantu.

"I know, Your Majesty," replied Paga. "I am simply following protocol."

"Now, what is it this time?" demanded King Bantu. "Your Royal Highness, it's a high alert."

"Oh," the King said in a sarcastic manner, arranging his robes across his shoulder, looking uninterested. Then, he looked up suddenly and barked, "What now?"

"It's true, Your Majesty." "Can you just get on with it?"

“It’s the rumour about the sightings of the Harlem Beast.”
“Hmmm...what’s new?” barked the King. “As you know, this is stale news to me. What has changed?”

“Your Highness, a few people have seen it, but we don’t know how many...”

“So?” mumbled the King. “What do you want from me?”
“Rumour has it that the beast has carted away a few people from the neighbouring kingdoms...especially the Kingdom of Ekity and...err...um...rumour has it that they are planning on waging a war against us.”

“Says who? And how do you know this for sure?” continued the King, without waiting for his response. “It’s in the Ancestral Code, Your Majesty, governing the four kingdoms. There is no way of knowing for sure, but you always asked me to report anything serious to you, Your Royal Highness.”

“Can’t you find out?”

“Well, it’s strange how only a few people have seen the beast. Not everyone who’s played at the HMP has seen the creature, even if they were present at the same time.”

“Is it a beast, dragon, or monster? What is it? And have you seen the beast?” enquired the King.

“I don’t know, everyone gives a different account of what they’ve seen, with different descriptions. So, there is no way of knowing unless I see the creature myself... And I haven’t.” “You haven’t?” asked the King, as if he didn’t hear him the first time.

“No, Your Highness,” Paga replied, answering the King too quickly and shifting from one foot to another, slightly looking away to avoid meeting the King’s eye. He dared not reveal that his son and wife had also seen the monster.

“Good, give me some time to think about this and I will let you have my decision. I will study the Ancestral Scroll to see if

there is a way out. We may need to shut down the HMP or levy a fee to discourage people from going there.”

Just as Paga was about to leave, Pogo ran in, panting and holding onto his chest, as if trying to stop it from falling off, and trying to catch his breath at the same time. “What is it?” asked the King.

“It’s a Code Red... Code Red...” “Yes, we know, what about it?” Paga probed him.

Pogo tried to speak, with no words coming out of his mouth. He didn’t know how to relay what he had witnessed, for fear of losing his job at the palace. The events behind the Hago Gate a few years ago had led to his demotion, because of his son’s involvement. Since then, Pogo had been treading on thin ice in the palace.

“Speak or get out right now if you have nothing to say!” snapped Paga.

“I don’t know how to say it,” whispered Pogo.

“Get this man out of here!” barked the King at Paga. “I will say what I saw,” cried Pogo, recounting very quickly what he had seen, for fear of being interrupted.

“Some people have just sighted the dragon, flying very low and close to the palace... I saw it too.”

At this, the King jumped up, almost missing a step and falling over, he, however, regained his balance and steadied himself. “It’s this creature, Your Royal Highness,” said Pogo Pogo continued, “It’s been causing a lot of problems in the Kingdom. People fear going to the HMP. The committee you have appointed refuses to shut the park. A few people have sworn that they have seen this creature, and nothing has happened to them after seven days, which means they are not lying.”

The King jumped up when he heard the word ‘sworn’.

“You will not say anything about people swearing...ever, not again... It causes me distress,” said the King.

“Sorry, Your Royal Highness, it’s really to let you know about the seriousness of the matter,” added Pogo “Will you carry on?” encouraged the King.

“It’s the beast. Some people have disappeared in Harlem and people from the other kingdoms claim their citizens have disappeared too,” Pogo stated. “So?”

“Your Royal Highness, don’t you remember the right for a kingdom to wage war against another if its citizen disappears in that kingdom for no lawful reason?” Paga explained before Pogo could respond.

The King was lost for words, not sure how to deal with the royal guards’ fear and excitement about this creature. Paga had also spoken so fast that it was difficult to interrupt him.

The King sat back and took it all in, saying “I remember the law vaguely; it only talks about ‘people dying,’ not disappearing.” He understood exactly what Paga was saying, but what could he say, and what could he do? He was already tired of being King. It had been one problem after another. He believed his actions in the past sent his parents to an early grave anyway, and this was his punishment.

“Hmmm...” he sighed, heaving his chest. “Thank you both for bringing this to my attention. I will think about this and get back to you on what we need to do. For the time being, get more guards around the HMP and let things continue as normal. If we need to catch this creature, we will have to keep the HMP open. Tell people to keep their eyes open and report any more sightings of this creature.” The King paused for a while, as if in deep thought, and continued slowly, “I will study the Kingdom’s Ancestral Codes governing the four kingdoms and seek the committee’s advice if I must.”

After both the royal guards left, the King went into his private study and grabbed the only copy of the Ancestral Codes that was there. He opened the scroll very slowly as he used his left hand to brush away some of the dust and specks on the scroll. Written at the top of the scroll was: ‘The Ancestral Codes for the Kingdoms of Harlem, Pamera, Baleppo, and Ekity.’

The King moved slowly to his oak desk to study the relevant parts. His fingers ran quickly through the headings, scanning and reading until he got to Section Seven. He was very still as he sat up to read.

Section 7: The right to wage a war against one or another.

Section 7.1: ‘No citizen of one kingdom shall die in another kingdom.’

Section 7.2: ‘A citizen of one kingdom can die in another kingdom if the death is natural or lawful, that is, tried in accordance with the laws of the other kingdom.’

Section 7.3: ‘A kingdom whose citizen dies in another kingdom outside the rules of section 7.2 shall have the power to protect its sovereignty by waging a war against the

Kingdom where its citizen has died unlawfully.’

Section 7.4: ‘To avert a war, the guilty kingdom shall return the citizens affected to their homeland.’

King Bantu clasped his hands on his head, resting them on the desk at the same time. He came to the sudden realisation that he was dealing with a grave issue. This was more than Code Red.

“We don’t know if they are dead, and no one has found a dead body,” he whispered. “The law only talks about ‘dying,’ not ‘disappearing.’ Why would anyone wage a war against the Kingdom of Harlem if there are no dead bodies?” He would

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have to send for The Wise One to find out the aim of this beast or monster.

As he turned to roll back the scroll into place, he noticed the last section of the Ancestral Codes, with reference to 'The Gate Keeper'. He moved closer to examine the provision, reading it out loud, "*Any of the Kingdoms against whom a war is waged can use 'The Gate Keeper' to protect and defend itself.*"

Chapter 8

Warning

The Wise One sat on his mat, waiting patiently for King Bantu, having accepted a long time ago to overlook his tardiness. He missed the King's father,

King Bantu Baha Banujala III, who had shown him more respect. It was an open secret between him and King Bantu that his actions had sent his father and mother to an early grave.

"Come quick, Wise One, the King wants to see you urgently," he'd been informed by one of the royal guards who came to fetch him.

The Wise One knew that the King had been waiting to have a private word with him for some time, but he had been sent away on a couple of occasions, because Queen Binta had been present and there had been no way to get rid of her. Queen Binta had lingered on even though it had been obvious that she was not needed, but she wanted to have first-hand information on what was going on with the Harlem Beast.

The last time The Wise One had been summoned by the King, the Queen had come in unexpectedly. The King had used

the word 'confide,' but he hadn't been able to say more than that.

"Come in, Wise One," said the King, ushering The Wise One to his private chambers. "I don't want to see anyone until The Wise One has left the palace – even the Queen is not allowed to come into my private chambers," the King instructed Paga, slamming the door in his face without waiting for his response.

After shutting the door, the King turned to The Wise One without allowing him to sit down or settle.

"I have two main matters to confide in you, Wise One," said the King. "One is this creature called the Harlem Beast." "Mhmmm... What about this Harlem Beast?" enquired The Wise One.

"Certain people in Harlem have sworn to have seen the beast or monster or dragon in the HMP, while some people have not. Now, I hear that people from neighbouring kingdoms are also being taken away by this thing, and you know what that means."

"Hmmm... What's the second matter?"

"It's Princess Bibaje," barked the King.

"What about her?" asked The Wise One, looking around as if he'd never been there before.

The King looked right and left, to make sure that other people were not lurking in the corners, listening in on their conversation. Moving close to The Wise One, within

touching distance, he whispered into his ear, "She scares me." "You will have to speak up, King Bantu, I can't hear you, and I hope you realise that we are the only ones here!" shouted The Wise One, before he continued, "anyway, I am partially deaf in that ear."

"The Princess scares me!" King Bantu shouted.

“Oh, my!” replied The Wise One, curling the side of his mouth upwards.

“I can’t tell anyone; even the Queen will think I’m crazy.”

“Tell them what?”

“That the Princess...err...” whispered the King, again moving closer to The Wise One, who took two steps backward to avoid falling over. The King stretched out his neck a little so that his mouth would be close to The Wise

One’s ear. “The Princess...” he whispered.

“I still can’t hear you,” shouted The Wise One in frustration. “Uh...”

“Please, carry on.”

“She speaks to me sometimes.” “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am.”

“What does she say to you?” asked The Wise One, not able to help himself from enjoying the King’s discomfort.

“You must confess and reveal the secret...um...something like that, I think.” The King sighed, breathing in heavily before he continued. “Her face turns into my grandmother’s face sometimes...”

“Are you sure?” asked The Wise One.

“Is that all you can say, are you sure?” The King burst out, without allowing The Wise One to interrupt him. “Yes, I am.

It’s so bad that I make sure I am not in the same room with her. I can’t even carry or play with her. I make sure that I am never alone. She really is...tormenting me.”

“What about the Queen, has she seen these things in your daughter?”

“No, it seems only I see it.”

“I find this strange, but remember some time ago when I was here, when your wife was pregnant? I was going to warn you

about what was to come. I saw a huge darkness hanging over the palace, but you refused to listen.”

“When did this start?” The Wise One continued after a brief pause.

“When she was a baby... Wise One, please forget about the past – this is now.” The King moved to sit on his couch, before continuing, “Please, consult your books and let me have an answer. Make it quick. You know the Queen can be stubborn, nothing will keep her away if she decides she wants to see me, and I want an answer today.”

“Let me consult my prayer books,” responded The Wise One.

The Wise One brought out his prayer book and said a few prayers. He also chanted some ‘silly songs,’ as the King would say. Eventually, The Wise One looked up and said to the King in a deep voice, as if he were in a trance. He radiated some light and glowed, looking totally strange. “This is deep; the two issues you have mentioned to me are connected and it’s the secret you know about, you know the secret... You know the secret.”

It was as if The Wise One couldn’t be stopped, he kept speaking. “I repeat, the two issues are connected. It’s your secret that is the cause; you must first confess this to the citizens of Harlem before I am given instructions on what next steps to follow.” “I don’t have any secrets,” muttered the King.

“Sorry, King Bantu, I am older than you and served under your father, who listened to me and took my advice seriously. You know the secret, King Bantu, I know it too, and my prayer books do not lie. You must think deep and confess, and until you do, the curse will not be broken completely. My prayer books tell me that a boy you see often is central to the whole issue. The beast is going to do more damage than you’ve ever imagined or seen. This is what I have been

trying to warn you about for some time, even before Princess Bibaje was born and this is just the beginning. The Harlem Beast will not only kill but will bring more beasts. Things will get worse, and the Kingdom of Harlem will be destroyed eventually.”

The King cut him short by snapping, “Thank you, Wise One, you can leave now.”

“You must confess your secret and find Tiera’s child, that’s the only way out. You only have seven days. Your time is short.” He continued, “Only you can determine whether the curse will be broken or not. Let me know what you decide.”

The King got up, and before getting to the door to open it, he turned to The Wise One and whispered: “This is one secret I intend to take to my grave.”

“Remember this, I advised your mother to continue taking you on the rounds when King’s Mother died and that your experience on the first day would determine if the events of that day would determine your future.”

“Yes, I remember,” whispered the King, remembering how his encounter with the old woman had tormented his dreams for a long time.

“Well, if you cast your mind back, your mother reported your encounter with an old woman in the fields.”

“Yes...um, what has this got to do with anything?” “What did you do?”

“It’s something I don’t like to remember.”

“Well, your mother reported your bad behaviour to me, and your actions of that day only deepened the tribal curse placed on you by your grandmother – King’s Mother.” King Bantu wasn’t happy with this discussion. He had done everything he could to erase the events that happened with his grandmother from his mind, but the events of the past weren’t ready to release him.

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“When King’s Mother died, and I asked your mother to take you on the rounds, meeting the old woman was going to determine if you would be set free. But you let yourself down and showed your true colours. You didn’t pass the test and that’s why you are still stuck in the rut. Find Tiera’s child and confess your secret to the citizens of Harlem to save this Kingdom. There is no other way out.”

Chapter 9

The King's Nightmare

The story of the old woman in King Bantu's dream had long been played out; or so it seemed. King Bantu hadn't seen her in his dreams for a long time; but she was back. Tonight's dream was different and disturbing; he didn't know who and what to blame. Was it The Wise One, who had brought back memories of King's Mother? Was it the softness of his pillow or the silkiness of his pillowcase? The King didn't know, but remembering the dream made him shudder.

"I will marry you, Tiera," Prince Bantu had promised before pulling the royal maid towards him.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Prince Bantu – you know that can never happen," answered Tiera as she rushed towards the door, saying, "I have to leave before your mother returns."

King Bantu had turned and moaned in his sleep.

Suddenly, it seemed Tiera was running after him, trying to attack him. As he tried to fend her off, her face changed into that of his grandmother. "No, King's Mother... please... I'm sorry

for what happened..." he had whimpered, but King's Mother had started laughing. Her laughter was so menacing that it sent chills up his spine and he broke out in cold sweat on the bed. He began to toss and turn on his bed, whispering in his sleep.

"Leave me alone, go away...uh...I will marry you...leave me alone."

Suddenly, the beast appeared beside his grandmother, outrunning her to chase after him. He froze and couldn't move. "I'm sorry, King's Mother." At the very last moment, when he felt that he couldn't escape, the beast swept King's Mother off her feet, and they began howling at him in unison. It seemed they were all in it together.

"Take him, not me...you should have taken him" King's Mother screamed at the beast as she struggled to get down.

"King Bantu lied, swore on my life; he killed me, he is a murderer, the royal maid, he killed her..."

"No...no," whimpered King Bantu. "Someone help me..." "You will die," King's Mother continued, wagging her finger at him, howling, "you must confess or die!" as her voice faded off. The beast suddenly dropped King's Mother like hot potato, turned and made its way towards King Bantu, who was trembling on the spot. The last thing he noticed before waking up was that Tiera had appeared once again at the corner of the room standing smiling and, beckoning at him to come over.

King Bantu jumped out of bed, making a dash for the door, he tripped on his robe and banged his head against the door-knob; he stumbled and fell on the floor. He sat on the floor with his hands clasped on his head, helpless.

King Bantu was relieved that his wife had slept in a separate bedroom to be closer to Princess Bibaje. His guilt of what had happened to the royal maid Tiera over the years had doubled,

tripled, and become the genesis of his sorry life. He steadied himself up and went back to bed to wait for sunrise.

The event had changed everything. He wished he could go back in time to change things, but it was too late for that. He had to think of how to save the Kingdom of Harlem from destruction.

Chapter 10

No Way Out

King Bantu climbed out of bed as dawn was breaking. The sun shimmered through his window, blinding him temporarily as he looked out. He saw the first streak of grey in the sky. He sighed heavily and looked in the distance; it was a day of sober reflection for him, especially after the last visit from The Wise One and his most recent nightmare. The message from The Wise One to him was grave, and he knew there was no way out.

Firstly, he had gone to study the ‘Ancestral Ancient Scroll’ and the rules were disturbing.

King Bantu was tired of the mess he’d gotten himself into, and he regretted having told a lie when he was a teenager.

“Everyone tells a lie, though,” he muttered. “So why have I been sentenced to hell?” He didn’t know it would cause him so much trouble. It was too late to change things, but he did have to consider his options and get back to The Wise One with his decision in seven days. He’d been told by The Wise One that there was no way out, that his fate was sealed by his actions.

King Bantu only had himself to blame. The King's non confession was a Code Red for the citizens, the King, and the

Kingdom of Harlem. If he didn't confess, he would die or be banished and the whole of Harlem would be destroyed. The name of his family would be dishonoured and also become a taboo – never again in the Kingdom of Harlem would his lineage be king, he reminded himself. The Kingdoms of Pamera, Baleppo, and Ekity would have to fight for the Kingship.

The Wise One had said that the only way out was for him to find Tiera's child and confess.

To die was out of this, no way, he was just too young for that and, "I love life and being King," he had mumbled, and continued to speak to himself, "what more can I ask for?" Being banished was even worse than death. He would live like a commoner and forego all his wealth and power – no way. *OK, maybe to confess is a better option*, he thought to himself. *If they find my son or daughter, they will become king or queen and I will have to step down from being king. Well, that's better, isn't it? Or could I be asked to live at 'No Man's Land' in the middle of nowhere? Well, only time will tell. Maybe, they will have mercy on me, but ultimately to confess has now become more of an option than keeping the secret.*

The humiliation will be unbearable. I brought this on myself. I shouldn't have told a lie. If I knew it would cause me lifelong heartache, I wouldn't have done it. I sent my grandmother to an early grave. Having to die because of one little lie I told is unfair. What a joke, what a sorry story, how sad, what a pity, King Bantu sighed and continued:

"I wish I could go back into the past to change things, but the deed is done and there is no way out...I must confess, I must confess or...umm..." the King muttered under his breath, as his wife walked in at that very moment.

“Bantu...what confession and...who is confessing to what?” the Queen asked.

“Err...it’s a long story...”

“What am I your wife for?” Queen Binta walked in, straightening the duvet lace, and arranging the curtains in the way that only she liked. “I’m here all day for you and listening...” she said, walking to a chair to sit down and lifting Bibaje to sit on her lap.

“You have to take the Princess to the maids before I continue.”

“You can carry her too, she’s your daughter, and it’s been a while since you’ve played with her. If I didn’t know any better and with the way you behave towards her, I would have said you were trying to avoid her.”

The Queen lifted Bibaje, gently placing her back on the floor, ushering her towards King Bantu. But, King Bantu turned away, saying, “I don’t want to hold her.”

“That’s what you say all the time, what has she done to you?” “Do you really want me to answer that?” “Yes, I do,” pressed the Queen.

“She scares me,” blurted out the King before he could stop himself.

“Really?” screamed the Queen, trying to control her temper.

“Yes, she does.”

“How can your own daughter scare you?”

At that, King Bantu burst into laughter; he laughed so hard that he almost went into a seizure.

“What have I said that is funny?”

“She’s only a baby...” the King mimicked in the Queen’s voice. “If only you knew.”

“Knew what exactly? What are you hiding from me?”

“This child has tormented me from the very first day she

was born – she seems to have replaced the old woman.” “But—” said the Queen.

“Forget it,” interrupted King Bantu. The King d calmed himself by pressing down his royal robes, arranging them neatly in front of him before patting the big knot on his shoulder. He wiped the laughter tears from his face with the back of his hand.

“Please, take the Princess away from me,” he whispered.

“If that’s your attitude to the Princess, I doubt if I want to listen to what you have to say anymore.”

The Queen left with the Princess, tears rolling down from her eyes. She didn’t know why the King despised the Princess so much. Was it because she didn’t have a son for him? Didn’t Mother say men determined if the baby was a boy or a girl?

She didn’t know what to do anymore; there was no one to confide in. “Am I being overdramatic?” she asked herself as she walked away from his room.

She was struggling to understand a lot of things but was failing and didn’t know what to think anymore. It was obvious to her that something was wrong. The King’s behaviour towards the Princess was abnormal. There was no affection at all. She had thought initially that it was because the baby was fragile, but the Princess had turned one, two, three, four, and was now five and there had been no change of attitude. When the baby cried, the King ran in the opposite direction. “I must admit to myself, though, if I wasn’t her mother, I would...”

The Queen stopped herself before she could finish the sentence.

“My daughter cries as if she is tormented – but what can I do?

She is my baby...” she continued.

One thing was certain: she had stopped making excuses for

the King a long time ago, and truth be told, he simply didn't care about his Princess.

When the King was sure he was alone, he whispered to himself as if he were talking to a ghost, waving his right hand in the air. "The Princess' face turns into my grandmother's face – truth. She scares me – truth. She talks to me sometimes – truth."

"What will I do?" the King continued muttering to himself, "I can't face humiliation...can The Wise One find another option for me? How will I survive this? My wealth and comfort...why did I do it? Grandmother, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me..."

He knew it was too late. The events of the past had caused him double, if not even triple tragedy.

Chapter II

The Kingdom of Ekity

The Kingdom of Ekity had to react to the Harlem Beast, and the Most Elderly Jereco couldn't stop this. In the Kingdom of Ekity, anger was steering because of the rumour that the Harlem Beast was not only carting away its people, but it was also killing them as well. The people of Ekity continued to reduce in numbers over the years and nothing had changed. But no one could prove this or put a number to the people who had disappeared.

The Kingdom of Ekity was about ten kilometres away from the Kingdom of Harlem. The region popularly called 'No Man's Land' separated the four kingdoms: Harlem, Ekity, Pamera, and Baleppo. The Kingdom of Ekity was the closest to Harlem from the west side of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of Harlem reigned supreme and was the only kingdom which produced a king out of the four kingdoms.

Harlem's king reigned supreme over the four regions. The other regions produced 'Elders' or those with similar titles.

There was enmity between the Kingdoms of Harlem and

Ekity, dating back to King Banujala I, who was known to have stolen the birthright of the people of Ekity. Though, the people of Ekity were certain that they had been robbed of their birthright, nobody knew the true story, only whispers, rumours, passed from generation to generation – so much so that it had become believable. Over the years, the stories became blurred and skewed, with no one certain of how they had been robbed of the paramount position and how the story came about. The rumours didn't go away, leading to ancestral rivalry the two Kingdoms.

One thing was certain, however, the people of Ekity were convinced that King Banujala, I had robbed them of their rightful kingship of the whole region – as their region could only provide Elders, not kings; the highest ruler of their land could never wear a crown. As a result, they were subordinates to the Banujalas, as they were the only paramount ruling family in the whole of the four kingdoms, collecting taxes from the other three.

The Kingdom of Ekity had to be subject to the whims and devices of any of the Harlem kings.

The Kingdoms of Pamera and Baleppo told similar stories about the Kingdom of Harlem.



The Most Elderly ruled the Kingdom of Ekity. Having left the past where it belonged, the Most Elderly Jereco, as the highest ruler, had urgent matters to attend to.

He had gotten up early to deliberate about the meeting he was soon to have with his ruling council. The Most Elderly stood quietly, waiting for the other elders to arrive. He knew what was coming and had tried to avoid it. “Not anymore,” he

mumbled. “It’s true what they say: ‘uneasy lies the head that wears the crown’.” But the irony of it all was that he wore no crown, but a decorated royal cap. Everyone knew that in their kingdom they wore no crowns, no thanks to King Banujala I, but the burden he carried was heavier than the cap on his head; he might as well be wearing a crown, he thought and sighed.

As the Most Elderly, his decision for the Kingdom of Ekity was final after discussions with the other Elders. No one could change it, whatever the outcome of the decision on his people – good, bad, or scary. At times like this, this position gave him no favours. The Most Elderly turned and strolled to his couch.

An emergency meeting had been demanded from the ruling council. The Kingdom of Ekity had to react to the story about the Harlem Beast, so the emergency meeting had been forced on the Most Elderly to deliberate and decide on what needed to be done. What was certain was this: something had to be done, and the popular view was that they had to retaliate. The Kingdom of Harlem, and especially King Bantu, couldn’t get away with what they had done to his people, and at this point, individual opinions did not matter, as they had a collective decision to make. Their action on this matter could affect generations to come, so they had to be careful and examine all the evidence about the Harlem Beast before coming to a decision.

The Most Elderly remembered when the Harlem Magical Park ‘landed’ in the Kingdom of Harlem from nowhere. He was suspicious about the mysterious appearance of the park. He had heard many stories of how it came about but had nursed his suspicion about the HMP – it had seemed too good to be true – and he had been proved right. He warned his people not to go to the HMP, but he had left the final decision to them. His reasoning was this: he knew they didn’t have a good relationship

with King Banujala IV, but if he wanted to open the HMP to his people, he wasn't the one to stop them.

Of course, he knew King Bantu's secret, but that was a story for another day. The man's people had said the HMP put a smile on their faces, so would it have been right to take the smile away? No.

The Most Elderly wasn't sure, and he did not have any facts about how his people disappeared from the HMP. Nobody had come to him to say a member of their family had gone missing or had been taken away by the beast. No one had reported being there when the beast had attacked the HMP. Therefore, he had no way of knowing if this was true. No one else knew the facts of the case for certain, there was no solid proof. The rumour in the Kingdom of Ekity was getting stronger by the day and his people had started inciting one another, demanding that he acted on the matter. "What will I do?" he asked himself quietly. He only hoped that Auntie Pauline Neafcy's Christian faith, which he believed in, would help him out and her God would give him wisdom.

The man was weary and sick of the burden he had to carry. As aforementioned, he'd been told that the HMP was great and brought a smile on people's faces. So, he couldn't understand why, despite the joy, fun, laughter, and whatever his people got from the HMP, why it had turned into a beast carting business.

He had warned his people, 'Not all that glitters is gold,' but of course this had fallen on deaf ears. They got carried away with the glitter.

He sometimes hated the people of Ekity; they constantly complained about what they didn't have and had never been thankful for what they had. As a result, they gravitated towards the Kingdom of Harlem when the HMP arrived, but he had warned them. He had known about the young Prince and the

pregnant royal maid. He knew what had happened was a great abomination and that it was only a matter of time before the King's past life would be exposed. He was sure the beast was a result of that.

As a matter of fact, he had gone hunting in the forest called 'No Man's Land' a long time ago, when he had found the pregnant young lady who said her name was Tiera. He had found her dirty, unkempt, and by herself in the forest, crying and hungry. He had tended to her and brought her back to the Kingdom of Ekity with him, leaving her just outside the outskirts, in his farmhouse – passed down from one generation to another – where he kept his hunting tools. *He knew it was a hut, even though it was bigger than the normal size, but he felt good calling it a farmhouse.* He had kept Tiera out of sight and did not bring her into the Kingdom.

He had looked after her. He didn't know how Meena, the young woman's friend, had found her, but he had told them to keep everything a secret to protect Tiera and the baby. Only Meena knew how her Uncle Dembe had found out about her friend.

After two days of tending to the young woman, the Most Elderly knew her story and realised that she was in a bad way. Tiera said she had been banished from the Kingdom of Harlem with her family, who had disowned her for bringing shame to them. The Most Elderly had been sad about this and had said to the girl: "When will people learn?" Tiera had looked at him helplessly, without uttering a word.

He had walked away without waiting for an answer. He liked custom and tradition, it helped to shape the community and kingdom to a certain extent, but there were some rules he personally disagreed with. Unfortunately, who was he to change these? Not even in his position as the Most Elderly could he

impose his views on his people, custom and tradition must be followed.

This man's everyday prayer was for the coming generation to change things and do away with the customs and traditions that didn't make sense. If he followed customs and traditions strictly, he would never have saved Tiera but would have killed her. NEVER! He would never do it. He didn't want her blood on his hands. The brutality and barbarity with which his people jeered when a sentence was being enforced for breaking customs and traditions turned his stomach. His philosophy was simple: 'I leave them to be judged by god.'

He found the local gods of his Kingdom dubious. They couldn't see, they were deaf, and couldn't hear and people took them seriously. What was the point? He had seen the light and knew that there was only one God.

The Most Elderly was a young boy when he had met Aunty Pauline Neafcy and her friends; Father referred to them as missionaries. They brought their faith to the Kingdom of Ekity and told them about God – teaching them that love conquered all. They were taught to love their neighbours as themselves, be their brothers' keepers, look out for each other, and embrace their neighbours' differences.

Aunty Pauline Neafcy even told them the story of the 'Good

Samaritan' from her holy book. The hostility from the people of Ekity proved so bad that, even as a young boy, the Most Elderly remembered how his father had assisted Aunty Pauline Neafcy and her friends to escape; bundling them out of the Kingdom in the middle of the night for their own safety. They didn't even have the opportunity to pack their personal belongings. Their values challenged the very essence of the Kingdom of Ekity, and its people were unforgiving.

The Most Elderly Jereco – as a young boy, with a handful of people in the Kingdom, including his father at that time – had seen the light, but was afraid to continue the work Aunty Pauline Neafcy had started, for fear of being banished for failing to follow and enforce the Kingdom’s customs and traditions.

The Most Elderly prayed to Sister Pauline Neafcy’s God and was a ‘Good Samaritan’ to everyone, even when it involved enforcing the Kingdom’s customs and traditions.

Chapter 12

Ekity Council of Elders

The knock on his door brought him back to reality. “The Most Elderly Jereco, Elder Trudo has arrived,” announced Shaba, the elderly’s guard. “Let him in...and, Shaba, ask the maids to bring light refreshment for my meeting with the elders, it will not be an easy night,” he said and sighed. Shaba shrugged his shoulders and left without saying a word.

Elder Trudo was known to be the most disruptive of all the seven members of the ruling council. He didn’t see eye to eye with anyone. He loved custom and tradition to the extent that he was ready to kill anyone who disobeyed; and he was never rational in his decision making. If he had found Tiera like he had, the young woman would have been killed immediately. “What a shame,” he whispered as he strolled to his seat and sat, waiting for the others to arrive. His mind roamed to Elder Breksit, who was not generally liked, so he was happy that he wouldn’t be present at the meeting. Elder Breksit had suddenly disappeared from the Kingdom, and no one could account for

him. He had no family. Rumour had it that he had gone to the HMP, and the Harlem Beast had taken him away; the truth is, no one would miss him.

After the six elders had settled down, the meeting commenced. Before the Most Elderly could speak, Elder Trudo had jumped up, shouting at the top of his voice, and waving his hand frantically. “We must wage a war against the people of Harlem.”

“For what reason?” queried the Most Elderly Jereco, without raising his voice.

“Why do you ask me that question? We all know our people have been disappearing from the mysterious HMP, built for the sole purpose of trapping, and killing our people.

Err...so they reduce us in numbers and take over our Kingdom.”

“And why would they do that?” asked the Most Elderly.

“So, they can take over the Kingdom of Ekity, you know it... that has always been the plan of King Bantu and his father before him. They think we are small and weak—”

Elder Bojo stood up, interrupting Elder Trudo. He spoke quietly, “The Most Elderly Jereco, long may you live. The matter at hand is very delicate and we must be careful in our deliberations...and approach with caution.”

Elder Trudo jumped up, pointing his finger in the direction of Elder Bojo.

“Let me remind you, in case you have forgotten, we know our custom and tradition from generation to generation is that no indigene of one kingdom dies in another kingdom without a lawful reason or a just cause.” He turned around and added, “We don’t need to see their dead bodies before we know they are dead, everyone knows it!”

“But...” continued Elder Bojo.

“No buts,” shouted Elder Trudo, without allowing him to finish, “just answer me, yes or no.”

“Yes, you are right, that is the custom and tradition.”

“Then, the matter is settled,” said Elder Trudo as he gently lowered himself to his seat, a smug smile appearing on his face.

“So, what do we do?” asked the Most Elderly Jereco, speaking so softly that the others unconsciously stretched their necks out a little to hear what he was saying.

“Then, we take them to war!” screamed Elder Trudo, jumping to his feet again, answering without waiting for anyone else to speak. “The sacred code has been broken; we must avenge our dead!”

“We have no proof of these allegations, do we?” asked Elder Bojo.

“I don’t care,” replied Elder Trudo. “They’ve had it coming a long time and history must not repeat itself. Our forefathers allowed the kingship to be stolen from us. We must embrace the opportunity we have now and make things right.” With worried looks on their faces, they listened to more of Elder Trudo’s blabbing, as it seemed that no one could stop him.

“It’s custom and tradition. We do not question it. It does not matter if it makes no sense, or if we have any proof, we must follow it!”

“Do you want us to investigate this matter and find out more before we take any action?” asked Elder Camda, directing his question at the Most Elderly Jereco. He had been sitting still during the heated exchange.

“There is nothing to investigate,” interrupted Elder Trudo before Elder Camda could finish his sentence. He jumped and stood in front of the Most Elderly, raising his voice. “We know the monsters are stealing and carting away our families and people... I don’t know what further evidence you need.”

You are slow to make decisions, but whether you say yes or no, our mind is made up, it is war.”

Elder Camda thought Elder Trudo was making a fool of himself, and not able to keep quiet any longer, asked him a direct question, “Are any of the members of your household missing...?”

“You are stupid for asking me...” Elder Trudo did not finish his sentence, but instead lunged at Elder Camda. Elder Camda, who had seen this coming, stepped to the side and Elder Trudo fell to the ground, but this did not stop him, as he prattled on.

“According to our customs and traditions, our fathers and forefathers instructed us that when things like this happen, there is blood on someone’s hands. King Bantu has shed the blood of our people and the Kingdom of Harlem must suffer the consequences.”

The Most Elderly Jereco knew Elder Trudo was right, but their style of leadership was different.

There was silence, everyone was alone with their private thoughts and knew that the Most Elderly had a difficult decision to make, knowing that the wrong decision would mean that the Most Elderly would have to ‘go,’ leaving the post of ‘The Most Elderly’ vacant. If this happened, the post was within anyone’s grabs, since the Most Elderly Jereco had no child apparent to pass the title to. Nobody voiced it, but they were sort of happy that Elder Breksit might be out of the race and hoped he never returned.

The two female elders in the ruling council looked on without making any contributions. Elder Rodini had had private conversations with Elder Trudo, who had called the

Most Elderly Jereco a weak leader. He couldn’t forgive the Most Elderly for not building a wall between the Kingdom of Harlem and the Kingdom of Ekity. They had tried to remove

him, but The Elderly Jereco refused to leave, saying it was his turn and nobody could take the position from him. Elder Tema, on the other hand, had no allegiance to anyone; she was simply biding her time to become the Most Elderly and knew she would do a lot of things differently. Elder Tema had been assured by her sister's crystal ball that it was almost her time.

The Most Elderly carefully got to his feet; all eyes were on him, watching and waiting for his decision on the matter. He had to think quickly on his feet. He said a silent prayer in his mind, *God of Sister Neafcy; please help me*, before speaking.

"I have heard everything that you have all said, give me seven days to think about this and come to a decision. Assemble here in seven days from today, at the same time, and you will have my decision on whether or not we can wage war against the Kingdom of Harlem."

"We want an answer now," shouted Elder Trudo as the other Elders got onto their feet and made their way to the door.

"You will have my decision in seven days, you may now leave," whispered the Most Elderly Jereco as he made his way to his private room.

"When I take over your position, I will be different," screamed Elder Trudo as he made his way to the door.

"I know," snapped the Most Elderly, angry with Elder Trudo, "but I am still the decision maker and the ruler for the Kingdom of Ekity, so you have to wait for your turn."

On the way out, Elder Rodini moved closer to Elder Tema and whispered in her ear, "When is the beast coming for Trudo?"

They both burst out laughing as they walked out of the

Most Elderly's home, and when they got outside, Elder Tema whispered back to Elder Rodini, "The beast can come for Camda too, after all, they both got us into this mess."

The Most Elderly left Elder Trudo, who was still ranting, and entered his private room. He sat on the worn-out couch, stroking the weary kaya wood arm gently as a smile appeared on his face. He was fond of this couch. It had been passed to him by his father, and he had it since. His father allowed him to sit on it occasionally as a young boy, but now he sat on it when he had difficult decisions to make; it connected him to his father and reminded him of where he was coming from.

“How will I resolve this problem without having to wage a war against the Kingdom of Harlem?” he asked and said a silent prayer to the one God that Sister Pauline Neafcy had introduced him to for wisdom and direction. He had looked forward to taking over his father’s position when he was a young man; it was at times like this that he wished his father were still alive.

“The old man taught me everything I know and would have found an easy way out if he were still alive,” he whispered.



The Most Elderly Jereco soon realised that seven days wasn’t that long a time as it came round very quickly. He arranged a meeting, so he could announce his decision to the other Elders. During the meeting and after a lot of drama with Elder Trudo being in the centre of it all, he announced his decision. “We will send a letter to King Bantu Banujala IV, giving him the opportunity of producing our missing citizens within 21 days. If he refuses, we will have no option but to wage a war against the Kingdom of Harlem.”

“21 days is too long!” screamed Elder Trudo.

“How many days do you suggest?” asked Elder Rodini “5 days!” shouted Elder Trudo

“Surely, that is too short?” queried Elder Bojo.

“Enough...!” barked the Most Elderly, adding “I am the Most Elderly here...and my decision is final.”

Turning to face Elder Trudo and waving a missing persons list in his face, he said, “By the way, you haven’t provided sufficient information about the names on this list...I find it dubious that you claim these people are missing.” Staring at the rest of the Elders he asked, “Why haven’t any family member come forward to confirm these people missing?”

No one answered him. Elder Camda and Elder Bojo looked away. They had problem of their own. The citizens blamed them for the messy Elder Breksit fiasco with no solution in sight. Elder Tema had been appointed by The Most Elderly to find a solution to the Breksit situation. Elder Breksit was still missing.

Elder Trudo had his own worries. At the time of the meeting, he was fighting off allegations from a few citizens. Most related to how he oppressed them forcefully taking their properties and farm produce. However, wanting to have the last word, he shouted “my guards carried out a thorough investigation and came up with the missing persons list.”

“We believe you,” replied the Most Elderly in a sarcastic tone, adding “this Meeting is over. I will write and send the letter to King Bantu Banujala IV.”

Part Two

The Past – Tiera's Story

Chapter 13

Tiera and Prince Bantu

Zogi's parents, Stash and Meena Jagaba sat on their worn-out couch with Stash's arms draped across Meena's shoulders. As Meena snuggled closer to Stash on the couch, her head on his chest, she asked,

"Err... what are we going to do about Zogi, Stash?" She then raised her head, and looking at him, said, "I think Zogi suspects we are keeping a secret from him."

"Hmm...it's a sensitive matter, but we'll continue to protect Zogi and put his interests first." "How?" asked Meena.

"Well, we will continue to put him off" and make sure we avoid any serious questions until we are sure how this will play out. He cannot know the truth about his biological parents."

"Even if we tell him, how much information do we share with him?" asked Meena.

"Ahh..." sighed Stash, adding, "I don't know," before resting his head on Meena's hair.

Stash continued, "I do understand, the King's angle makes the whole situation difficult; we have only been protecting

Zogi's interest and we agreed to tell him the truth when he came of age...but, he's still only 15 years old."

"I know," replied Meena, "but...you know that *he is old* enough and saying he is only 15 is an excuse."

"Hmmm... I know," stated Statish, without saying anything further.

Meena and Statish both kept quiet, deep in their own private thoughts.

"The King's angle makes everything so difficult," repeated Meena softly, as if she was scared that the winds would carry her words to the palace.



It was a very long time ago. Meena remembered how it all started.

Meena and Tiera had been best friends and had worked as royal maids in the palace at the same time under King Bantu Baha Banujala III. Meena had recounted the whole story to Statish, repeatedly, so much so that Statish could tell it himself, word for word. But he knew this was a healing process for Meena, so, over the years, he had never stopped Meena from telling him the '*Tiera*' story. After all, it was a secret that couldn't be shared with anybody else.

"Statish, I remember that day vividly and Tiera's pain when she told me what had happened – it's as if it happened yesterday."

"I know," replied Statish, playing along.

Meena continued with her story, repeating herself on occasions without any apologies. Statish settled down further into the couch without interrupting her. He had, over the years,

painted a picture of the whole story in his mind, and once again it was as if he were watching a movie.

All the royal maids who had served in the palace under King Bantu Baha Banujala III only had good things to say about him. He was such a loving king, completely different from his son, Bantu. Rumour had started in the palace that immediately after Prince Bantu celebrated his first teen birthday, he had become a menace to the royal maids with his inappropriate behaviour. He was nicknamed 'the touching prince'. A touch here and a touch there made Prince Bantu happy. No one had dared to complain or mention this to the Queen; no one wanted to rock the boat. But most of the royal maids who had been unlucky enough to attract his unwanted attention had complained bitterly to the other royal maids, but not to the Queen or his grandmother, King's Mother. The King's Mother had been heavily involved in trying to raise the prince as a perfect gentleman to the highest standard required of a future king.

At some point, *no one knew for certain when it started*, Prince Bantu had professed his love for Tiera, which she had denied and discouraged in all ways possible, even though she liked the prince and the attention he showed towards her. She didn't want the prince's attention, because she knew it was only going to end in disaster, *no happy ending* could come out of it. But Tiera has been very unlucky because the prince refused to back off! The situation came to a head one day, when King Bantu Baha Banujala III and Queen Barta Banujala travelled to the Kingdom of Ekity for a ceremonial duty.

The norm was for the prince to attend ceremonies with his parents as a learning process for a king-in-waiting, but the Prince had different plans. The teenage Prince had been stropky, stamping his feet and slamming doors behind him at

every opportunity that he had. He wanted to be grounded. At some point, he even faked being sick. The prince got what he wanted: he was asked to stay at home, which deprived King's Mother from going to the ceremony, because she was asked to keep an eye on Bantu. She wasn't amused.

Immediately after his parents' carriage pulled away, he waited for a while and checked on King's Mother and saw her sleeping. He laughed to himself and turned back to carry out his mission. He began loitering around to catch Tiera's attention, but Tiera ignored him, which infuriated him the more. When he was certain that she was going to clean his bedroom, he had gone ahead of her to plant himself inside the huge mahogany wardrobe, waiting patiently for Tiera.

Tiera opened the bedroom door, taking out a duster to begin cleaning. She hummed to herself as she cleaned the room, moving closer to the bed. She bent down, unlocked the bedside drawer from the sides – the bedsheets needed to be washed. She started changing the bedsheets. She was bending over the bed when Prince Bantu snuck out from where he was hiding and pounced on her. Tiera, not knowing what it was, became startled and screamed, jumping up at the same time and dropping her duster with the other cleaning agents, screaming, "What's that?" She was shocked when she turned round to see the prince.

"Tiera, calm down, it's me," said Prince Bantu. "Did you forget something?" asked Tiera.

"No, I only came to help you clean," replied the prince, laughing jokingly in her face.

"Please, leave me alone," she replied, "I do not want any trouble."

"Come here at once," Prince Bantu said sternly to Tiera as he patted a spot beside him on the bed for her.

“No... Prince Bantu, don’t,” Tiera said as she ran towards the door, trying to escape. The prince ran after her, catching up with her. He yanked Tiera towards him and pulled her towards the bed.

“Don’t even deny that you feel the same way about me,” whispered the prince to Tiera.

“I do like you, Prince Bantu, but you know this is wrong – you know I am getting married soon,” she continued.

The prince sat her down beside him on the bed as cold sweat broke out of her forehead. She tried to hide the excitement she felt, thinking about being the luckiest woman on earth. Tiera tried to wriggle out of the prince’s grasp, who, now lying down on the bed, pulled her towards him.

“You can’t do this...you know what will happen,” pleaded Tiera, who didn’t sound convincing, even to herself. This fell on deaf ears.

“You can’t do this,” she had repeated. “The Queen will kill me and my fiancé...”

“Shhh... Tiera, my princess, don’t worry, no one will kill you, not even my mother,” he whispered, trying to reassure her.

“You know that’s not true,” replied Tiera. “My family will be shunned and banished from the Kingdom of Harlem.”

“No such thing will happen, my mother dares not,” barked the prince, suddenly sounding very angry. “I love you, Princess Tiera, and I want to marry you.”

“I am no princess, and you know it...don’t call me that. Be serious for once...and...Prince Bantu, if you say you love me, then you will let me go...you will leave me alone.” But the prince had persuaded her to make out with him, “It will be our little secret,” he had assured her.

Tiera was sure she was in love with the prince; however, this did not stop her from crying very softly, thinking that no one

could ever find out about what had just happened. She was straightening her blouse and patting down her skirt when Meena, who was also on duty that day at the palace, had walked in on them.

Meena let out a short scream, not needing to be told what had just happened. She stood frozen for a while, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. Tiera looked startled and alarmed, muttering, “Meena...”

Prince Bantu stared dumbly at Meena, and without uttering a word, pushed past her, and rushed out of the room without looking back.

Meena rushed out of the room after the prince, apologising profusely to the prince, “I’m so sorry.” Meena didn’t know the exact details of what happened and needed to get out quick to protect her job.

Chapter 14

Who's Baby?

Meena paused and nudged at Statish, as she suspected that he was sleeping. Statish was startled awake and mumbled, “Yes, Meena, I’m still with you.”

“You must listen Statish, this is serious, you know I am getting to the crucial part of the story.”

“Yes, I know...I’m here, remember I can even take over telling the story from here...” Statish chuckled.

“You know, Statish, I was conflicted at the time, not knowing what to do or if I should report what I saw...I couldn’t,” she whispered, adding, “It would have gotten Tiera into trouble. She got herself into trouble eventually, but luckily, I wasn’t to blame for any of it.”

Meena had married Statish at a young age, with a short courtship. There was a rumour among her peers that it was an arranged marriage, but it didn’t bother Meena. During the time Meena worked at the palace, it wasn’t surprising that the prince didn’t make any advances towards her.

Meena was disturbed about what she saw when she walked in on Tiera and the prince. It wasn't good news at all, and she didn't know if it was the first time. She had no way of knowing. Tiera didn't confide in her about her secret meetings with the prince or what had happened between them until much later, when Tiera told Meena her story.



Tiera had been engaged when she worked as a maid at the palace, but she wasn't happy with the man her parents had chosen for her. It was a family arrangement, and her opinion and show of protest didn't count. She simply didn't have a choice in the matter. It was therefore not surprising that when the prince began to show interest in her, it made her feel special. She loved the attention, but soon realised that she couldn't encourage the prince; they were from two different worlds.

"You will get me into trouble, you know," Tiera had told the prince the first time he had expressed his affection for her.

"There is no such thing, my princess," he had said, adding, "you need to relax – don't you at least like me?" the prince had teased her. "I'm not to show any feeling of likeness towards you," Tiera had responded.

The advances from the prince had intensified, but she couldn't report or confide in anyone, not even her friend Meena. Moreover, Tiera liked the attention she received from the prince, and her biggest secret was that she enjoyed being called a princess by the prince. As a matter of fact, she had started carrying herself like one: better and superior to the other royal maids in the palace. This didn't earn her any favours, as other maids put this down to her upcoming marriage.

Everywhere Tiera went, the prince watched her like a

hawk. When he could, he stalked her; so much so that Tiera always felt his eyes on her. He was so careful about it that they had not been caught or seen together. Tiera had felt uncomfortable, but there was no way of stopping the prince unless she stopped working in the palace.

Tiera had told Meena about the day it all started, when Prince Bantu had caught Tiera in his mother's private chambers, cleaning. On another occasion, the prince was already hiding under the velvet duvet lace. As Tiera began to pull the bedsheet to change it, she leapt back in fright when the prince jumped at her, trying to pull her on the bed. And in the clumsiness of being caught half under the sheet and not being able to see, Tiera had fallen on the embroidered Egyptian carpet, screaming at the prince, "What do you think you are doing?"

She had fallen with her face half-covered with the duvet lace. She looked like she was playing a hide and seek game with the prince, so instead of being angry, she had burst into laughter, in unison with the prince. Sitting gingerly on the carpet, she tried to steady herself with the intention of leaving the room, which happened to be a mistake. Prince Bantu had been very persuasive, to the point where Tiera couldn't say no. Tiera couldn't breathe, Prince Bantu had kissed her. After that, she had cried softly with the guilt of enjoying what had happened between her and the prince.

"Meena, please, help me..." she had cried; however, Meena wasn't there, and no one was around.

There were other occasions when the prince and Tiera had met up to show their affection to one another, and every time Tiera would cry. She knew Prince Bantu's affection towards her and her response to it would end up bringing shame on her and her family. Who could she turn to? One day, Prince Bantu had sat beside her on the carpet, laughing at her sheepishly. "Come,

on my princess,” he had teased her, “nothing will happen to you, don’t you love me?” the prince had pried.

“Why are you talking about love when you know nothing will come out of this. You know we are in two different worlds; don’t you know?” Tiera had asked, before she continued,

“You know I am engaged.” They both fell silent for a while, before Tiera concluded, “You know this isn’t going anywhere, and it will only get me into trouble.”

Tiera was deep in thoughts, knowing for sure that there had never been any story in the history books of Harlem where a maid married a prince, and Tiera was certain that things would not change in her time. How can a maid become a princess in the Kingdom of Harlem? No way.

“If this gets out, you’ll have brought doom on me and my family,” Tiera whimpered, slowly drying the tears from her face, and trying to get up to leave, but the prince had pulled her back.

“Well, welcome to my world,” said the prince. “I am already doomed anyway.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Tiera. “Don’t worry, Tiera – this is our secret.”

“But secrets always have a way of getting out. What if this gets out?”

“It won’t; it’s our secret...” replied the prince. “I will keep it our secret and take it to my grave,” he continued. “But you’re too young to be talking about graves...” replied Tiera.

“Never mind...” mumbled the prince. “I do love you, you know...I only wish things were different,” he said, before jumping up without warning; this made Tiera fall back on the carpet.

The prince went on a rant.

“I wish I were not a prince. I hate this family. I have never had the freedom other children have had to play around. I do

not have friends; I am being groomed to be a king – can you imagine? I must follow stupid royal rules, etiquettes, pretend to the King and Queen to get them off! my back...I can't go into the fields; I can't go to the local school, royal guards are always watching me, the people of Harlem are always judging me because of my father. I can't be myself at all. So, tell me, who is trapped or doomed, you or me?" "The citizens of Harlem accuse the royal family of spending their money, but we represent this kingdom and bring trade in from other kingdoms. The Palace is a prison for me, and I wish the accident of birth could be reversed," he concluded.

"It's not as bad as you make it," said Tiera, now trying to console the prince, forgetting her own dilemma for the moment, and wondering why he was complaining so much. Every young man in Harlem wanted to be in his shoes. "I have been told that I can't even love anyone and will have to marry for allegiance with one of the ruling families from the other kingdoms. I asked Mother, '*What if I don't love her?*' And she had responded, '*Love has nothing to do with it.*' But can love be controlled? See why I say I am doomed as well?"

Suddenly, the prince whispered to Tiera, "Wipe your tears and relax. I will marry you. I swear this on the soul, spirit, and heart of my grandmother. I will never deny our love."

"If you say so, Prince Bantu; I know you will make things right," whispered Tiera unconvincingly.

"I will see you tomorrow, come back here tomorrow at the same time," the prince had said before they both left the room.

Tiera didn't return the second day as the prince had asked, however, she continued working at the palace. Tiera realised that there was no way she could avoid seeing the prince unless she stopped working at the palace – which was not an option.

She would have had to explain her reason to the head of the

royal maids and to her family. Her reasons would be unconvincing, since everyone knew she was saving for her traditional marriage. The royal family paid good wages and she had been saving for a while. Prince Bantu and Tiera continued to see each other in secret, since Tiera was convinced that the prince loved her. The maids at the palace had their suspicions, but nobody voiced them.

It was only when she discovered that she was pregnant that she realised she had to confide in someone and only one person came to mind: her best friend, Meena.

At the royal maids' chambers, Meena and Tiera had sat in a Corner, far away from one another.

"Calm down, steady yourself, and tell me what is wrong," Meena had said to Tiera, when she burst out crying during their conversation. "What's the problem, my friend?" "It's Prince Bantu...I am doomed," she whispered before she started shivering and weeping uncontrollably.

"Tiera...!" Meena had shouted. "You need to snap out of this self-pity mode and tell me exactly what the problem is; you scare me, what is it?"

"I am doomed," she wailed.

"Is it about your marriage to Akiba?" It was an open secret that Akiba only wanted to marry Tiera to pursue his own personal interest.

Tiera responded by saying, "You know, it's my wages from the palace he is interested in... He also wants to show off to Carew that he is better than him by marrying me... No, you don't understand, I have put my family to shame..."

"How? Please, calm down... What have you done?"

"My family and I will be banished from the Kingdom, and I could die in 'No Man's Land'."

“Can you please tell me what is going on? Who is killing who?” “I am...am, hmmm...”

At this point, Meena became annoyed and said to Tiera angrily, “Please, spit it out at once, before the Queen gets back or I am getting out of here.”

“No...please, don’t leave me,” Tiera replied, clinging to Meena’s arm. “I want to die.”

“Then do that on your own. I’ve got to go now, Tiera, call me when you are ready to talk – I’ve work to do.”

Meena turned to leave, taking quick steps to get away. Having spent too much time with her friend rather than her chores at the palace was already an offence in accordance with the Queen’s code of conduct for royal maids. Tiera ran after her and touched Meena’s hand. As Meena rolled her eyes at Tiera, she observed that Tiera was clutching at her chest. “Help me,” Tiera said, falling to the ground before Meena could reach her. Tiera had fainted. Meena was so scared that she stood over her for a while, frozen. Not knowing what do, she sat on the floor like a zombie with her hands clasped on her head. Suddenly, as if on cue, Meena jumped to her feet, ran to fetch some water, ran back, and emptied the bowl of water on Tiera’s face, who jumped up, gasping for air.

“Help me,” she whimpered, after looking around to make sure no one was watching. Sure, that nobody was nearby; she leaned closer to Meena and whispered very softly, “I am pregnant.”

“No, you are not,” said Meena, pulling back to look into Tiera’s eyes. “Surely, that’s a thing of joy,” she whispered back to her, stroking her hair gently to the back.

“Yes, I am pregnant, and it’s not what you think.” “You mean Akiba?”

“No.”

“But, you are not supposed to, you know, before you marry.”
“I know the tradition, but it’s worse than that.”

“So, when are you going to tell Akiba?” asked Meena. “I can’t tell him,” Tiera whispered.

“You know, it’s a matter of time before everyone finds out...”
“I am dead,” said Tiera as she started to cry again.

“I can’t help you if you can’t trust me enough to tell me what’s on your mind.”

“It’s Prince Bantu,” she blurted out. ‘What about him?’ asked Meena. ‘Erm...err...it’s his baby...,’ cried Tiera. “You are really dead,” Meena mimicked, saying nothing else.

They continued sitting on the floor, rocking to and fro unconsciously, not uttering another word to each other, looking into the empty space before them. There was no need for words, as they had recognised the magnitude of Tiera’s situation. They were lost in time, in the world...

Suddenly, they heard the distant voice of the Queen, and without speaking to one another, jumped up and ran in different directions, as being seen together would have been trouble. The Queen’s code of conduct was strict, and she only bent the rules if she liked you.

Chapter 15

The Confrontation

Tiera's mother, Randina, had noticed after a few weeks that all was not well with her daughter. She discussed this with her husband, Naru, who had noticed nothing.

"I am not surprised," Randina had said to him. "You always walk around with your eyes closed; you don't get involved with things around here," she had concluded in frustration.

"If you must know, I prefer it that way. You know, I don't want any of your trouble, you wear the trousers, remember?" "Please, be serious," Randina had pleaded with him.

"I'm serious, I have learnt to leave things in my wife's capable hands," he had added with a wink.

"Your daughter is pregnant. She has brought shame on us; the story gets deadlier rather than worse," Randina whispered.

"How so?" Naru had asked, without showing much interest. He didn't support his daughter marrying Akiba, whom he personally considered a loser. If Tiera was pregnant for him, it meant they would have to support their daughter in raising their

grandchild, which he personally wasn't looking forward to. Akiba had no job and was known to live off other people. Naru had been forced by family ties to agree to the marriage between his daughter and Akiba. "Prince Bantu is responsible for her pregnancy," Randina blurted out when she still had the courage to speak.

Randina now had Naru's full attention. "No," he gasped, before flopping on the couch like a whale. "We are in trouble," he added. "That can't be! It's—" "Yes, it is," interjected Randina, without waiting for him to finish what he was about to say.

"Then, we have a duty to tell the Queen; we must arrange a meeting quickly and bring this to her attention. You know that our customs and traditions are quite clear that the man who impregnates a woman outside of wedlock must marry her immediately."

"In your dreams," Randina muttered, adding, "I don't know how you can be calm about this; this can't be good news for our family." "But what can we do?" he replied. "Perhaps our fortunes will change when Tiera marries the prince. You know the rules of our kingdom."

"You know that can never happen. Rules apply to govern the poor. I am sure you know the rich bend the rules to suit them, or they get away from them altogether. What world do you live in? Look around you."

Randina burst out laughing hysterically. Naru stared at her as if she had lost her mind.

"I don't know about you, but I have a very bad feeling about this. It won't end well, believe me," Randina stated, convinced that something bad was about to happen.

Chapter 16

Prince Bantu's lie

Tiera's parents agreed to meet with the royal family, and you guessed right, the meeting was worse than Randina ever predicted. It was the genesis of all problems to come.

Prior to their meeting with the royal family, Tiera's parents, Randina and Naru, had called Tiera and asked her specific details about her relationship with Prince Bantu. Tiera had revealed as much as she could, telling her parents that Prince Bantu had professed his love for her and she was certain that he would not deny their love and the pregnancy.

"He even swore on his grandmother's spirit and soul when he told me," she had added, ending her sentence with, "promising that he would marry me as well, and, Mother... I never admitted this to Prince Bantu, but I love him so dearly." Tiera then burst into tears.

Randina had frowned and Naru had scowled, before asking, "He swore on his grandmother's life that he would marry you?"

He continued by adding, "That can only be good news."

“I have told you, there is no happy ending to this story,” stated Randina. “We are poor, not royals, not—” “I know, Mother,” Tiera interrupted.

The day of the meeting arrived, and Tiera and her parents made their way to the palace. All procedures were cut short as the Queen asked Tiera’s parents to tell their story. It was therefore surprising for Tiera’s parents that after they had recounted their story to the royal family, no one had responded immediately.

Prince Bantu had sat still, deep in thought, as Tiera looked onto him, pleading with her eyes for him to support her story. But he had said nothing and simply looked far ahead of him, into nothingness. The Queen brought him back to the present by asking him to respond to Tiera’s story. Prince Bantu did. He jumped up from his seat without warning, rushed forward before anyone could stop him, raised his open palm, and slapped Tiera on the face. The force behind the slap was so strong that she almost fell to the ground. Tiera’s parents had rushed to her side to steady her.

“How dare you lie about me!” he had said through clenched teeth. “I only see you in the palace, as one of the royal maids. Have I ever been alone with you in this palace before? Answer me, have I?”

Tiera was crying and begging him at the same time. “Please tell the truth, you said you would marry me,” she had whispered.

“The truth is this: I never promised to marry you and I am not responsible for your bastard baby!”

“Stop it, Bantu, stop!” cried his mother. “Show some respect to the people here.”

“That’s not true!” cried Tiera.

“Shut up, you don’t know what is true,” replied Prince Bantu, looking directly at Tiera.

“But, you swore on your grandmother’s life and you know the consequences for that.”

“I don’t care; she is an old witch anyway!”

At that point, everyone fell silent. You could have heard a pin drop. After a while, his grandmother began to pant and choke, managing to say, “Bantu, tell me you didn’t swear on my life.” Prince Bantu looked down and didn’t respond.

“Do you know what will happen to me if you swore on my life and told a lie?”

“I know.”

“So, are you responsible for Tiera’s pregnancy or not?” “I’m not!” he screamed, adding, “I barely know her. She’s not even a princess, just a royal maid, why would anyone believe her word against mine? Why would you believe her lies? Why?” Prince Bantu simply stomped off without listening to his mother, who was calling him to come back. The royal family exchanged looks, completely shocked by what they’d heard and the consequences of what would happen if Tiera were telling the truth. The Queen beckoned with her hand to Paga, saying “fetch Bantu and bring him here this minute.”

When Prince Bantu returned into the room, the royal family dismissed Tiera and her parents, with the Queen adding, “Give us a week to deliberate on this matter, we will speak to Prince Bantu again and let you know our decision.”

“Why bother?” screamed Prince Bantu, lunging at them and wagging his finger at Tiera and her family. “You are banished from the Kingdom of Harlem. I repeat, you, your mother, and father are banished.”

The Queen and the King were too shocked for words. Tiera wailed, refusing to leave with her parents, shrieking, “I’m not

leaving the palace until Prince Bantu tells the truth, he will not ruin my life; please help, I am doomed.” The Queen had had enough; she beckoned at the royal guards, who didn’t need to be told what they had to do.

They tried to remove Tiera, who was struggling and shouting while her parents looked on in complete silence as they walked quietly to the door. Tiera was later whisked up and carried out by one of the royal guards. “You will not get away with this,” were her last words before Paga lifted her off the floor and bundled her out of the palace.

The King, who had remained silent throughout the meeting, left for his private chambers without saying a word.

The Queen and King’s Mother, on the other hand, went into Prince Bantu’s room and sat on the bed. The Queen said to her son in a soft voice, trying to get the truth out of him, that she was sure the royal maid wouldn’t have made such an accusation if there were no element of truth in it. She needed to know the truth to work out her next line of action. “You have brought shame and disgrace to us. When Tiera’s family asked for a meeting, this was the last thing we expected.”

The Queen took a long pause and continued speaking. “You know what will happen to Tiera’s family if you have lied: they will be banished from the Kingdom of Harlem, and no one knows where they will go and what will happen to them. As for King’s Mother, your grandmother, you know what will happen to her if you lied. She will die seven days from today, that’s custom and tradition, because you swore on her life. The beast will come for her.”

She paused, giving her son time to take in what she was talking about, and then continued, without giving him an opportunity to respond.

“It’s not too late to make things right, but before we can do

that, you need to tell us the truth about you and the royal maid Tiera, so we can call on The Wise One, who will tell us what to do to make the problem go away.”

“I repeat myself; you know *you cannot swear* on the life of your grandmother, especially if you are lying, so please tell us exactly what happened.” The Queen looked around the room, and waving her hand at the same time, said, “See, your father is not here, I need to plead with him to forgive you.”

“But, Mother, have I ever lied to you before?” asked

Prince Bantu. “I am telling you the truth: I didn’t promise to marry maid Tiera, neither am I responsible for her pregnancy.” Prince Bantu continued, “To convince you that I am telling the truth, Mother, I swear on the life of King’s Mother.”

The Queen didn’t know what to do anymore, she was short for words and said, “The next seven days are crucial and will confirm who is telling the truth, you, or your maid Tiera.”

King’s Mother began to shake uncontrollably. She didn’t know what to think, was Prince Bantu lying or telling the truth? If he was lying, then he had just given her a death sentence, meaning she only had seven days to live. What would happen to her in seven days? Why didn’t he swear on his parents’ lives? “Why did he swear on my life?” she cried out loud.

The Queen sat with her head bowed low, not having the courage to look at King’s Mother. She knew how grave this matter was. She didn’t even know what to report back to the King. They had done everything to raise Bantu as an honourable young man and the future king, but why did he have to swear? What would she do? She was aware of the saying in Harlem, ‘*Swear on the life of your enemies if you tell a lie and watch them die in seven days.*’ Some have said it meant nothing. Others have said it was custom and tradition to prove your innocence.

Swearing on people's lives was taken seriously in Harlem, and it was the only way people could prove they were 100% innocent. The Queen didn't think her son was telling the truth about Tiera.

The Queen sighed, and King's Mother heaved, before they both stood up and walked out of his room. The Queen reassured King's Mother, saying, "I'm sure nothing will happen to you; why would Bantu lie?"

King's Mother was not convinced.

Chapter 17

Demise of King's Mother

No one in the royal family could ever forget the roller coaster of events that happened during the week after the drama with Tiera. Prince Bantu had hoped it was a secret he would carry to his grave. The guilt he felt was like a gaping hole that came from a senseless tragedy. He only had himself to blame.

King Bantu Baha Banujala III refused to speak to his son. The King didn't care if Bantu was telling the truth or not. He was more ashamed that the royal maid had had the courage to accuse his son of getting her pregnant.

King Banujala III was sure that his wife didn't believe his son's story, but they had no way of finding out the truth. Everyone knew that only time would tell. They waited patiently to see if King's Mother would survive the next seven days; unfortunately, that was the only way they had to find out.

As it happened, events quickly began to unfold the very next day, which was the beginning of seven days of horror for

King's Mother and the whole of the royal family. This changed the course of their lives forever.



On Day One

King's Mother had woken up screaming for Queen Barta. "Help! My hair is falling off!"

The Queen had run to her, trying to calm her down when she got to her room, saying, "No, King's Mother, you look fine to me."

"Look, just...look," she continued, pulling a chunk of hair from her head, and thrusting them at the Queen to show her.

"King's Mother, it's normal for little strands of hair to fall out when you brush your hair or when you are a certain age."

"Not on this scale, and these are not little strands, in case you haven't noticed," she responded. King's Mother continued to hold out the chunk of hair on her hand. "It's Bantu..." she whispered, "he swore on my life..."

"King's Mother come with me, and I will brush your hair gently with my special brush to make sure it doesn't fall off. I have this medicinal ointment I can rub on it; it will help your hair grow."



On Day Two

The Queen could hear King's Mother wailing early in the morning, before the break of dawn. The royal maids and the Queen ran towards her room, thinking something terrible had happened to her. Only the King and Prince Bantu didn't join in the confusion.

“Look at my skin!” King’s Mother had screamed, throwing her arms over her head without giving anyone the chance to examine them. “My skin is falling off” she screeched.

“King’s Mother...”

“See... Look,” she whimpered, pointing at her legs as she lifted her robe for them to see and thrust her arms forward without warning.

“No, King’s Mother, will you get a grip?” snapped the Queen spitefully. “There must be an explanation for this.” “Can’t you see the patches on my body?” King’s Mother stated in despair.

“How can your skin fall off? You only have sensitive skin, King’s Mother. It’s just dry. Do you want me to send for The Wise One or your son?”

“No... I’m going to die. The Harlem Beast is coming for me.” “The Harlem Beast...?”

“Yes, it’s Bantu; he sentenced me to death when he swore on my life!”

“King’s Mother!” the Queen exclaimed. She stopped herself right on time to take in a deep breath, reminding herself to stay calm, before saying, “Come with me, I will add my medicinal ointment to your skin to make it glow.”



On Day Three

“Bantuuuuuuuu!” screamed King’s Mother. At this point, it was as if the roof of the palace was going to cave in. King’s Mother was in her room, throwing chairs, bottles, and anything she could lay her hands on. This time, even the King couldn’t keep away, he had to see what was happening to his mother.

“Yes, Grandmother...” Prince Bantu responded, raising his

voice to meet the urgency in his grandmother's voice and running to see her. He had been avoiding his grandmother, but now he couldn't keep away, because she had called him directly.

"Come here this minute!" screamed King's Mother, smashing the mirror in her room with a shoe.

This time, the King and the Queen had rushed to Grandmother's room and stood looking at the drama and the havoc King's Mother was causing. They were now all tired of her complaining, rudeness, whimpering, and suspicions. The Queen had put it down to King's Mother seeking her son's attention. It wasn't a secret that the King avoided his mother as much as possible. King's Mother's drama, as they called it, had become unbearable for the whole family, but there was nothing they could do about it.

"Yes, Grandmother," Prince Bantu had said softly, slowing down his pace to stroll into her room. "Why can't you leave us all alone?"

"That's no way to speak to my mother," barked the King as he shifted position to stand beside his son. Prince Bantu looked back with a shocked expression on his face when he saw his parents and some senior maids behind them. Upon Bantu's entering the room, the Queen dismissed all the maids, telling them to go to the maids' quarters, adding, "This is a family matter."

King's Mother faced Prince Bantu, begging him, "Look at my eyes, they are sinking in... I can barely see anything."

"Can you please tell the truth about Tiera's pregnancy?" added King's Mother.

"Why do you ask, Grandmother? I have already told you the truth about the maid Tiera."

"So, how can you explain why I seem to be disappearing?"

Can't you see what is happening to me? It's because you

swore on my life and it's now certain that you lied." "No, Grandmother. I didn't lie..."

"Then, why are these terrible things happening to me, huh?"

Tell me, why? You've placed a death sentence on me," she continued. "You swore you didn't do it."

"I didn't...I'm...I'm..." replied Prince Bantu without answering. Before anyone could stop the King's Mother, she had rushed in Prince Bantu's direction and given him a slap on the face. She held on to him tightly, occasionally breaking the hold and shaking him hard. Prince Bantu tried to break his grandmother's hold, but he couldn't. "Get her o' me, she looks scary," Prince Bantu whimpered.

The King strolled slowly to his mother, tugging at her arms to release his son from her strong hold; after a while, he succeeded in pulling her o'. He cleared some broken bottles and debris, before perching to sit beside his wife, Queen Barta, uncomfortably on the couch. He then turned and grabbed his son on the shoulders, addressing him in a very clear and steady voice.

"Look at your grandmother and look at her very well. We do not know what is happening to her, even though Mother believes that she is dying. One thing is for sure: only you know if you have lied about the maid Tiera. You had better tell us the truth before we send for The Wise One to reveal the secret behind Mother's illness. Please, Son," he begged softly, "Tell us the truth now, before it is too late for King's Mother."

The Queen and the King's Mother looked on quietly.

"Father, she's just acting up as usual, seeking your attention." "If you lied, you know the Harlem Beast will take your grandmother away on the seventh day," added the Queen gently.

"Mother, you know that's not true, no beast is coming.

Have you seen any in Harlem before?”

“Not seeing it happen doesn’t mean it’s not true, Son.”

“Well, I think the story is really just to stop people from lying.” “Can’t you see that your grandmother is in great pain?” pressed the King.

“No, Father, Grandmother’s misfortune has nothing to do with me.”

They couldn’t get Prince Bantu to confess, so the Queen took King’s Mother away to calm her down, giving her some medicinal potion to make her sleep.



On Day Six

By the sixth day, it was obvious to the royal family that Prince Bantu had told a lie. King’s Mother’s body was infected with what they called a ‘Great Disease’. King’s Mother’s appearance had changed completely. She looked skinny and gaunt. Her skin was all wrinkled and dry. She couldn’t walk straight, and her legs looked like sticks that couldn’t carry her frail body. All her hair had fallen out completely, leaving a few miserable looking, unhealthy strands. When you looked at her, you saw a nightmare that was real. She had started tying a scarf on her head to cover her baldness. The scarf looked dirty; you wouldn’t want to touch it. Her eyes were sunken in and looked hollow.

After several small talks with Prince Bantu and the threat about the Harlem Beast coming for him as well, he had confessed about Tiera, in a contrite tone, confirming her story. He concluded that he had been with Tiera, and it was likely that Tiera’s pregnancy belonged to him; however, he had no real way of knowing.

“I do love her,” whispered Prince Bantu, who then told his version of his romantic involvement with the royal maid Tiera.

After his confession, he concluded by saying, “This is your fault for trying to control who I love. You said I couldn’t marry anyone of my choice— ‘a commoner’, using your exact words – that I had to marry into another royal family arranged by Father. I didn’t want to let you down, Father, which is why I didn’t tell you the truth; I didn’t want to bring shame to the family.”

It was, however, too late to call upon The Wise One to see how he could help.

“You should have confessed! It’s always a better thing to do because we may have been able to fix things. But not now, it seems too late for King’s Mother,” replied the King angrily.

The Queen had burst into tears instantly, and Grandmother had started wailing. The King walked away very quickly, not wanting anyone to see a tear drop down his face. *Tears are for women*, he thought, and didn’t want to show that he was weak. “There has to be a way,” were the last words he uttered before leaving the room and closing the door gently behind him. He made a mental note to send for The Wise One for any last minute solution, if not for King’s Mother, at least for his son.

Chapter 18

Strange Occurrence

In the maids' quarters, they stood together in a crowd and gossiped about the cause of King's Mother's troubles, but no one was the wiser.

Some said, "She's been cursed by the gods." Others stated, "The Harlem Beast is coming for her."

"Stop spreading rumours about the beast, it's an awful thing to say," one of them had admonished.

"I swear I heard the word 'beast' when I was leaving Prince Bantu's room. I moved very slowly, so I could...you know... eavesdrop on their conversation."

No one could confirm the true story, but they were certain that whatever it was, the prince was lying. It was, however, not their place to tell King Bantu Baha Banujala III or Queen Barta. They knew the damage was done anyway.

Later, on Day Six, the King, the Queen, and Prince Bantu had gone to spend some time with King's Mother. As they were about to leave, King's Mother began to speak, addressing Prince Bantu, "Remember, tomorrow is the seventh day; if the Harlem

Beast comes for me, I will place you under a curse and pronounce a death sentence on you too, which will hang over your head forever. When you become the King of Harlem, your reign will not prosper...you will be shamed. You will not die but live a life of misery; you will be childless.”

She began to cough but steadied herself and continued.

“I will escape from wherever the beast takes me to come back and torment you... My spirit will not depart from this palace, it will haunt you... The Hago Region...”

“Mother! Ask her to stop!” Bantu screamed before running out of the room.

“The King’s Mother doesn’t mean any of this,” uttered Queen Barta, before she left the room as well.

“I mean every word I have pronounced,” whispered King’s Mother.



On Day Seven

The seventh day was the day no one in the royal household would ever forget. Up until the present day, King Bantu had consoled himself throughout the years that the day never happened, and it was simply a bad dream, if only. In his mind, Prince Bantu had written it off as a bad dream. “It surely couldn’t have been real,” he often told himself. The King had, however, taken precautions and asked that Paga sit in King’s Mother’s room every day to protect her from prying eyes. The King had taken additional precautions by relieving the other royal maids from their duties on that day. He didn’t know what was going to happen, and it was important that they were able to control the story, if indeed something did happen.

The gust of wind that blew and attacked the palace was

unbelievable, everywhere had turned dark. The immediate members of the royal family could hear the maids screaming in their quarters, but they didn't dare show their faces in the main palace; they had been warned to stay away. Everyone nursed their fear in secret.

Suddenly, the King, the Queen, and Prince Bantu could hear the King's Mother's shrill noise as they all made their way to her room. The past few days had been a collective nightmare for the royal family. King's Mother was howling, screaming, sobbing in-between, wailing, and shouting. Her screams went up and down; one minute it was loud, the next minute it was faint. She behaved like a deranged woman.

"Someone, help me," she whimpered. "Get away from me," she said during another outburst.

When the rest of the royal family arrived at the King's Mother's room and saw her condition, they all burst out in unison, "What happened to you?"

"No, no... What's happened to my mother?" screamed the King, rushing to her side but stopping abruptly to avoid touching her. He fell in a heap before her, helpless and frightened. Prince Bantu simply covered his face with his hands; he couldn't bear to look at the skeletal frame of his grandmother.

"The beast is coming for me, look over there," King's Mother said, pointing at a corner of the room. Everyone looked, but they saw nothing. "No, it's there," she said once again, pointing in another direction. They looked but saw nothing.

"Mother, there is no beast coming for you, it's all in your mind," said the King, who had regained his composure, had gotten up too, and was trying to calm his mother down. "I will call The Wise One and he will sort this out," he added. "Surely, the 'swearing taboo' can't be real," mumbled the King. He'd never believed it to be true. Suddenly and without warning,

they heard a whoosh of some sort. As King's Mother screamed, pointing towards the direction of her window, everyone looked and saw a strange creature forcing itself through the window. It looked like a beast.

At that point, they all ran, to hide, with King's Mother crawling straight under her bed, which was big enough for only her now-shrunken frame. Prince Bantu and the King hid behind the big cupboard, the Queen ran behind her husband, holding him tightly around the waist. The King stood very still, frozen to the spot. He peeped from behind the cupboard and watched.

The beast flapped its wings, forcing itself through the large window, and in the process damaged the frames around it and smashed the glass between the panel frames. It grabbed King's Mother's legs, pulling and yanking her from under the bed where she was hiding. King's Mother tried to hold on to the bed frame with the little strength she had, but the beast wouldn't let her go. No one in the room moved, they were frozen with shock.

Suddenly, the beast swept the bed away with its wings and King's Mother became exposed. It moved closer and grabbed her shoulders with such force that she looked like a mere piece of paper; it whisked her away. "Help me," she whimpered. "Help me!" she screamed, but nobody had the power to do anything as the beast carted King's Mother away. As if on a cue, the King ran towards his mother and after the beast, raising his hands to grab her legs to rescue her from the beast. Tears rolled freely down his face as he screamed to be heard, "Mother, take hold of my hand, stay with us, and let's fight the beast!" King's Mother looked like a deranged woman as she looked down at her son with no strength left in her to do or say anything.

Out of nowhere, they heard a voice screaming, "No!" and someone running after King's Mother to save her. They turned to look and discovered that it was Paga. He was trying to rescue

King's Mother. He managed to grab one of her legs, but he couldn't match the power and strength of the beast. He couldn't keep his hold on King's Mother and could only watch as the beast took her away.

"Err...what are you doing here? How long have you been here?" stammered the King. Paga was afraid, having been witness to the deadliest secret of the royal family. He wished he hadn't been there. "You asked me to keep an eye on King's Mother, Your Royal Highness. You wanted only me to attend to her, and I have been doing this since day one of the incident. I didn't know I would see anything like this. You can trust me, Your Highness" he added very quickly.

The King was cross that someone else had seen what had happened to his mother, but this was no time to be emotional, he had to act quickly. "Well, I don't have to remind you of what will happen to you if this gets out."

The maids were nowhere to be seen, but from their quarters, and for those who were looking outside the window, they saw a creature flying away with what they thought was prey. It wasn't normal to see such things, but they shrugged their shoulders and concluded that it wasn't unusual to see strange things around the palace. This was the Kingdom of Harlem, where anything could happen.

The King, Queen, and Paga got together to agree the best story they could spin to the people of Harlem about King's Mother's passing. They had to fabricate a believable lie, without people asking too many questions. It was at that moment that Paga got his promotion to the head of royal guards. The King wanted him to keep his mouth shut and for him to keep the secret at all costs. He also wanted Paga close to him as well.

So, over a period of seven days, the royal family, including Paga, pretended as if King's Mother were still alive. Paga took

food into her bedroom, which he ate. The Queen would go to her room as well and converse with the wall, so maids could hear her voice, as if speaking to King's Mother. On the seventh day after the King's Mother's disappearance, the Queen began to cry in the palace, announcing King's Mother's passing. A few maids heard this and spread the news.

Paga arranged a meeting for the royal guards and maids and announced that, "The King's Mother has passed." He added that, "The King wants a quiet burial ceremony, to be attended only by his immediate family, The Wise One, and myself. No one else will attend."

Paga knew that an empty coffin would be buried at the back of the palace where he had prepared. The King had discussed this with him, and they had agreed that it would be the best thing to do. Paga looked for a wooded area within the boundaries of Hago Region to 'bury' the King's Mother. No one else knew that it was going to be a grave with an empty coffin. This had never happened in the history of Harlem.

One week of mourning was declared in the Kingdom of Harlem for King's Mother, with the King cancelling all his appointments.

Prince Bantu couldn't believe what had happened. After a few weeks, the Queen and King agreed that they should build a new palace and move out of Hago Region, as they couldn't dispel the rumours about the palace and Hago Region being haunted. In the aftermath of the week, maids had whispered after the end of one week of mourning that they had seen the King's Mother, and some claimed to have seen the beast, while others swore that they saw an old woman roaming the grounds of the palace. The royal maids would scream; they heard howling in the middle of the night. A lot of strange things began to happen that they couldn't explain. King Bantu Baha Banujala

III began to plan for the royal family to vacate and relocate the palace to Shakula, the south of Harlem, and work was to commence immediately.

After the funeral, the King had consulted The Wise One and he had confirmed that Prince Bantu needed to confess to the citizens of Harlem to break King's Mother curse, but Prince Bantu wasn't having any of it and the King let things be. The Wise One then made another suggestion. That they needed to go on a special round, which Bantu and his mother had done since he was a little boy. Bantu's response and behaviour during the round would determine how quickly King's Mother's curse would be broken. "Report back to me," The Wise One had concluded. They had reported back to him about Bantu's behaviour. Prince Bantu had seen an old woman, had been rude, and had more curses placed on him.

"If he had been civil to the old woman he had seen, things would have been different," concluded The Wise One, the old woman would have blessed Bantu and that would have been sufficient.



Over the years, as Prince Bantu grew older and later became King Bantu, he couldn't stop playing the scene in his mind. The Wise One had told him to confess and reveal the secret to the citizens of Harlem, but he had refused. Mother had called The Wise One repeatedly, but nothing had changed. The Wise One encouraged him to continue the rounds after King's Mother's funeral. "You may be fortunate to encounter the old woman again – and have the opportunity to redeem yourself," The Wise One had stated. Prince Bantu had refused to go on any more rounds, even though what had happened that day had scared

him forever and had added to the nightmare that haunted his life.

He never saw Tiera and her family again. No one knew what became of them. Tiera and her family assumed that they would be banished, and so rumour had it that they had packed their stuff and left Harlem in the middle of the night – on the same day they had been in the palace. So, by the time his parents sent for Tiera's family, the royal guards could not find them. He didn't know if she was pregnant at that time or not. He had no idea where she had gone with her family, but he knew it wouldn't be a good place.

Was what happened to his grandmother simply a coincidence? *Did Tiera have a baby? Is the baby mine?* He had thought it would have been a happy ending if Tiera had their baby. More so, it was simply a taboo to have a royal baby outside of Harlem.

So, the curse remained unbroken until Zogi and his friends went behind the Hago Gate, or did it?

Chapter 19

Tiera leaves Harlem

The past defined the present. Tiera's parents didn't wait for a formal pronouncement from King Bantu Baha Banujala III to know that they would be banished from the Kingdom of Harlem, so when they got home, they disowned Tiera and ordered her to leave. There was no other way they felt able to deal with the situation.

"Please, Mother, Father, don't send me away," Tiera had cried, but her mother had pushed her away.

"Father, please forgive me," she continued as tears rolled down her face. "I didn't mean to bring shame to my family..."

"It's too late for that," Tiera's father barked as he quickly turned away, taking giant steps out of the room, so no one would see tears streaming down his face. He couldn't believe that he had lost his only child and grandchild to the royal family.

"Where will I go? Can I at least travel with you when you leave the Kingdom tomorrow? We have until dusk to leave the Kingdom of Harlem," she continued.

"Don't be deceived, Tiera, we are not in this together,"

Randina said in-between sobs. “You are on your own,” she continued, “and I agree with your father. You must leave today.”

Tiera went to her, crying; being in her teens, she didn’t have many possessions or belongings, so she didn’t have much to pack. She tried to appeal to her parents again, but it fell on deaf ears.

Tiera cried uncontrollably as she left her home and made her way out of the Kingdom of Harlem. A few of her neighbours and friends saw her as she left the Kingdom, but most averted their eyes in such a manner that you would have thought Tiera would contaminate them.

Tiera trekked by herself for miles in the wooded areas, stopping occasionally to sit and take a rest; but the truth was she had no idea where she was going. After her strength was spent and she could no longer carry on, she decided to take a rest again. When she got up to continue, she noticed a damp and broken wooden sign. She moved to read the sign but lost her strength and fainted. Raindrops on her face brought her around. She looked up, saw the sign, and crawled in the mud.

As she moved closer, she read the sign ‘No Man’s Land.’ She looked around and saw what looked like a small farm or hunting hut. She continued to crawl, pulling her bag behind her until she got into the farm hut.

She sat in the dark, resting her head on the wooden frame, glad that she had at least found a home for the time being.

Chapter 20

Meena finds Tiera

No one knew where Tiera and her family had gone, and it was best to keep it that way; most people agreed that they were never coming back to Harlem, would never be found, and Tiera would have been killed in ‘No Man’s Land,’ since she had no one to protect her. There was a rumour that her parents had died and were linked to the strange things that happened in the palace. No one knew that Tiera was asleep in ‘No Man’s Land’ when Elderly Jereco had walked into his farmhouse, startling her awake with the loud bang of the door.



It was a long time ago, but the most miserable time of Meena’s life. Meena missed Tiera so much that when she visited her uncle in the Kingdom of Ekity, she had asked him to make discreet enquiries about her friend, since the Kingdom of Ekity was the closest to Harlem.

“Leave it with me,” Uncle Dembe replied. “If anyone knows anything about this friend of yours, it will be the Most Elderly Jereco. Give me some time and I will get back to you if I have any news,” he had concluded.

She was lucky. Her uncle was a close confidant to the Most Elderly Jereco, and through her uncle, she knew she would find Tiera if she were in the Kingdom of Ekity. “I can only do my bit,” she had confided in her uncle.

After a few weeks, on one of her visits, she received information from her uncle that her friend had indeed been found by the Most Elderly Jereco in ‘No Man’s Land’. Uncle Dembe asked her to keep it a secret to ensure the safety of her friend. No one had seen any other members of her family.

Tiera couldn’t be brought into the Kingdom of Harlem. Uncle Dembe said to Meena, “I didn’t show too much interest when my friend Jereco was giving me information about your friend. He didn’t know I was fishing for information. This lady, if she is Tiera, is in ‘No Man’s Land’ and you must find a way to locate her. I can’t help you any more than that, and please leave my name out of this... I don’t want to get into any trouble.”

Meena leapt up with joy, hugging her uncle and thanking him, adding, “You’ve given me more than enough to work with, I will find her. Thank you so much, Uncle Dembe,” she added before leaving.

Meena snuck out of the Kingdom of Harlem on a couple of occasions to ‘No Man’s Land’, but she didn’t find Tiera. Being careful and not wanting to be found out didn’t help. She convinced Statish that she was going to see Uncle Dembe in the Kingdom of Ekity, and he shrugged without interest, knowing exactly what she was up to. Statish knew that nothing he said would stop her from her mission to find her best friend. He knew Uncle Dembe, but he was no great fan of him. Uncle

Dembe had opposed their marriage; he didn't think Statish was good enough for Meena.

One day, Meena was about to give up on her search for Tiera when, before dawn, she had ventured into 'No Man's Land' again and had found her.

Meena made sure that she was out of sight, sneaking up behind Tiera. She used her hands to cover Tiera's eyes from behind, saying, "Guess who." Tiera turned around very quickly, recognising her friend's voice. No one visited her except for Elderly Jereco, who was too serious to play hide and seek with her. When she confirmed that it was Meena, she burst into tears.

"How did you find me?" she managed to ask, while sobbing. "You are the only other human being I have seen since...you know; the only other person is the man who found me here. I know he is an important man, but he refused to tell me his name."

"Don't worry about that. Tell me, how have you been?" Meena asked, not yet revealing the identity of Elderly Jereco.

Tiera recounted her journey and how her parents had disowned her. "I can't get over the shame and humiliation Prince Bantu brought on me and my family; especially my parents, who had nothing to do with it."

"Well, be careful who you believe next time," said Meena, "love can be a terrible thing, and experience is sometimes a bitter lesson. Better to learn from someone else," she added wisely.

"Never mind; the foolish law and tradition didn't help either." "How are you feeling today and what is going on?" "Hmmm..." started Tiera.

Meena interrupted her by saying loudly, "Look at me, have I

changed? I have wonderful news for you!” she exclaimed, without letting her friend speak.

“What is the news, my friend?” replied Tiera, forgetting for a moment that she had been interrupted. Such was their relationship.

“I am pregnant too,” exclaimed Meena, “and as a matter of fact, I think our babies are due to be born at about the same time.”

“How did you work that out?”

“Well, I found out a couple of days after you told me about your pregnancy.”

“When this happened, why didn’t you tell me when we worked at the palace?” responded Tiera.

“Well, I found out about the time you had problems with Prince Bantu, and things had got out of hand...so I couldn’t share my news with you. I had to be sensitive to your problem,” she added. Meena suddenly said, “I need to start heading back to Harlem before someone finds me here with you or when I am sneaking out of ‘No Man’s Land’. I promise to give you all my support any way that I can.” “Thank you so much, my friend. Do come back quickly. You have given me hope and something to look forward to. I thought I was doomed to be alone here forever and eventually eaten by wild animals.”

“Don’t say such things; the old man will look after you.” “It’s good to know that our babies will be born about the same time – that will be great. We can do a lot of things together.”

“In ‘No Man’s Land’?” Meena asked jokingly. “You must be kidding me.”

“Yes - you can have your baby here?” probed Tiera.

“How’s that possible?” asked Meena.

“Why not?” responded Tiera, adding, “Nothing stops you if you want to, after all, your mother’s family is from the Kingdom

of Ekity, and Uncle Dembe can sort you out. Speak to Stashish," she stated.

"Well, I will ask. If my husband agrees, then so shall it be..." She laughed nervously, as she knew it was totally out of the question. Where would she find the courage to ask her husband such a dumb question? She thought. She dared not. "I love you so much, my friend," Tiera said, tears streaming down her face, as Meena prepared to leave after a few attempts. "You've been so good to me, and thank you for believing in me, looking for me, and standing by my side.

You've risked so much by trying to find me and visiting.

Thank you."

"What shall I bring for you on my next visit?" "Well..." Tiera said, and they both burst into laughter.

"I know your favourite food and drink – that is number one. I will bring comfortable robes for you and sleeping materials."

"The old man helping me has promised that when my baby is born, a few days after that he will help me travel to the Kingdom of Pamera, where my baby and I can begin a new life. He said the customs and traditions there are more relaxed than here, so no harm will come to us."

"I'm happy the old man has given you and your baby hope," Meena chortled.

"You've been such a great friend to me," Tiera blurted out, wiping a tear from her eye.

Dismissing Tiera's emotional outburst, Meena turned around to hug her friend, saying, "What are friends for? I will bring you ample supplies when next I visit."

"Thank you, my friend. I fear for that old woman, as she shall surely die, because Prince Bantu told a lie and swore on her life. It makes me feel bad about how selfish Prince Bantu

really is, you know, thinking only about himself and not caring about all the lives he has destroyed in the process.”

“Well, he’s no longer your problem!” snapped Meena.

“Know this, you’ve been vindicated.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, the King’s Mother died mysteriously. We witnessed a lot of strange things happening in the palace after the death of King’s Mother, I think it’s because of what Prince Bantu did to you, but this is a story for another day.” “Really?” whispered Tiera.

“A big shroud of secrecy is keeping the real story from coming out. The royal family is relocating. A new palace is being built in Shakula, moving it away from the Hago Region.

The rumour is that a curse has been placed on the Hago Region.”

“Hmmm...”

They both smiled and hugged each other for the last time before Meena was eventually allowed to set off.

“I wish you didn’t have to go, my friend.”

“You know that’s not possible, but I promise to see you soon.”

Meena set off to the Kingdom of Harlem, feeling sorry for her friend and wishing they could go back home together.

Chapter 21

The birth of Zogi

Meena and Tiera continued to see each other for a while, until it was almost time for Tiera to have her baby. On the fateful day, Meena had woken up very early, telling Statish, “I need to run an errand for Uncle Dembe.”

“You shouldn’t be travelling in your condition. You know our baby is due anytime from now; I don’t want you or our baby to be in any danger.”

“Since I will not be leaving home for a while after our baby is born, I thought I should run this last errand for Uncle Dembe. You know he has no other family apart from me...” “I know you are going because of your friend. I know you have found her, and you have been visiting – not sure I buy this new love for your uncle,” Statish had said and left her without uttering another word.

When Meena arrived and saw the commotion going on, she became anxious. There was an elderly woman at ‘No Man’s Land’ whom she had never seen before, conferring quietly with

the Most Elderly. Meena was certain the woman was not from the Kingdom of Ekity, because of the way she was dressed. Didn't Tiera mention to her that the plan was for an old woman to help Tiera begin a new life in the Kingdom of Pamera?

She was eager to know if Tiera's baby had been delivered. As she ran forward to find out what was going on, she fell "at on her tummy and felt a sharp pain. She cried out in anguish, holding onto to her tummy. She looked down and saw blood gushing down her legs. "Somebody help me, my baby... Oh, I'm bleeding..."

The old woman, called Antar, and the Most Elderly rushed towards Meena to help her up. They led her gently towards the farmhouse and attended to her in a little corner, to avoid disturbing Tiera. The old woman examined Meena and exclaimed, "We must deliver your baby this minute – your fall has induced labour."

The Most Elderly went to fetch some water, dropped it with the old woman, saying, "I will wait outside, Antar." He stood outside the door of the farmhouse to ensure no one would wander in unannounced. The farmhouse was his private property, but the surrounding area was open to the citizens of Ekity. He wasn't expecting anyone, but at that very moment he felt exposed, and worried that someone would see him. They were in grave danger if found out.

The old woman brought out a bottle of medicine and a small cup from her worn-out bag. She poured a portion of the medicine into the cup without measurement. "Take this, my daughter," she said, pushing the cup towards Meena's mouth. Meena took a sip and spat it out. "You must take this, my daughter; it will help your pain and hasten the delivery of your baby.

We want your baby out, healthy and in one piece."

"But it's bitter," Meena whispered, trying to spit it out. "I

know, my daughter, hold it down, it's for your own good; drink a little bit more." The old woman placed the cup back on Meena's lips and she took a big gulp, wincing as she swallowed it. The immediate reaction from Meena seemed unexpected. She felt a whoosh of pain run through her body and began to move from side to side. "My baby is coming... My baby is coming... Hmmm...my baby..."

"Don't hold back, my daughter, push...oh; I can see the baby...push."

Meena pushed for the very last time and a baby girl was delivered. She began to cry, "Statish...our baby...wish you were here," as the old woman took one glance at the baby and rushed out of the room.

The Most Elderly returned into the farmhouse when he saw the look on his friend's face. "You are a brave woman," he said, before pouring Meena more water to drink and clean up.

Meena tried to get up but fell back on the bed of straw. The determination to hold her baby in her hands gave her the strength to carry on. Meena attempted once again to get up, but felt dizzy, almost falling. Holding on to the old, moist, and rotten wooden frame to steady herself, she got up again, taking her time by placing one foot after another gingerly, scared that she might fall if her steps were rushed. Meena managed to get to the door of the farmhouse and noticed the old woman, who was still holding her baby, and the Most Elderly standing very close to each other conferring. From the look of seriousness on their faces, Meena knew immediately that something was wrong. "My baby!" she shouted in a hoarse voice. "I want to hold my baby... I want my baby..."

The Most Elderly rushed to her, steadying her and saying at the same time, "You will hold your baby. Come with me, you are still weak." Meena was led to a wooden stool made from the

stump of a tree, where she was made to sit down. The old woman came closer and gave her the baby girl. Meena hugged her dearly, kissed her face until she realised that the baby was not making any sound whatsoever.

“My baby, what is wrong with my baby...?”

“Ah...hmm... I am so sorry, my daughter,” the Most Elderly bemoaned. “Your baby didn’t make it; we think it was your fall...”

Meena threw the baby away, as if hot coal were burning her hands. The quick reflexes of the Most Elderly saved the baby from hitting the ground; he caught her at the very last minute.

Meena’s baby girl had died at birth and there was nothing she could do about it. She was distraught and inconsolable... she cried, wailed, threw herself on the ground, got up, cried, and blamed herself. “It’s my fault; I shouldn’t have come to this forbidden place.” The Most Elderly and the old woman looked on and allowed her to exhaust her grief in her own way.

“You cannot take this baby back to Harlem, so we will have to bury her here. We are so sorry for your loss,” said the old woman. Meena looked on as if in a trance and said nothing. The old woman wrapped the baby in some of the material she had left, while the Most Elderly dug a hole in the ground. The baby was placed in it and covered up. The Most Elderly cobbled some sticks and trees together and placed them on the grave. They left Meena kneeling on it to grieve some more. After a while, she got up and remembered that the only reason she was in ‘No Man’s Land’ was to see her friend Tiera. “Where’s Tiera? Has she had her baby?” Meena asked the wind.

Meena made her way to the farmhouse and waited to see the Most Elderly, the old woman, and Tiera. The Most Elderly came in and she asked him, “Where is Tiera? Has she had her baby?”

He moved closer to her to deliver the news. "Your friend had a baby boy."

"After what happened to me, this is good news. I am so happy for her. Take me to her this minute, I can't wait to see my dear friend and her new baby," Meena prattled with mixed feelings.

"I'm sorry..." replied the Most Elderly.

"Sorry about what? This is good news for my friend after what happened to her...you know?"

"I'm so sorry to say this, Tiera died after childbirth. She was so weak, we tried everything."

"Oh, no!" she screamed. "No..." she continued to cry, having not fully recovered from her own sad news; losing a baby and her best friend on the same day was too much.

"Why has this evil fortune fallen on my friend and me? Why? What do we do, Most Elderly? What do we do?" she said in-between her sobs. "Can I see my friend?" she asked. "At least pay her my last respects."

"No, you can't, my daughter. It's a taboo for you to see a dead body when you've just had a baby."

"But my baby is no more!" she wailed. "It changes nothing. I hate taboos! They do more damage than good."

"Do not worry yourself about taboos, my daughter." "Where is her baby; can I see the baby, or is it a taboo too?"

The Most Elderly walked off to fetch the baby. When he reached the other side of the farmhouse, he bent down and picked up a bundle of material, which Meena soon realised was a sleeping baby. He returned and placed Tiera's baby in Meena's arms, saying, "This baby needs a mother, and I can't take him home with me, neither can my friend." The Most Elderly left her alone with the baby and went outside to speak to the old woman, and after a short period, they returned to

speak to Meena. The old woman bent over and took the baby away from Meena, seeing how distraught she was.

“It’s unfortunate the way things have ended up,” said the old woman. “Look after him like your own, and as for you, nobody needs to know that your baby died, since everyone is of the opinion that Tiera is dead anyway. Your secret is safe with me,” she concluded.

“I also assume that there is no one left in Tiera’s family to look after the baby, since they all disappeared from the Kingdom of Harlem,” said the Most Elderly.

Meena didn’t speak, she was undecided. The Most Elderly repeated to her, “Take the baby home,” adding, “You were her best and only friend that I know. She loved and trusted you dearly; if you don’t look after this baby, you know what will happen, as you are not indigene of this kingdom.”

“I know, Most Elderly,” mumbled Meena, before she continued, “I will have to leave the baby in ‘No Man’s Land’. I can’t take him home with me, since we know that he is an unwanted prince, born outside of wedlock. Taking him could destroy our lives.”

“Is that better than the baby being left in ‘No Man’s Land’? Since Tiera’s baby survived and yours didn’t, no one will know what happened. You can keep and nurture the baby as yours forever. I repeat, no one needs to know,” the Most Elderly responded, without giving any consideration to what Meena had said.

Meena took the baby reluctantly from the old woman, tears “owing down her face. The Most Elderly asked her, “What name do you give this baby?”

“Zogi...because he has replaced my sorrow with joy.” “That is a good name,” said the Most Elderly and the old woman in unison.

“Most Elderly, what should I tell my husband?” asked Meena. “I leave that decision to you, my daughter.”

“What will happen to Tiera’s body?”

“You need not worry about that, my daughter; I will take care of everything.”

“Do you want to spend one night here to get your strength back before you travel back to Harlem?”

“No, Most Elderly, that will only raise suspicion. I will rest for a while and set out before dusk, and if I don’t feel I have the strength, I will stay with Uncle Dembe until tomorrow morning. It only means I must come up with a very good story to tell him.”

“Thank you for taking care of my friend, even at this time. It’s a sad story,” Meena snivelled.

“I had grown very fond of your friend; she had become like a daughter to me. Never you worry. That’s life, my daughter...”

You now only must worry about yourself and Zogi.” “She would have done the same for me,” Meena said.

Meena was silent for a while, before turning and addressing the Most Elderly. “What do you see when all is dark? What do you hear when all is silent? What do you say when there is no one to listen? What do you do when no one is watching? Such is the sorrow I feel about my friend Tiera.” She took the baby back to the corner of the farmhouse where he’d been picked up and wiped him with damp material while she sang to him in her native tongue. She noticed the birthmark on his arm and examined it carefully but couldn’t make anything of it. It looked like a blob.



Meena kept the baby close to her and slept for a while, but she was restless. She set off after dusk and made her way back to Harlem, making sure she didn't encounter anyone on her way as she entered the Kingdom. As she entered their home, Stashish rushed to welcome her and was surprised to see her with a baby. "What happened to you? Don't tell me you've delivered?"

Come here...tell me what happened. Is it a baby boy or girl? Oh...my baby!"

"Will you at least calm down?" whispered Meena. "I am so tired, please take the baby," she said, thrusting him into Stashish's hands. "I need to rest, and you have to look after him tonight," adding, "I will tell you all about it tomorrow." Stashish couldn't understand why he had been left holding the baby. He thought his wife would at least be happy. "Women..." he whispered as he danced around with his baby boy.

A few days later, Stashish invited a small gathering of friends, saying to Meena before their guests arrived, "This is the best day of my life – you have made me a proud man.

Thank you for giving me a beautiful baby boy," he added, "but you haven't explained to me why you named our child Zogi. Who names their child Zogi? Why has he replaced your sorrow with joy? What sorrow...?"

Without thinking, Meena replied, "It's in remembrance of my friend, Tiera... You know how her...disappearance affected me."

"But still, you should have asked me. You know we have a tradition, and we had selected names for either a baby boy or girl."

"Not now, Stashish. In time, you will know how appropriate the name is."

"Why talk to me in a riddle? Did Uncle Dembe help you?"

“I said not now, Statish, you are asking too many questions,” Meena whispered.

“Why are you sad?”

“I’m not sad, I’m happy about our baby. But Statish, things didn’t go as planned; I don’t know how to tell you.” “What happened?” he replied.

“Tiera’s baby...and my baby... it was so sad...”

“You saw Tiera? Where did you...? How...? What baby?” stammered Statish.

“Meena...congratulations!” shouted one of the guests coming into the room from outside. “Guests are waiting for you and your baby in the yard, you need to come out.”

Meena rushed out before Statish was able to ask any more questions.

Statish knew something was wrong but couldn’t place his finger on it. He would have to wait until Meena was ready to share it with him. “Should I force it out of her? No, that will not help,” he whispered under his breath as he made his way to meet their guests.

Part Three

The Truth Revealed

Chapter 22

King Bantu's regrets

The 'official' reason for King Bantu's yearly coronation anniversary was to celebrate the establishment of the Banujala Kingdom. However, due to the unforgettable events that happened at the last ceremony, King Bantu had cancelled the last four coronation anniversaries. He was determined to cancel the fifth one, but for the stern warning from The Wise One, who had ended their conversation by saying, "It may bring the solution to your current problem." As a matter of fact, the fifth anniversary had been called the *confession day* in Harlem.

After his last consultation with The Wise One, it became obvious to King Bantu that there was no way out of his dilemma and after a few sleepless nights, he realised that his preferred option was to confess to the citizens of Harlem as the alternative was unthinkable. He had unwillingly confirmed to The Wise One that he would confess.

King Bantu then began to practice repeatedly, in front of his mirror, on how best to tell his shameful story.

Anytime he got to the 7 days of terror that King's Mother endured, he would break down. On one occasion, he shed a tear for King's Mother. The terror of the 7 days would forever remain with him.

On occasions, he called Paga for support. Paga would stand without saying a word, while King Bantu recounted the story. During what they both called the final rehearsal and when the King thought he was ready, Paga interrupted the King by saying – "Your Royal Highness, please tell me your story again..."

The King rolled his eyes, angry at Paga's interruption and said, "This is my story, don't interrupt me again." "It's just that..." Paga stammered.

"You will let me finish this story..." the King snapped, without allowing Paga to finish his sentence.

"Err...umm...I want to suggest that you leave out details about the 7 days of terror...you know...King's Mother horrifying story..." Paga insisted, refusing to be bullied by the King. After all, his suggestion was for the King's benefit.

The King paused for a while before responding. "You may be right Paga...why do you say that?"

"King Bantu, we've been over this before, that part of the story will get the citizens upset if you describe in detail what happened to King's Mother."

The King cracked a smile...thinking how unfortunate his situation, that Paga was his adviser. The King re-told the story as if in front of an audience, raising his voice a little and waving his hands in a dramatic way. He left out the gory details about King's Mother so Paga would go, and he will rest. The King had been told to confess and he was determined to tell the whole story. In his sad mind, he was happy that the citizens would be distraught about the King's Mother 7 days of horror. He even

entertained the thought of describing in detail exactly what happened.

“You are ready, your Royal Highness,” said Paga. “I am ready Paga,” replied the King.”



Thinking ahead and wanting to be in charge of the *confession day*, King Bantu had given several instructions to Paga. “You and the other guards will go round Harlem and spread this news.” “What news...” asked Paga.

“The story is this – let the people of Harlem know that there is no celebration again this year, but instead, it will be a *confession day*.”

“What if they ask what this means?”

“You tell them it’s about the King’s past, an event that happened a long time ago. How the King needs to confess to the citizens to save the Kingdom of Harlem from destruction.”

“Is that all...?”

The King stared angrily at Paga before saying, “Yes, Paga... you can put your own spin on the story, since you know exactly what happened. Remember, it is my confession, so know how you spread the news.”

Paga bowed before the King, saying “I will see to this immediately.”



Paga and the other royal guards planted themselves in the Kingdom of Harlem to spread the story about the *confession day* as instructed by the King. “What time is this confession?” one of the citizens had asked.

“All you need to do is get to the Square as early as possible,” replied Paga, adding, “There is no set time for the King’s confession, and eat before your come.”

The King was dubious. He had instructed Paga not to give a specific time for his confession in the hope that a few of the citizens miss it and his humiliation will be reduced.

On the *confession day*, the citizens of Harlem had woken up with great anticipation of what was to come. They didn’t know what to expect and had kept their heads down. The troublemakers were eager to see how events would unfold for the King, since the last anniversary linked to the Rescue Mission behind the Hago Gate, was still fresh in people’s minds, especially those directly affected. The Harlem Magical Playground was a constant reminder.

The citizens had been informed and so they knew this wasn’t going to be a normal anniversary. They had different theories about what the confession was all about as the information given to them was scanty. Others gossiped about what would happen at the King’s confession and to the King after it. Nobody was bold enough to voice their view or repeat this outside their homes. Most of them had woken up early to have enough time to prepare and start making their way to the Square. It was like old times, but this was different: there was no joyous tone in the air; instead, people were apprehensive and certain that the day would not be ordinary.

All entertainments had been cancelled by the King. “Eat and drink before you come,” the town crier had announced to the citizens. If some of the citizens had a choice, they wouldn’t have gone, but for those that hated King Bantu, they couldn’t wait to see his final downfall; they hoped that things would not work out for him. The truth was this: no one knew the exact

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time of the so-called confession, but most had resolved that they didn't care and would wait for as long as possible to see the King humiliated. "Let's see how the King gets out of this one," one of the citizens had said on their way to the Square.

Chapter 23

Search for Tiera

The King woke up early, and as he prepared to go to Harlem Square, he couldn't help but wonder. To this day, as far as King Bantu Banujala IV remembered the past, he would pace up and down in his private chambers or his room and talk to himself, which he had begun to do unconsciously.

"I blame myself," King Bantu muttered under his breath, before adding, "I didn't believe in the silly taboo or the customs and traditions or whatever stories had been passed on from generation to generation, perhaps if I did, King's Mother wouldn't have been taken away by the beast. How could I have known they had any truth in them? It was all difficult to believe. If you were me, would you have believed it?" he would ask the thin air.

The King knew what had been said about swearing on someone's life and the effect if it turned out to be a lie, but he had found it difficult to believe. Even though he didn't like

King's Mother, he didn't think he would purposely endanger her life, or did he?

Everyone believed it was a trick to make people confess about secrets they didn't want to share with anyone and there was no way of knowing otherwise. The horror of what happened to King's Mother, his grandmother, was like yesterday and forever etched in his mind; no wonder he was traumatised.

King Bantu finished getting ready and left for Harlem Square without any ceremony. He didn't wait for Queen Binta, since she'd made it clear that she wasn't going to be a witness to his 'show of shame.' The Queen wasn't going to watch her husband's humiliation after the confession that his lie led to King's Mother's disappearance. Queen Bantu didn't want to know or see the consequences of what would follow.



The King settled on his throne, and on cue from The Wise One, got up and moved to the front of the podium, where he told the citizens about the relationship between him and Tiera when he was a teenager. About Tiera's pregnancy, how he denied the pregnancy, lied about their relationship, swore on King's Mother's life, how King's Mother disappeared because of that, and the curse on him by King's Mother. He concluded by saying, "I think the beast took King's Mother away. I now await the pronouncement of The Wise One on what will to happen to me."

The King turned and sat down, holding his head in his hands, feeling humiliated. The festive anniversary celebration was supposed to have been his day to shine, but he had been disgraced instead, with his citizens gloating at him. If he

survived today, he had resolved to get his revenge, somehow. He wasn't sure on whom exactly, but there was enough time to work something out. His revenge list wouldn't be that long, and one thing was certain, The Wise One would be top of the list.

The King's confession had resulted in a chaotic and aggressive reaction from the citizens of Harlem, almost leading to a riot. The people of Harlem didn't know what to do, resulting in each person reacting in the way they knew best.

"Oh, no," some citizens of Harlem screamed, others shouted at the King, "killer of King's Mother," while others looked on, bemused. A few women wept for the King and King's Mother, others wept for Tiera and her family.

"Liar, cheat, murderer," the citizens of Harlem chanted.

"King Bantu the liar!" shouted someone from the crowd.

"King Bantu the hypocrite!" shouted another person. The crowd began to chant: "King Bantu brought us sorrow; King Bantu brought us destruction; King Bantu must go, go, go with the beast."

"Yes, he must go, he must go!" someone else shouted.

"You must be dethroned."

Everyone began to chant, "King Bantu must go!" "Stop! Stop this minute!" The Wise One howled as King Bantu's vacant eyes stared and looked steadily ahead. The power and force in his voice resulted in a defeating silence, so much so that you could hear the crack of a twig in the background.

"The celebrations are over, and you must now all take your leave. Give us seven days to find a solution to this problem. If the King has another child out there, we must find him or her to help stop the reign of the Harlem Beast. The child must be brought to Harlem and quickly. If not, the curse from the King's Mother will bring more disaster on everyone in the Kingdom of Harlem. This is greater than a Code Red."

Zogi's mother was the first to run out of the Square, she had had enough – there was no longer a hiding place for her. She couldn't bear it anymore.

What would happen to her family if they knew her story? What would happen to her loving husband, Stash? What would happen to her son, Zogi? She had never told him what had happened that day; she had left out the most crucial part of the story. "What will I do?" she asked the wind. "I need help..." she muttered as she continued to run without looking back. She found a tree stump and sat on it to catch her breath. She put her head in her hands and considered the awkwardness of her situation. "It wasn't really my fault, or was it?" Meena asked herself. Every time she brought the matter up, she had always been suddenly interrupted, and with time passing, she had found it more difficult to tell Stash the whole story. "What will I do?" Meena had thought it was a secret she would take to her grave, but the wind of time was fast changing against her.

Zogi got home and noticed his mother hadn't arrived, even though she had left the Square before the rest of the family. He couldn't find his father and Nana as well. Zogi sat on the couch for a while but soon realised that he was falling asleep, so he crept into his bedroom, changed his clothes, and climbed on his bed. Having scratched his itchy birthmark, he again cast his mind back to Princess Bibaje and was convinced there was a logical explanation behind the similarity of their birthmark.

"Am I King Bantu's son?" he wondered. "Hooray, we will be rich and powerful," he whispered. "I...will be king one day. I can do what I like. If only..." He settled to sleep.

Zogi smiled at himself and his daydreaming. Even if he wasn't the King's son, he was old enough to know that this mother was keeping a secret. A lot of things didn't make sense to him. If King Bantu was his father, then who was Stash? And

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when did his mother and King Bantu meet? “Did they ever have a relationship? What was the connection?” Zogi had a lot of questions, with no one to answer them.

Chapter 24

Truth Be Told

Queen Binta could hear the noise from the Square and was glad that she had stayed at home to save herself from the humiliation. After much pestering, King Bantu had confessed his secret to her in his private chambers. She had strained her ears to hear him properly because he had whispered throughout. It was as if someone else was lurking in the corners to listen to him. The humiliation of what was to come had made her stay home. She had cried so much that, after a while, she was convinced she would shed tears of blood if she didn't stop.

To Queen Binta, everything was clear now, including King Bantu's weird behaviour around his daughter, Princess Bibaje, "I'm sure it's all linked," she whispered. The Wise One had pressed, but her husband had denied the knowledge of this other child. He, however, admitted that Tiera had been pregnant for him. *Queen Binta didn't believe for one minute that King Bantu was telling the truth. How could he have known about Tiera's pregnancy and not for one-minute think about the*

baby Tiera would have delivered from the pregnancy? Of course, he was lying. So, if Tiera had a baby, where is this child and where is Tiera?

Queen Binta knew that he had lost contact with Tiera, because she and her family had disappeared from Harlem. It was only when King's Mother had died because of him swearing on her life that everyone realised that the Tiera must have been telling the truth, by which time it was too late to find her.

Nobody knew where the royal maid Tiera had gone, and truth be told, no one knew whether she had a baby. The Wise One had been very clear. "You must find the child, or else..." Queen Binta had closed her eyes briefly, bit her lips, looked upwards, and shook her head after The Wise One's revelation.

The King returned home from the Square a defeated man, and the Queen avoided him by keeping out of his way, since it was obvious that they didn't have anything to say to each other. She heard him call his most trusted royal guard, Paga, who due to recent events stayed close to run emergency errands for the King. Queen Binta witnessed the King taking Paga to his private chambers. Making sure that she couldn't be seen, she tiptoed to follow the King and Paga. At a point, the King held Paga close and looked back, but the Queen dodged very quickly, hiding behind long, dropping curtains to avoid being seen.

When the door to the private chambers closed, she moved very quickly and pressed herself against the door to eavesdrop on the King's conversation with Paga; she wasn't disappointed.

Inside the King's private chambers, the King instructed Paga, "Send word to the other kingdoms to enquire and search for the royal maid Tiera. You only have two days to find her, because if Tiera cannot be found, we need The Wise One to find an alternative solution for this mess we are in."

"I'll do this immediately and report back with my findings,"

replied Paga. Paga turned quickly and rushed out of the room with a sense of urgency. As he pushed the door open, he heard a big thud behind it. After closing the door behind him, he looked sideways and saw the Queen on the floor, struggling to get up. He helped the Queen up, steadying her before going his way. Paga didn't have to be told that the Queen had been eavesdropping.

After two days and an extensive search in the other kingdoms, Paga reported back to the King the bad news that Tiera and her child could not be located.

“Did you ask the right questions?” asked the King.

“Yes, we did. No one knows the whereabouts of the royal maid Tiera and her child. If they know, they didn't say.”

Chapter 25

Meena's Resolution

Meena and her husband huddled in their little living room and discussed the matter with intensity.

“What are we going to do?” Statish asked Meena. “I really don’t know. How will I confess to the King that Zogi is his child? How do I tell Zogi that his mother died a few hours after his birth? That I only agreed to look after him when my baby died, and the fact that if I didn’t take Zogi, he would have been left in ‘No Man’s Land’ to die? He would have been killed within hours – tell me, how?”

Meena had told Statish the whole story eventually, without leaving anything out. Initially, she had always left out the crucial parts, especially when Statish had questioned the birthmark, as they didn’t have any such in either his family or Meena’s. He had, however, stopped asking questions, waiting to hear the full story in Meena’s time.

He was angry when Meena had confessed. “You mean you have been raising the King’s son under my roof and I didn’t

know this? I would have supported you if you had told me everything.”

“I doubt very much,” Meena had responded.

“Zogi will be devastated about this, but let’s see what happens in the next few days, since The Wise One has promised that the solution is in finding the child, our child. It’s all so scary. How are they going to tell him?”

“You need to go and see the Most Elderly to let him know what is happening in Harlem and how he can help. Speak to Uncle Dembe as well.”

“But Uncle Dembe doesn’t know.”

“Well, this is a serious matter and we need all the help in the world to avoid the wrath of the King. See what happened to your friend and her family.”

“I told you, she died,” Meena whispered. “Did you see her body, though?”

“No, the Most Elderly said it was a taboo to see her, having just had a baby at that time myself.”

“Taboo, really? From which of the four kingdoms?” “I don’t know,” replied Meena.

“I don’t like this,” said Statish, but Meena said nothing. She didn’t want this to turn into an argument.

Chapter 26

Meena Travels

Meena travelled at the break of dawn to the Kingdom of Ekity the next day, to avoid being seen by anyone. She previously sent word to her uncle to arrange a meeting between her and the Most Elderly in the Kingdom of Ekity. Due to the urgency of the matter, Meena didn't wait for her uncle's response before setting off to the Kingdom of Ekity, making her way straight to the Most Elderly's house when she arrived there. She knew it breached protocol, but that could wait. She had an important matter to discuss with him that couldn't wait.

She knocked briefly on the door of his home and pushed open the door, forcing her way in before she heard his response. She didn't want to be seen by anyone entering the Most Elderly's house to avoid rumours and word getting back to Harlem, since this was a sensitive period for the whole of Harlem.

"What are you doing here, my daughter, at this early hour of the morning? I have asked you never to come back here again

after you- know-what..." the Most Elderly whispered, looking around to make sure no one was listening to their conversation.

"Help me, Most Elderly," Meena muttered. "I'm in trouble." "What is it, my daughter?" the Most Elderly asked.

"I know you have your own contacts and may have heard what is going on in Harlem," whispered Meena.

"Hmmm... I know one or two things, but you will have to tell me what has brought you here this early."

"The King has been instructed to look for Tiera's child, and he has only a few days to do so. I don't know what to do."

Meena burst out crying, and without waiting for the Most Elderly to respond, added, "Do I tell King Bantu about maid Tiera and Zogi?"

What if he takes Zogi away from us? What if he banishes my husband and me from Harlem? What if—"

"Stop. Calm down, my daughter," the Most Elderly said in a soft voice, adding, "and why would he want to do that to you?"

"You know..." Meena whispered, looking around them. "He is Zogi's father."

"So?" he said with his teeth clenched. "I still don't see what the problem is," he continued. "Remember, this child would have been killed within hours if you left him in 'No Man's Land'. You have done the King a great favour." "If I confess the secret, I have been keeping for the past 15 years, what do you think will happen to me? We are in deep trouble," she concluded and started wailing.

"My daughter, I see your position as that of strength rather than weakness."

"How do you mean?" responded Meena.

"You are the solution to the King's problem, it seems."

The Most Elderly continued, "In so far as you can help the King, you have something to bargain with."

“How?” Meena asked with a sniff.

“Tell me, how you think the King will find his son?” he asked. “Well, I don’t know,” she responded.

“But you do know,” pressed the Most Elderly.

“No, I don’t, and I don’t understand what you are getting at.” “Let me explain myself. You know where the King’s son is, and as a matter of fact, you live with him and have done so for the past 15 years – you’ve raised him as your own.”

“Yes...,” said Meena.

“So, all you have to do is bargain with the King. Trust me, if he had a way of finding the child, he would have done so before now. Also, what is most difficult to and is what is not lost.”

“Err...hmmm...really?” Meena managed to say, nodding her head along.

“So, you have what he needs.”

“Yes, Most Elderly, I have Zogi.”

“Did The Wise One tell him where to and his child?” “No, I don’t know, Most Elderly.”

“Well, that’s where you come in.” The Most Elderly sat down and moved his couch closer to Meena, gently nudging her to sit beside him on the same couch.

“How?”

“You will go to the King—” “No, I can’t,” interrupted Meena.

“You have to listen to me carefully, without any more interruptions, as I have a meeting to attend in a few minutes”

“Sorry... I am just worried...” interjected Meena again.

The Most Elderly continued as if he had not been interrupted. “You will go to the King and convince him to offer a reward to anyone who finds his child.”

“Hmmm,” replied Meena, nodding her head again, “how?”

“Tell him that this may help him to find his child quickly;

that the King needs to involve more citizens in the Kingdom to help him look for his child. Whoever finds the child or provides him with information to locate the child will receive the King's reward. The King must announce this and declare what the reward is. I expect your King to go with this idea, because of the problem he has found himself in."

"Hmmm..." Meena mumbled.

"Once he has publicly announced his reward through his town crier and made the pronouncement as the King, he cannot go back on his word, and this is where you come in. Before the end of the days left, or depending on how you want to play it, you will take Zogi with you to the palace and introduce him as his son. You will tell him your story. You have me to back up your story, if needed. You will get your reward."

"How do I convince him, Most Elderly?"

"That is simple. As I remember it, the boy has a birthmark that is known only to the royal family in Harlem, so you don't have to go out of your way to convince the King that Zogi is his child."

"How do you know about the birthmark and its royal connection?"

"Don't worry yourself about that," replied the Most Elderly. "Do you think this will work?"

The Most Elderly responded as he got up from the couch,

"Well, unless you have another plan, it is a better solution; and you must do it quickly, before they find Zogi with you. If they do, you will find yourself in a worse situation, including banishment."

"Most Elderly, I have another question for you: you said Tiera died, can you show me where you buried her, so I can go to her grave and ask her for support?"

“Sorry, my child, the time is not right for you to know.”
“Why do you say that?”

“Tiera is not your priority for now; you must hurry back before too many people see you here. Also, I am running late for my meeting.”

Meena travelled home with mixed feelings. She was happy to have found a way out. On the other hand, she was apprehensive of having to go and meet the King. Where would she find the courage? Her only hope was that the King would be more understanding because of his current situation and the urgency to find his child. When she got home, she told Statish the advice the Most Elderly had given her.

“Meena, you know your plan won’t work, don’t you?”

“Why?”

“The King is not entertaining any guests or seeing anyone within the next few days.”

“Well, we must find a way; we must go to the palace unannounced. This will make or break us, so we cannot delay this any further,” she said.

“When do we tell Zogi?”

“After we have booked an appointment with the King, and he has declared his reward for the person who finds his child.”

“What if it’s punishment?”

“Well, it can’t be, can it? You know that finding the child is the King’s only saving grace.”

“How will Nana take it, knowing that Zogi is not her biological brother?”

“I don’t know, but we will help both of them through this and remain strong as a family.”

“I hope things work out. If not, we are in real trouble.”

“I know,” Meena said and burst into tears. “We can only now hope for the best,” she whispered as she moved closer to

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her husband, hugging him tightly. “You’ve been so good to me; I am sorry for involving you in this mess.”

“It wasn’t your fault; I would have done the same thing in your situation. Zogi has been a wonderful son to us, so we can only pray that things work out for all of us.”

Part Four

The Confession

Chapter 27

Girls Day Out

Zogi had warned Nana not to take her friends to the Hago House but Nana hadn't listened; she didn't like being told what to do and was determined to take her friends with her for their own girly adventure. "Come on, girls, stop hovering in the background, step it up!" shouted Nana as she addressed her friends – Rikoh, Farah, Rodica, and Harsha – behind her. She had failed to convince the three sisters–Dammie, Tommie, and Tammie – to come along.

"I don't want any trouble with Mother," Dammie had said to Nana. Tommie and Tammie were happy that Dammie had not agreed to go along. They both disliked Dammie for forcing them to hang out with her friends.

The howling of the wind, the eerie environment, and the colony of bats were a quick reminder for Nana that they had almost reached their destination. Nana found the gates open, and it was exactly the way she had seen it with Zogi and his friends. Suddenly and without notice, Rikoh began to scream. Farah, Rodica, and Harsha started running helter-skelter. Not

knowing what made Rikoh scream, Nana ran towards her direction while Farah, Rodica, and Harsha ran in the opposite direction, confused. "What is it?" shouted Nana.

"Look, it's there!" screamed Rikoh.

"I see nothing," replied Nana, exasperated.

"Help!" screamed Harsha as she fell into a ditch. She waited a while for help and was about to give up, when Rodica showed up. Rodica held her hand out to Harsha in attempt to help her out. Harsha grabbed it with so much force that Rodica fell into the ditch with her. "Ouch!" shrieked Rodica. "What have you done and how are we going to get out of here?"

"Calm down," replied Harsha calmly. "I should be able to get us out."

"How...?"

"Hmmm, let me work something out," mumbled Harsha, looking at a spot behind Rodica with such intensity that she glowed. "Why are you glowing?" asked Rodica.

Ignoring Rodica and pointing at a spot behind her, Harsha whispered with a glow on her face, "Look behind you." Rodica turned around and found steps etched on the side of the ditch.

Looking puzzled, she whispered, "I didn't notice *those* before." "Well, what are you waiting for? Let's get out of here," muttered Harsha, who at this time had stopped glowing.

Rodica climbed out of the ditch first, with Harsha right behind her. Harsha, limping, ran as best as she could towards

Farah and grabbed her, saying, "What is going on?"

"Come this way," Farah said, pointing. "Rikoh and Nana are over there." Rodica, Farah, and Harsha made their way to Rikoh and Nana. They were happy to have escaped whatever had scared them, and standing in a circle, hugged each with their heads touching in the middle, glad that no one was seriously hurt.

Without warning, it began to rain heavily. Nana and her friends got drenched almost immediately. The rain stopped straight after, with only the wetness of their cloths giving an indication of the heavy rain. The girls began to laugh in confusion about the whole fiasco. "Let's get out of here, quick, before something else gets in the way, said Rikoh"

They were wringing their clothes dry, when the rain started again; this time, it was a storm with thunder and lightning. The trees swayed from one side to the other, while a few branches snapped and broke off from tree trunks, because of the strong force of the wind.

"I am going to be struck by lightning, help me!" Harsha cried in a frightened voice.

"You can't be that unlucky..." said Nana jokingly, adding, "We'll be fine."

As they made a run for it, it seemed as if the grass beneath their feet had turned into a carpet. They noticed that they were running, but it was like a treadmill, running on the same spot, going nowhere.

"We're not moving." "We are, run faster."

"Is this a mat or carpet?"

"Are we not standing on grass?"

"We are not, can't you see? We are running on the same spot, going nowhere." "We *are* running on the same spot!" shouted another.

Without warning, the grass stopped moving, flinging, and throwing the girls to where they had started from. The girls screamed in unison.

"My hands!"

"Oh, it's my legs." "My stomach..." "My arm..."

Falling on top of one another like dominoes, they looked to the other side and spotted a huge tree that had appeared out of

nowhere. They couldn't make out what kind of tree it was, but they were convinced they hadn't seen it before. The tree was sparkling.

"Look at those, they're apples." "No, they are balls." "I think they're peaches."

"Apples and peaches on an oak tree – how is that possible?" "Who says it's an oak tree?"

"Stop guessing, aren't you curious? Let's go and find out what the nature of the tree is and what's on the tree."

As they got closer to the tree, they moved to examine it and noticed that what was in front of them wasn't anything they had imagined. The tree looked like an apple or a peach or an oak tree. It was what anyone imagined or wanted it to be like. But what they saw on the tree looked like apples.

"Oh," said Nana, "they are apples... They are transparent apples..." she stated, as if she had planted the tree there. "How can you be so sure, and what is a 'transparent' apple?"

"It's obviously an apple that is transparent, like this one; it's like glass, you can see through them, can't you?"

"They are sparkling, ever so beautiful," said Harsha, adding, "I would like to take one home."

Harsha reached out to grab one of them, but Nana screamed at her, "Don't touch it, things are not the way they seem in this place," adding quickly, "we really ought to get going...home. I have a bad feeling that something terrible will happen."

"But look, I have never seen so many beautiful things in one place in my life. We can't be going back yet, I need to take one of these with me."

"No, you're not, and if you insist, you will have to meet me in Harlem. I'm off," stated Nana, turning back, and poised to leave.

As she began to walk away from Harsha, she suddenly

remembered that it looked like the object her parents had found in Zogi's bag a while ago. But the one in his bag didn't sparkle... "Ooh," she whispered to herself, "did Zogi pick it from here? I'm sure it's nothing, but Zogi's toy does resemble this apple... A transparent apple," she muttered. "Someone tell me what a transparent apple is?" asked Harsha, refusing to leave.

"I don't know, Nana just said it looks like a transparent apple," replied Rikoh.

Harsha shouted to the others, "I would like to have one transparent apple, you know!"

"Don't touch it, let's go home," begged Rikoh and Farah. "See, Nana is already leaving," added Rodica.

As if to tempt Harsha, one of the transparent apples dropped on the grass right in front of her, and at that point Harsha couldn't help herself. She ran slightly forwards, and before she knew what was happening, she was right in front of the apple. Harsha grabbed it, shouting out with joy at the same time, "Yippee!"

Farah, Rodica, Harsha, and Rikoh screamed in unison, "Nooo!" and at that point Nana, who was further ahead, turned back and started to run towards their direction when she saw what was happening.

Harsha's body began to turn into flames, and then a dark smoke; then, a whirlwind and a cloud of dust surrounded her.

She looked like melting smoke. Before the girls knew what was happening, they watched as Harsha was swallowed up and sucked into the apple, which by then had dropped from her hand to the ground. The force of the whirlwind was so strong that it flung the other girls on the ground.

"Nana, help Harsha, she's trapped in the apple!" cried Rikoh, pointing at the apple.

"Help me!" cried a muffled sound. They couldn't be sure

where it was coming from or if it was indeed Harsha. As they ran towards the apple to save Harsha, it began to roll right back towards the tree. They ran faster, trying to grab the apple, and as they reached it, it gently lifted itself up, floating in the air before attaching itself back to the tree branch, blending in so perfectly with the other apples that there was no way of knowing which apple had swallowed Harsha.

Before the girls could find their bearings, they saw the tree disappear right in front of them into thin air. Without a word to anyone, the girls began to run; they ran until they couldn't breathe anymore, so they settled under an elm tree and leaned their heads on it. They had not rested for two seconds, when another tree not far off turned into what looked like a beast, growling at the girls. They froze for a minute and began to run again. This time, they didn't stop until they reached their school and hid underneath the Kampa Mountain. Their chests heaved up and down while they tried to steady their breath. They stayed there for a while to make sure that the coast was clear, before embarking on their journey back to Puta. By this time Rikoh and Rodica had started sobbing. "What are we going to do about Harsha?" cried Rikoh.

"What are we going to tell her uncle?" asked Farah. "You must beg Zogi to come back and rescue her." "How's that possible?" asked Nana.

"You know Zogi is a special boy, there is something about your brother that we can't put our finger on. I *know he* is the only one who can get Harsha back," Rikoh added.

"How can I tell him I took you to the Hago Region without his knowledge? He's going to kill me."

"Well, you must tell him. What will happen if Harsha's uncle starts to look for her?"

"Not my problem," snapped Nana, angry that she had

disobeyed Zogi by bringing her friends to the Hago Region and knowing she would be blamed for Harsha's

disappearance. "I told her not to touch the apple."

After Farah said to the girls, "Let's get our story straight," the girls stood still for a while, debating seriously on the version of events that they would share with their parents and Zogi.

After they had agreed on what they would say, Nana cautioned, "Please, don't tell anyone who needn't know what happened. I will find a way to tell Zogi. He will know what to do."

Nana began to run without waiting for the other girls. Before she realised it, she was at Loga's instead of going straight to her home. It was getting late, and she needed to see Loga before he slept. Loga would have to talk to Zogi; she couldn't bear the thought of facing Zogi alone. Nana knew Loga liked her, and she was going to use that, even if she had to "utter her eyelashes at him. She'd seen Mother do it to Father a few times, and it seemed to have worked, because on the occasions she had witnessed it, Mother had gotten what she wanted from Father.

Nana managed to smile despite the difficulty she found herself in.

Chapter 28

Nana's Plea

“**G**ood evening, Mrs. Tombo.” Nana exclaimed. Mrs. Tombo, surprised to see her at that time of the day. Opening the door for her, she asked, “What are you doing here this late?”

“Sorry for bothering you, Mrs. Tombo, but...err... I need to have a quick word with Loga. Zogi sent me to him,” Nana stammered.

“Why couldn’t he come? Why send you?” continued Mrs. Tombo. “I must have a word with your parents about this.”

“Please, don’t get him into any trouble. He was busy running an errand for Mother, that’s why he sent me.” Nana hoped her story wouldn’t be checked out, but she knew that was the least of her problems.

“That’s fine, Nana, but let Zogi know that I’m not pleased with late night visits. Loga! Nana is here to see you!” Mrs. Tombo shouted before making her way out of the living area.

Loga was getting settled in after a particularly tiring day of

running errands for his parents, and he wasn't too happy that he had been disturbed, but the thought of seeing Nana again put a smile on his face. He could never admit to anyone that seeing Nana made him happy. Zogi had sussed him out, but Loga had continued to deny having any affection for his sister.

“What is it, Nana, and why are you here this late?” asked Loga. “You...err...look...disturbed.”

“It's sort of urgent and we need to talk,” whispered Nana.

“OK, let me grab my sandals so we can go out without any prying ears.” They both walked out, unconsciously holding each other's hands before they realised what they had done. Without speaking, they immediately snatched their hands away from one another.

When they got to the wooded boundary between their homes, Nana burst into tears. Loga was scared by the sudden change in Nana's mood, and he tried to calm her down, saying, “You must talk to me and tell me what is wrong. Or is Zogi in trouble?”

Nana heaved her shoulders, wiping her eyes dry. As she was about to speak, Twinkle ran towards them, jumping on Nana, licking her face. Nana wasn't in the mood for Twinkle and was thinking about how to get rid of him, when Loga came to her rescue.

“So, what is it?” Loga asked, pressing Nana for information. “It's really bad, Loga,” Nana replied slowly without uttering another word.

“Well, Nana, until you tell me, I am unable to help you in any way.”

So, in-between sobs, Nana told Loga everything that had happened to her and her friends in the Hago Region.

“I was down on my hands and knees, dazed and sweeping

off leaves from my body, when the whirlwind from the evil apple swallowed Harsha,” Nana concluded.

“Oh, my days!” exclaimed Loga. “Nana, what have you done? This is bad! Zogi warned you not to go to the Hago Region with your friends; there is a mystery about that place that we don’t know... Anything can happen at any time. Why did you do it?”

“It’s too late for your questions, Loga. We need to rescue Harsha.”

“How do you rescue someone who you say has been swallowed by a strange object?”

“Well, err... It looked like a transparent apple.”

At the mention of that, Loga yanked Nana towards him and covered her mouth with his palm, looking around very quickly to make sure no one was listening to their conversation.

“Nana, you must be careful here. Don’t go saying things you don’t know. You didn’t see a transparent apple,” whispered Loga.

“Well, that’s the only description I can give to the object, and the girls and I saw it. Funnily enough, a few years ago, when Mother asked me to fetch Zogi’s school bag, we found an object in Zogi’s bag identical to the one we saw. The only difference is that the ones in the Hago Region sparkled. The one in Zogi’s bag didn’t. We didn’t make anything of it at the time. We assumed he picked it up from the woods.”

“So, what happened to this object in Zogi’s bag?”

“Mother said I should put it back in his bag and I returned the bag back to Zogi’s room.”

Cutting her short, Loga said, “Enough about Zogi. What do you want from me?” Loga knew any further discussion about the transparent apple would expose Zogi’s secret, which he had sworn to keep.

“We need to rescue Harsha from the evil apple, and I want you to convince my brother to lead the rescue mission.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but since we got lucky when we rescued my brother from the Hago House, I thought we could rescue Harsha, since I took her there.”

“Sorry, Nana, you know I can’t do that.” “Yes, you can, you are his best friend.” “No, I can’t.”

Nana fluttered her eyelashes at Loga, begging him sheepishly, “Please...”

“Hmmm,” mumbled Loga, shifting and moving from one foot to another without maintaining eye contact with Nana. After a long, awkward pause, Loga responded, “OK, I will find a way to ask him, but you are in deep trouble. There is no guarantee that he will agree... I will talk to him tomorrow.”

“No, it must be today. You know it’s the King’s resolution day in two days’ time. Remember that after his *confession day*, the King was given seven days to find his supposed child to resolve the *beast problem* we face. If you’ve been counting, you will know that it is in two days’ time and all the citizens of Harlem must be at the event. If we are doing anything, it must be tomorrow.”

“So, what do I tell my mother?” asked Loga.

“I don’t know, but I will wait for you here. You can come for a sleepover with Zogi, so we can plan Harsha’s rescue mission.”

“This is not good, I tell you - but come inside, you can’t be outside alone at this time. I will speak to Mother, and we can go to yours together.”

As they walked into Loga’s home, Nana repeated, “I want you to convince my brother, and we have to inform Harsha’s guardian, you know, her uncle, sometime tomorrow.” “Who are

the ‘we’? Please, leave me out of your plans. You and your friends will have to speak to Harsha’s uncle without my help.”

They went inside, and while Nana sat on the couch, Loga talked to his mother about going to Zogi’s home to have an unplanned sleepover. “Why this late?” his mother enquired. Loga replied with a story so long that he was dismissed with the wave of her hand, “Take it easy and be safe on your way there,” she said. Loga said goodbye and walked to fetch Nana, who shouted, “Goodnight,” to Mrs. Tombo as they set off.

Loga and Nana held hands as they both walked in silence to Nana’s house. When they arrived there, Loga turned and squeezed Nana’s hands to reassure her. He smiled at her and Nana smiled back at him before they went in.

Nana’s parents and Zogi were surprised to see Nana, Loga, and Twinkle at that time of the day.

“And where are you coming from this late, Nana?” asked Meena, and without stopping, she asked Loga, “isn’t it a bit late to be visiting?”

“It is, but I’m spending the night here.” “Good, and your parents know you’re here?” “Yes, they do,” Loga responded.

Zogi pulled Loga to the side and asked, “Is there a problem?” “Yes, a big one, let’s go outside and I’ll tell you all about it – your parents can’t hear a word.” “That serious?” he asked. “That serious,” Loga stated.

As they strolled outside, Nana walked very slowly into her bedroom, pulling at her French plaits, and biting at her fingers at the same time. It was a habit she’d had since she was a child, one she only exhibited when she was nervous. The outcome of her brother’s chat with Loga was important for Harsha. She already felt responsible, because she took her friends to the Hago Region after she had been warned by her brother not to.

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Nana was crying inconsolably, hopelessly sad as the thought of never seeing Harsha again crossed her mind.

“How will we be able to keep this a secret, and what do I tell her uncle?” she mumbled softly to herself as she sat on her bed, pulling her legs up to her chin and resting her head on them. She gazed blankly out of the window, looking at the trees, which were scarcely visible in the evening twilight.

Chapter 29

Nana's Guilt

“L oga, I don’t understand your story,” shouted Zogi, looking around to make sure no one was listening.

“Did you say there was an evil apple?” asked Zogi. “Yes... That’s what Nana told me.”

“And this apple looked exactly like mine?” “Yes.”

“And there was a tree with lots of these transparent apples?” “Yes.”

“The evil apple turned into a whirlwind and swallowed Harsha?” “Yes.”

“The evil apple and the tree disappeared after Harsha had been swallowed up?”

“Yes.”

Zogi stood very still, struggling to come up with words to describe how angry he was. “Why has Nana done this to me?”

I will kill Nana for what she’s done.”

“No, you won’t. You will get over your anger. Could be worse, you know, your sister tried to make a comparison between your *toy* and the transparent apples they saw.”

“No, she didn’t!” exclaimed Zogi.

“You don’t have to worry about that. Anyway, she couldn’t figure it out and I kept my mouth shut.”

“I’m upset about this and what’s happened to Harsha. I hold her responsible! I warned her not to go there at all, not to talk about taking her friends.”

“I know.”

“So, what do we do?” asked Zogi. “Nana thinks we can rescue Harsha.” “How?”

“Well, everyone thinks you have supernatural powers, you know, following our last experience behind the Hago Gate, the Hago Region, and HMP. Some say you’re special. Others say things you don’t want to hear about, really.”

“How did they figure that out?”

“Well, don’t ask me. You can’t say you’ve not heard these rumours, and by the way, I agree...” Loga stated, before coughing sheepishly. “I know you’ve got the apple, remember, but I haven’t said a word to anyone.” He winked at his friend.

Zogi got into a state. He tried to form some words, but he couldn’t speak, so he started to throw his hands around so much that he looked very animated.

“Calm down, Zogi... We can figure something out.”

“You don’t understand, I also have a personal problem I’m trying to resolve... It’s my birthmark.”

“What about it? Can I help in any way?”

“No, there’s nothing you can do. I now know that only time will tell, so it’s really a waiting game.”

“This sounds deep.”

“Don’t worry yourself about it, let’s focus on the problem at hand,” replied Zogi.

“I am worried. What are we going to do?” asked Loga. “Unfortunately, it’s the King’s *Resolution Day* in two days’ time

and all the citizens must be at the event. Anything we do has to be done tomorrow, and we must be discreet, we don't want a repeat of last time."

"You can bring your transparent apple along," said Loga, trying to reassure Zogi. "Oh...and by the way, you can see the girl who looks like, you know," Loga laughed jokingly.

"Be serious, Loga, let's think about what needs to be done and how to do it. I can't face the King's wrath. I simply can't deal with it."

"OK, this is the plan: I'm not talking to Nana. Tell her that we will all go to Harsha's guardian, so Nana can tell him what happened. We then make our way to the Hago Region and see if there is anything we can do about this evil apple."

Loga burst into laughter and quickly stopped himself when he realised the great challenge ahead. Zogi continued, "Nana will come with us to show us where the whole thing happened.

We tell no one else, and no one else comes with us."

"Seems we have a plan, so let's get a good night's rest; tomorrow will be a long day," concluded Loga.

They made their way back into Zogi's home and Nana rushed out as she heard the clanging of the door. Zogi walked past her, whispering in her ear, "This is on you."

Loga was right behind Zogi. He knew from the heaviness of Nana's shoulders that she had been crying, and that made him feel awful. But, Loga didn't say a word as he moved close to Nana, took her hand, and gave her a gentle, reassuring squeeze as he walked past her into Zogi's room.

Chapter 30

Plan to Rescue Harsha

Zogi went into his room, slamming the door with such force that Loga, who was right behind him, had to quickly step back to avoid the door catching his face.

Zogi's parents also cringed in their room.

"Your son is upset," whispered Statisch to Meena. "I know! Teenage hormones?"

"He will get over it. As you know, he's been behaving strangely lately."

Nana, on the other hand, climbed and curled up in her bed before bursting into tears, feeling the gravity of the whole day.

She knew she shouldn't have taken her friends without Zogi or Loga. "Now, Harsha has disappeared, who knows what will happen next?" she told herself. "It's my fault."

"How could Nana have gotten us into this mess?" Zogi asked as he looked out of the window.

"Calm down, Zogi. We will try our best and leave the rest."

"By leave the rest, do you mean if we're not able to rescue

Harsha from the evil apple?”

“Yes.”

“But what do we tell her uncle?”

“Never mind, Zogi, let tomorrow take care of itself.”

Loga summarized their plans. “So, Nana will take us to Harsha’s house first, not sure what we are going to tell Harsha’s uncle. Then, she takes us to the Hago Region to show us where it all happened.

Bring your apple with you; it may be able to help us. But, come to think of it, how can you explain Nana’s story about apples appearing on what seemed to be an oak tree?”

“Don’t ask. From experience, you should know that anything can happen in the Hago Region – it’s a mysterious place.”

“Hmmm...”

“Now, we have a plan.”

“Let’s go to bed so we can have an early start tomorrow. We need to make it back in time. We can’t allow anything to disrupt the King’s *Resolution Day*, titled by the citizens of

Harlem as the ‘day of reckoning.’”

“Don’t go saying that anywhere, so you don’t get your family into trouble.”

“By the way, Zogi, you mentioned being worried about your birthmark. You’ve always had it, so what has changed?”

“Nothing to worry about, just wondering why no other member of my family has it, that’s all.”

“Well, it happens, so you have nothing to worry about.”
“Anyway, good night,” Zogi responded, unconvinced. “And Harsha, here come Zogi and Loga to the...rescue!” whispered Loga.

“It’s not funny...” responded Zogi

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“Hmmm...” mumbled Loga, deep in thought as to what lay ahead of them.

Zogi couldn't admit it to anyone, but he was very worried, and on the other hand, he was looking forward to the adventure. It had been a while. He smiled and settled to sleep, gently touching his transparent apple as if for assurance.

Chapter 31

Visit to Uncle Jaja

They set off at dawn as the moon cast an eerie glow over Kampa Hill, avoiding the citizens of Harlem who were already up and about, taking advantage of the beautiful morning. The sky was dark, with clouds impregnated by rain. The surreal atmosphere wasn't to last, as soon after, the heavens opened and heavy rain poured down, catching them unaware and soaking them in seconds. Twinkle was lapping at the rain and shaking off his fur. Nana was in front, leading Zogi and Loga to Harsha's house; the rain was the last thing on their minds. The paths leading to Harsha's house were new to Zogi and Loga, but they followed Nana anyway. Zogi couldn't wait to put this part of their plan behind him, so they could head off to the Hago Region where they would face the main challenge of rescuing Harsha, if indeed they were able to do so.

When they got to Harsha's home, Nana knocked quietly on the door while Zogi and Loga stood awkwardly behind her. They heard the metallic scrape of a lock as it creaked open.

Uncle Jaja, who was Harsha's distant relation, opened the door, and when he saw Nana, said, "Come in, Nana, why are you here this early, and who are the young men behind you?"

"Good morning, Uncle Jaja, this is my brother, Zogi, and his friend, Loga," replied Nana, pointing in their direction as she introduced them.

"Come in," Uncle Jaja said, opening the door wider for the three. "How can I help?" asked Uncle Jaja.

"I came to get Harsha...ermm... We agreed to go to the fields today to play, since it's the King's anniversary tomorrow." Nana sucked in her breath, shaking, before continuing. "She said she would be waiting at the Kampa intersection for us, but we didn't find her there. I thought she was running late..."

Zogi and Loga looked at each other with raised eyebrows. Zogi shrugged and looked away. There was no way he was getting himself involved in Nana's fib.

"I'm...confused, though," said Uncle Jaja, responding to Nana and shaking his head as he continued. "She left yesterday; she was going to play with you for a while, and after that, make her way to her aunt in the Kingdom of Ekity. I have no reason to believe she didn't arrive there safely. I will be going to join them later today, so it's likely I will see her. I will let her know you asked after her. We may come back tomorrow for the King's anniversary. If we make it, you will see her there."

"Oh..." Nana mumbled, looking at Zogi and Loga for help, but they looked away without uttering a word. "Hmm...that means she must have gone after we returned from the fields. Oh... I remember, she mentioned it...ermm... I think I forgot," muttered Nana as she scratched her head and bit her nails. "Well, my children, I will let her know you came by when I visit her later today."

“Oh...we’ve got to go,” Nana interjected, jumping up and running out. She didn’t stop until she was out of the door.

“I do hope Nana’s alright,” said Uncle Jaja.

“She will be fine,” replied Loga. “Thank you for having us,” he added as they left his house.

Chapter 32

Rescue Mission

After leaving Uncle Jaja's house, Zogi, Loga, Nana, and Twinkle set out of Puta for the Hago Region to find and rescue Harsha.

"Nana stop!" screamed Loga, who had to stand in for Zogi, as he wouldn't speak to Nana. "What was that about and where are you rushing to?" he asked.

"We need to rescue Harsha and quickly, before Uncle Jaja's visit to the Kingdom of Ekity. He can't know that Harsha is missing," replied Nana and with a sense of urgency, and she continued walking without waiting for Zogi and Loga.

They walked in silence.

Nana was way ahead when she suddenly turned back and shouted, "Please, hurry!" She began walking briskly, rushing on in front of the boys without waiting for any response. Nana walked out of Puta onto the familiar path and briskly across Kampa Hill, which created an intersection for the four regions. The paths to the four regions met here. Just beside Kampa Hill was an old and broken wooden signpost with four arrows on top

pointing the way to each region. The one pointing towards the Hago forest had native writing that read, 'THIS AREA IS PROHIBITED'. The area was covered with trees, plants, overgrowth, and underbrush. It was wild, unkempt, and free. Nana walked towards the forest and down the path leading to the Hago Gate.

The gate, which was slightly ajar, was pushed opened by Loga without any incident. Only Zogi's transparent apple was playing up in his bag. When they got halfway between the gate and the Hago House, Nana began to point frantically at the eastern side of the region, saying, "See, that's the tree, it's the tree with the apples that swallowed Harsha."

Zogi looked in that direction but saw nothing. Suddenly, he noticed that the transparent apple in his bag was bursting to come out.

"Look!" Nana shouted. Zogi looked again and suddenly he saw the tree; it had appeared out of nowhere. His apple began to vibrate, expanding and contracting, so much so that Zogi's bag burst into flames, and *whoosh*, his bag and the apple floated into the air. Not knowing what it was or what had happened, Loga and Nana began to run away from Zogi. Zogi wanted to laugh, but he couldn't, because he would have to reveal that it was his transparent apple that was playing up and he didn't want Nana to know about it. Running after the apple, Zogi, muttered to himself, "Wait...we may need some help in finding Harsha."

"Look!" Loga shouted, pointing towards the western direction of the region. "I see three trees."

"Where?" asked Zogi. "They're there."

"But I see nothing..." said Zogi. "I see only one tree, but..." As Zogi, Loga, and Nana were trying to work out if there was more than one tree, they heard a growling so loud that they froze on the spot. They turned around very slowly, as if afraid to

move, and after completely turning around, they saw it. Nana began to tremble on the spot, with a glazed look as if in a trance. The beast glared at them with fiery eyes and nose, making no attempt to come after them. Nana had heard so much about the beast that she'd have been thankful to have never encountered it. Somehow, she always missed it but not today. Loga couldn't move; he was shivering as if it were the coldest night of all time. Zogi stood still, as if glued to the spot.

The terrifying creature was ugly to look at. It was a four-legged, five-armed, winged monstrosity. Its head hung loosely from its thin neck, and when the creature moved, it appeared as if his head moved like a blade of grass that was blown by a gust of wind. On his head were blood-shot eyes and a scratched face which oozed slime.

Then, the creature, wanting to crave attention and scare them more, howled loudly, a howl that could topple an oak tree with its vibrations. This mighty howl also revealed its fang-like teeth, which could slice through lead with immense ease. The moon loomed large over the children as they considered their situation and braced to face the Harlem Beast.

Zogi didn't know what his apple was doing, but he didn't wait to look for it, since he knew it could look after itself.

Zogi shouted, "Run!" and they began to run towards the Hago House, because the beast was very close behind them. They got to the door and tried to get in, but it was pointless, as the door wouldn't open. Zogi banged and pushed on the door, but the door remained shut. It was obvious that they couldn't get into the house and the beast was almost upon them. Zogi looked through the cracks in the door, which was wedged shut, and realised that even if he managed to pry it open, there was little he could see from where he was standing and couldn't be sure they weren't going to run into a trap. Twinkle was barking, and

it seemed the only sound in the desolate region. Twinkle quickly moved away from the door and began sniffing around, Loga right behind him. "Come this way, follow me!" shouted Loga, pointing at a new door they had not seen previously. Zogi followed Loga, Nana, and Twinkle, realizing from the outside that it looked like his *hideaway room*.

"Thanks to my apple," Zogi mumbled to himself, not knowing how the door got there but certain that his apple had planted his *hideaway room* there for their escape.

Zogi had visited the Hago House by himself and had discovered the *hideaway room* a few months ago. He had flaunted the existence of the *hideaway room* to his friends and sworn to Loga that it was real. He took Loga, Nana, and Twinkle into the *hideaway room* and confessed in a rush how he had found it, "I was going to show you the room the last time we visited the Hago House, but if you remember very well, we left in a rush." He then turned to Loga and said, "I would have showed it to you after that, but I didn't want to get anyone in trouble."

Zogi and the others kept as still as statues as they made their way through the door. When Zogi entered the *hideaway room*, he wasn't certain that it was the same room he had seen before, but the events of the past had become so blurry in his mind that he, at times, wondered if the encounter with the beast had ever happened. He remembered that he had seen seven doors in the Hago House about five years ago, so perhaps one of the doors there led to the *hideaway room*.

Zogi was hopeful they would rest there for a while until they were out of danger.

Without warning, part of the roof to the *hideaway room* caved in and a log with something looking like a twine came sailing down on top of Zogi, tangling his foot and tripping him over.

Zogi was about to untangle the twine from his foot, when Loga shouted with urgency, “Run! The beast is here.” They ran from the *hideaway room* into another door that wasn’t there before. As they made their way through the door, the beast forced its way into it, right behind them, running after them with a pattern and consistency true to all the rumours. Zogi’s speed was reduced by the twine still tangled to his foot. At a point, he stumbled and fell onto the stone floor. As he struggled to get up, the beast swung at him. The beast was, however, in for a fight, as Zogi swung at the beast with an outburst of anger, which was unexpected. He yelled at the top of his voice, turning agile and athletic without knowing how. He pushed at the beast with both hands, letting out a loud grunting noise. The beast lifted Zogi and flung him down. Zogi swung at the beast again. This time, the beast lifted him into thin air, flinging him around before eventually throwing him to the other side of the room. Zogi steadied himself, got back to his feet, and punched the beast.

“Is that my brother?” Nana whispered to Loga as they hid behind a giant frame.

“Yes,” Loga replied, adding, “What do you mean?” “Zogi doesn’t have that much strength or power, not to talk of fighting a beast. It seems something has come over him.”

“Maybe...like we say...anything can happen in the Hago Region.” Nana smiled, nodding her head in agreement and happy that Zogi was combating the beast; she had no power to run anymore.

The beast grabbed Zogi again, slamming him against the stone wall, holding him there. Zogi couldn’t breathe and felt himself falling, passing out, and losing consciousness. “Yes, you’re going to die, and you can’t save H-a-r-s-h-a,” the beast whispered to him.

“I will save her...” Zogi managed to say. “What is stopping you?” asked the beast.

Loga and Nana eventually thought Zogi needed help and ran out of their hiding place towards him with Twinkle right behind them.

As they got closer to Zogi, they held back as they saw Zogi in action again. It seemed a burst of new strength came over Zogi, and suddenly, he swung at the beast with both hands and couldn't explain where the energy came from, while the others cowered behind him. He snatched himself away from the grip of the beast and took several steps away from it. As he moved further away from the beast, before he could even catch his breath, another beast had appeared from nowhere.

Zogi saw from the corner of his eyes how his apple had appeared from nowhere. His apple split into two, with one part floating for a while before taking the form of a beast while the second half simply disappeared with a whoosh. Zogi wasn't sure if Loga and Nana had seen what he saw, however, he said nothing.

For some reason, this beast rushed towards the other beast, like a bull charging at a red flag. It began to fight the other beast. Zogi, Loga, and Nana looked on in amazement.

It seemed to be a fight between good and evil.

“Come! Let's look for Harsha and leave the beasts to it,” screamed Loga.

“It looks to me that the second beast is working for us,” reasoned Zogi. “Can you see that instead of coming after us, it seems to be keeping the other beast away?”

“Ahhhh. We have a friendly beast then!” shouted Nana in an outburst. “We will call it the *good beast* and name the other the *evil beast*!”

As the *good beast* and the *evil beast* fought, Nana turned to

Zogi and Loga, pointing towards the end of the corridor. “Look at the tree, that’s the tree with the evil apple that swallowed Harsha.”

“How can you tell? This looks exactly like the ones we saw earlier,” replied Loga.

“I just know it is. Get Harsha out of the apple and now!” “How?” asked Zogi.

“I don’t know, just do something, before the *evil beast* comes after us again or the tree disappears.”

When they turned to look, they saw that the *good beast* and the *evil beast* were beside the same tree Nana *claimed* had swallowed Harsha. To them, it was as if the *good beast* was trying to shake the life tree. However, the *evil beast* was swinging at the *good beast*, trying to forcefully remove its grip from the tree. The *good beast* didn’t budge, and on the last vigorous shake, as if on a cue, an apple dropped from the tree, rolling towards Zogi, Loga, and Nana. Twinkle was barking in a frenzy. They ran towards the apple and could hear a muffled voice coming from inside it, saying, “Save me! Please, help me, I’m trapped and need to get out!”

Loga watched as Zogi ran towards the apple on the ground. The second half of Zogi’s transparent apple appeared and turned into a gigantic apple with spikes all over it. It floated hesitantly in the air before attacking and smashing the evil apple. There was a big bang as the apple smashed and turned into a cloud of smoke. As the smoke settled, they noticed a giant moon balloon. It was so gigantic that they ran in the opposite direction and the moon balloon rolled after them, as if in a chase. They didn’t look back until they heard a big burst and noticed the moon balloon spitting out a person and disappearing in a large cloud at the same time. They ran towards the figure but concluded from a distance that it was Harsha.

“Harsha!” exclaimed Nana as she ran to hug her. They both burst into tears of joy.

“I’m so sorry...,” cried Harsha.

“No, Harsha...” sobbed Nana. “It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have brought you to the Hago House. Let’s get out of here. I thought I had lost you...”

Zogi and Loga, on the other hand, turned back as they heard a crashing sound. When they looked, they saw the fireball of horror in the Hago House. Twinkle had been set ablaze by the Harlem Beast. Zogi made a frantic effort to douse the flames from Twinkle, with no luck, and as the beast was almost upon them, they knew they had to leave without Twinkle, at least for the time being.

Zogi and Loga scrambled to get out of the house. One minute, it seemed as if the wind was easing o”. Next minute, it seemed everything was flapping in the wind. It was a chaotic scene, with everyone running towards the door, trying to get out at the last minute.

“What happened to me? What is going on? Where are Rikoh and Farah?” Harsha continued to ask all these questions without stopping.

“We need to get out of here and fast,” said Loga, adding, “what about Twinkle?”

“I’m afraid we can’t save him,” said Zogi. “We need to get out of here,” he added.

They looked back and saw that only one beast remained, and it looked like the friendly one. They saw it waving at them as they ran, mouthing, “Go.” Zogi could swear that the beast had winked at them.

“I must be dreaming...” he muttered to himself. He took a quick look at Harsha and saw the exact resemblance Nana had mentioned.

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They continued to run out of the Hago House, through the Hago Region, until they got to Kampa Hill and eventually Puta.

Loga had to think on his feet when he got home, giving his parents a convincing story about why Twinkle wasn't with him at that point in time.

Chapter 33

King's Resolution Day

It was the *Resolution Day* for the King, seven days after his confession, when the royal family and the citizens would know what lay ahead for the Kingdom of Harlem. The truth was: no one knew the exact time when anything was going to happen. This, however, wasn't going to stop the citizens of Harlem who were ready to wait for as long as possible to see the King humiliated. "Let's see how the King gets out of this one," one citizen had said on their way to the Square.

"Is it true that the King has a child?" asked another citizen. "Has anyone found this child?" asked someone else.

"I hope not," smirked the first one, adding, "I hope the Beast comes for him."

"But, that means we are all in danger." "Well...err... I never thought about that."

"Do you think the King will find the lost child?" asked one citizen.

"What about the royal maid? Will she come back?"

Many people had different questions, but there was no one to answer them.



Queen Binta was in her private chamber with her most trusted maid, Royal Maid One, finalising her instructions to her.

“Make sure you listen attentively to everything discussed at the Square as events unfold. Don’t wait until the end of it all before you report back to me.”

“Your Majesty be assured that you will get the full report. I will be your eyes and ears,” responded Royal Maid One as she left the Queen’s private chambers to make her way to the Square.



Zogi’s head was throbbing the next morning, and he sat up in his bed thinking about Harsha’s rescue; did it really happen, or was it another dream? Loga would confirm this to him. He was about to stretch out in bed for another round of sleep, but he had no such luck – his parents wouldn’t give him that chance. They were up early, banging on the door of his room, urging him to get up and get ready for the King’s *Resolution Day*, the seventh day after the anniversary celebrations.

All citizens had to go back to the Square for the resolution to the King’s saga. He’d heard the rumours and whispers. “The beast will come for everyone,” Zadua had told him the last time they had been together.

Zogi had warned him, saying, “Shhhh... Don’t let people hear you say that, it’s nonsense talk and will get your family into trouble.”

Others had said, “The beast will come for the King.”

Zogi was surprised that after rushing him and Nana to get ready, his parents refused to set off to the Square. Meena and Satish had an idea of what was to come, but they didn’t know how it would play out exactly. Zogi didn’t know what was going on with his parents, but he wasn’t having any of it, shouting at the top of his voice, “Mother, Father...we really ought to get going.”

His parents didn’t respond – and he didn’t know why they pretended not to have heard him. Nana, who was in the kitchen grabbing extra snacks, wasn’t sure what the fuss was about, so she answered back, “Will you stop shouting? Anyway, you are old enough to go on your own, so you don’t have to wait.”

“But, it’s supposed to be a family day out,” responded Zogi.

“You mean the King’s humiliation day? I can’t say it’s special. What I know is that the Kingdom of Harlem will not be the same after today,” stated Nana.

“I hear what you say, but we ought to get going.”

“Also, remember, there’s no entertainment, no food, no drinks – didn’t you hear the announcement?” Nana sighed and continued speaking, “That’s why I’m stuffing my tummy with extra food before we go. I suspect it’s going to be a long day for everyone.”

“Yes, all citizens know there is no food!” snapped Zogi.

“So, why would we want to rush to the Square?” queried Nana, happy that she was getting under her brother’s skin.

“Surely, the *Resolution Day* can’t be any longer than the normal King’s coronation celebration,” Zogi shouted, annoyed at Nana for making excuses for their delay in setting out.

“Ahhh! You don’t seem to get it; anyway, I suggest you grab some snacks for later.”

Zogi sighed and continued to silently wait, thinking of his

parents' strange behaviour over the past few days and unable to work out the cause of it. He concluded they had adult issues, which was no concern of his. He went back into his bedroom and removed his transparent apple, playing with it for a while before putting it in his pocket. He came out of his room again and was about to set off without waiting for any one of them, not even Nana, when he heard his mother shouting, "It's time to go." He left to join them.

As they got close to Shakula Square, the apple began to vibrate in his pocket. He found this strange, because there was no obvious sense of danger or any harm in sight. "Could it be the beast lurking in a corner?" he asked himself. Having had the apple for a while, he knew something was about to happen but didn't know what it was. He hoped that the apple was wrong for once because the Square wasn't the place for any drama, especially not today, because there was nowhere for any of the citizens to hide.

The King arrived at the Square. There was a mob-like, loud, curious noise from the citizens, followed quickly by a sudden and eerie quiet that seemed to have been engineered. The Wise One was there, waiting. The Wise One had noticed a change in the King's attitude over the past few days, which he knew was because of the problem facing him. The King couldn't be enemies with The One Wise, because he somehow believed he could solve his problem. He had become nice and polite to him; his arrogance seemed to have disappeared. The reason was obvious.

Without further ado, The Wise One started giving directions, he then summarised why they were gathered at the Square. "We have searched everywhere for the King's child, with no success. The King hasn't been able to find the child he fathered or evidence of the child's existence. We will all wait

here until dusk to see if the child appears, and then I will make a pronouncement of what will happen to the King, his family, and the people of Harlem.” At this point, a few people started weeping and wailing, because they felt sorry for the King or from the fear of what was to happen to the Kingdom of Harlem.

Meena had herself to blame, she didn’t have the courage to go and seek an audience with the King as she had been advised by Most Elderly Jereco. She had made only one attempt of going to the palace – made under the pretext that she was visiting one of the royal maids, since she herself previously worked there. Her courage had failed her at the King’s arrival.

As The Wise One got up to start talking, Meena ran to the front, shouting, “I found your child, it’s a son. I found your son!” Meena’s husband was right behind her.

Zogi and Nana looked at each other, shaking their heads and whispering to one another, “Is Mother alright? Where did she find the King’s son?”

The people of Harlem who were close to Meena’s family thought she had lost her mind. If she had found the King’s son, then where was he? After all, only Nana and Zogi came with them to the Square. It must be a joke.

The Wise One asked, “What are you saying, my daughter?”

“I know where the King’s son is.”

“Are you sure of what you are saying?”

“Yes, Wise One, I will take you to the King’s son, but not before you tell me if there’s a reward or punishment attached to my revealing the truth.” Meena moved closer to The Wise One and repeated, “In case you don’t understand, I know where the King’s son is. But the King must pronounce a reward in front of the citizens of Harlem before I move.” She added, “What will the King do if I fetch his child?”

At this point, The Wise One strolled slowly to the King to

have a quiet word with him. They conferred for a while; no one knew what they were talking about. Since Meena was now in front of the crowd, she could see the King nodding his head without knowing the content of their discussion.

Meena felt feverish, not knowing what the outcome of this would be for her family, but it was too late for her to back down; there was no going back.

Everyone looked on. The King concluded his discussion with The Wise One by whispering, "It will be a reward, Wise One. I need to get myself out of this mess."

"I understand." The Wise One sought everyone's attention, saying, "The King will make an announcement." The King got up to address the citizens, "I, King Bantu Banujala IV, promise that anyone who finds my child before dusk will be given a handsome reward; the citizen's life will change for good. I will reward you with three silver coins and a portion of land will be allocated to you in an area of your choice in Harlem," declared the King, adding, "your family will be second to the royal family in Harlem."

The Wise One turned to Meena, saying, "In that case, you need to fetch the child right now or take us to where he is... Did you say it's a son? It's a matter of urgency."

"In that case, I have your word, sworn to me in the presence of the citizens of Harlem and The Wise One," said Meena, addressing the King. "Now, I will fetch your child."

The King replied, "My word is my bond," as Meena set off to fetch the King's son. Everyone gazed and fixed their eyes on Meena, not knowing what had come over her. *Where is she going to fetch the King's son from?* Some wondered.

"Is she crazy?" some asked.

"She's been very strange over the past few days. I knew she was hiding something."

“How do you know?”

“Remember that we are very close?”

“Really? I wasn’t aware of that. Since you don’t know how this will play out, it’s best not to announce how close you are to Meena, so you don’t get banished with her family.”

“Why would you say that?” “I’m just looking out for you.”

Chapter 34

The Secret Exposed

The apple in Zogi's pocket almost gave him away. It vibrated with so much vigour that he had at some point panicked. When the ball pricked him, he shouted out in shock, "Ouch," without realising.

Nana had asked, "Is anything the matter with you?"

Zogi had replied with a 'yes' without giving any explanation. Nana looked at Zogi with a curious look in her eyes and turned back to what was going on in the Square. She was oblivious to the plight of the rest of her family.

Meena turned away from the King with purpose. You could see the look of determination on her face. "Mother, do you know what you are doing?" asked Zogi and Nana in unison when they saw her walking towards them.

"This is it," Meena said. She was going to fetch the King's child, and no one was going to stop her. She walked up to Zogi, stopped in front of him, and burst into tears, saying at the same time, "I'm sorry, but you must come with me... You have to come with me."

“But, Mother, I don’t know where the King’s child is, and I can’t help you,” answered Zogi.

“I know, but please come with me anyway,” replied Meena.

Zogi refused to move and felt the apple in his pocket jabbing at his thigh.

The apple went crazy, giving a loud shrieking noise that was so loud that everyone began to run towards the exit of the Square. “It’s the beast, Harlem Beast, it’s come for us!” people screamed without waiting to ascertain where the noise was truly coming from and if they were running into danger. After looking round the Square, The Wise One realised that there was no apparent danger but noticed a dark cloud gathering. He shouted at the top of his voice for the crowd to keep quiet, shouting, “We need to find the King’s child.”

“You must come with me,” Zogi’s mother repeated, and without waiting for his response, yanked at Zogi’s hand and began to pull him after her. She tumbled into a few people in her rush to the front of the Square. There was a sense of urgency in her stride, as if she didn’t want anyone to stop her. She didn’t want to change her mind. Zogi struggled, attempting to free his hands from Meena’s, but realised he couldn’t. Meena didn’t know where her strength came from, as she made sure not to let go of Zogi’s hand.

Zogi blurted out a few questions at his mother without waiting for her answer. “Mother, what are you doing? I don’t know where the King’s son is. You’ve never told me about the King’s son. Where are you taking me? Why...err...are you trying to pass me off as the King’s son? This won’t end well for you.”

Statish and Nana were close behind them. Zogi looked at his father, pleading with his eyes and saying, “Father, please tell Mother to stop this minute.” Statish averted his eyes and looked away without uttering a word.

The citizens of Harlem at this point had started to cluster into small groups, whispering, trying to make sense of what was going on, and pointing at Meena and Zogi. They all had their theories about what they thought was happening.

“Is Zogi the King’s son?” “No, it’s Nana, I think...”

“Meena said son...”

“No, she said daughter...”

“She may have been confused...”

“Did Meena and the King have a relationship?” “Maybe.”
“When?”

“Well, I walked with her at the palace as a royal maid when we were teenagers. I suspected something was going on between those two. It was the way she rolled her bottom when the young prince walked by.”

“Ahhh! I don’t want to be part of this talk anymore, there is too much specification. Let’s see what Meena is up to.” Without thinking, they all started to move towards the front of the Square, closer to where the King was seated, to see everything first-hand.

Meena stopped right in front of the King, facing The Wise One. She stood for a while, as if weighing what the outcome of her action would be. “There is no going back,” she mumbled to herself. At the very last minute, she thrust Zogi’s hand out. Nana, at this point, started running to the front to catch up and try to make sense of what was happening. Loga and Zadua, with other friends, excused themselves from their parents and moved to the front to join Zogi.

“What is going on?” asked Zadua. “Are you the King’s son?”

Loga asked. “Do I look like a prince?”

“What does a prince look like? Do they have horns?”

“Be serious, Zadua...” Zogi despondently said, adding, “Anyway, you have to ask my mother.”

The Wise One took hold of Zogi, and without saying a word, pulled him to the King while Zogi struggled, without success, to snatch his hand out of his. After placing Zogi beside the King, The Wise One pulled Meena to one side, asking, “My daughter, do you know what you are doing?” “Yes, I do,” she responded.

“Is this the child the King fathered?” “Yes, Wise One, he is.” “Are you sure about this?” the King interrupted, tired of being ignored by The Wise One for too long. He wasn’t ready at this stage to follow any protocols. He needed to know immediately. “Yes,” she replied and burst into tears.

Zogi left The Wise One and ran to his mother, clinging to her. He whispered into her ears, “Mother, please don’t do this to me. I’m sorry for always disobeying you. You want to punish me, don’t you? Tell me it’s not true...you don’t have to punish me this way.”

“Calm down, my son. If what your mother is saying is true, today becomes a turning point in your life for good,” said The Wise One, trying to console Zogi.

“I don’t want a turning point, I want my father,” he responded, kicking a close-by twig to show his frustration.

At that point, Statish ran to the front and grabbed Zogi, speaking quietly to Meena, “Do we have to do this? After all, he is my son – I have looked after him since he was a baby. How can the King suddenly want to enjoy the fruit of my labour?”

“It’s too late for any regrets, Statish,” and moving closer to him, Meena whispered in his ears, “listen to me very carefully, if we don’t do this, we will lose everything, I mean everything. We must do it this way, if we did not and had we been found out, we would have been banished from

Harlem. Do you want to live in ‘No Man’s Land’? Rumour has it that people get eaten alive in that region. Please, Statish,

let's try and remain positive. The interests of Zogi and Nana should at this stage come first."

Statish nodded, not totally agreeing with her but not knowing what other alternative solutions they had. He knew deep down that Meena was right. Statish resolved to assist Meena. Nana was sobbing uncontrollably, but she managed to ask, "Is this true?" while Zogi looked on as if in a bad dream.

By now, most of the citizens were in shock, some with their mouths wide open in surprise. The King jumped up and rushed to Zogi, holding out his hand to him. Zogi stepped to the side to avoid the King's hand or embrace.

The Wise One said to the King, "There is only one way to be completely sure. I know that everyone born into the royal family, whether boy or girl, wears a special badge of honour: the birthmark. So, I am going to ask Zogi a direct question."

Addressing Zogi, he asked, "Son, do you have a birthmark?"

"Err—"

"Yes, he does!" shouted Meena, loud enough for everyone to hear her.

The Wise One said quietly, "Can you please show it to me, my son?"

"No... I don't have a birthmark; I have nothing to show you."

"Yes, Wise One, he does," countered Meena, looking at The

Wise One and pointing frantically at Zogi's upper right arm, trying to indicate where to find the birthmark. The Wise One nodded to acknowledge the tip, walking towards Zogi at the same time.

"No, he doesn't," cried Nana, running to hug Zogi, now upset, thinking also that something bad was going to happen to her brother, that she might even lose him forever.

The Wise One had had enough of Zogi's tantrums. He yanked Zogi to him with such force that Zogi almost fell over.

“Where does The Wise One get his strength from?” Stashish whispered to Meena.

The Wise One lifted the sleeve of the shirt Zogi was wearing and saw the birthmark; he examined it and confirmed that it was the ‘badge of honour’ to identify those born directly into the royal family. His was on the top of his right arm. When The Wise One saw it, he gasped and held his hand to his mouth. “Oh, no...” he whispered. “It’s true, he’s a prince.”

Those who were close enough to The Wise One had gasped, with some saying, “Oooh, it’s the birthmark—he is indeed the King’s son.”

Some were envious and had nothing good to say. “I’m sure the birthmark is fake and will fade in time. They will soon be found out, just watch,” they concluded. Whispers from one person to another made the clusters of the citizens become louder, since everyone had something to say. Others moved from one cluster to another to hear something else or see from a different view.

The Wise One took Zogi to the King, revealing his birthmark to him. The King’s hands were shaking as he shifted to lift the sleeve of his robe. Zogi and the King gasped in unison as they noticed that Zogi’s birthmark was an exact match to that of the King and positioned on the same spot.

Nana began to cry, “Nooo, he is my brother. He is not the King’s son; how can he be?”

Zogi was visibly upset and didn’t know what was going on. But, one thing was certain, his birthmark, the one the King was revealing, and the one Princess Bibaje had, were the same. When it all dawned on him, he gasped, wondering, *how could this be?*

“How can I be the King’s son? Mother, can you explain

what is going on here? This surely can't be...that I am a prince?" he added.

The crowd became unruly. A few were jubilant that a Code Red had been averted, as no one wanted the Kingdom of Harlem destroyed. Other citizens simply wanted the King deposed. Everyone wanted to be heard, because they all had their own theories on how and why the birthmark matched.

The Wise One shouted, once, twice, thrice, and eventually everyone became quiet. The King didn't know what to do, but he was happy that he had a son who had been found. At least, he was now temporarily out of trouble. He, however, wasn't sure how this could change things, or his life, or Zogi's, or the citizens'. He just didn't know. "What will Binta do?" he mumbled, and continued, "I am sure the princess will be happy to have a brother." He simply didn't know. He had conveniently left The Wise One to take charge of the drama unfolding right in front of everyone.

The Wise One shouted and hushed the citizens again, asking Meena to step forward.

"Meena has a story to tell, and we will all listen. Everyone, including the King, would like to know where you found Zogi and how you were able to raise him as your child for the past 15 years without telling the King. The presence of the royal birthmark is the only proof we need, but we will need to have a word with anyone who is able to back up your story, which is not a matter for today."

Meena was taken to the front of the crowd. As she began her story, it was exactly how she had told it to Stash over the years, but everyone else was hearing it for the first time, including Zogi and Nana. The citizens made different sympathetic sounds. "Oh, what a shame."

“Why? Why did this happen to the royal maid Tiera? Why did she die?”

Some of the women had begun to weep, especially those who worked with Tiera in the palace a long time ago.

Meena concluded her story with tears in her eyes. The Wise One stood up to address the citizens. “We have to thank this woman for what she’s done, how she’s been loyal to her friend, Tiera, in spite of her sorrow in losing a child, and saving the King from his troubles. Most importantly, she saved the Kingdom of Harlem from a Code Red. I don’t need to remind you what that means. Since we have resolved the King’s problem, the Kingdom of Harlem is in a better position and will be stronger in facing any external forces. She and her husband have been brave and will be rewarded in accordance with the King’s pronouncement.”

The crowd burst into laughter and began to clap and cheer in unison while the spiteful ones jeered at the King. The envious ones rolled their eyes upwards towards the sky, whispering, “It’s a lie, she kidnapped the baby because she lost her own.” Some accused her of being a witch.

Chapter 35

King's Denouncement

The King was saved by the discovery of Zogi, or so he thought. In accordance with their Ancestral Rules and traditions, he was immediately denounced as the King by The Wise One, and in the same token, Zogi was pronounced the interim head of the '*Caretaker Committee*' until such time that Elderly Jereco was able to corroborate Meena's story. Upon conformation of her story, rites would be performed to crown Zogi as the new King. The Ancestral Rules allowed the Kingdom of Harlem to have a '*Caretaker Committee*' in situations like this, which is disbanded immediately after a King is crowned.

Suddenly, the crowd broke out in thunderous noise, with some cheering while others clapped. The Wise One tried to calm down the crowd, but they again became very noisy and unruly.

"All hail King Zogi Banujala."

"All hail the King," the crowd responded.

Zogi, feeling uncomfortable, screamed, “I am not your King,” but this was drowned in the noise of the crowd. Zogi’s friends became excited. They ran to him and began to sing, and soon everyone joined in.

The crown was removed from the King’s head and The Wise One gave it to one of the royal guards to keep. The King smiled, because somehow, this had a happy ending for him, and if his son was to become King, then who was he to complain? He remembered always feeling a connection to Zogi when he visited the palace with his friends, but he would never have thought in his wildest dreams that he would have ended up being his son. *What an irony*, the King thought. *To think my son broke King’s Mother’s curse. Is this the end of it all? Has the curse been fully and finally broken?* “I have been humiliated and shamed, but I can live with it,” he whispered to himself.

The Wise One held on to the crown awkwardly, and ignoring Zogi, announced, “Our new King can now speak.” But, instead of Zogi speaking, he moved away and ran to his parents, hugging and clinging to them to wake him up from his supposed nightmare.

“Mother, Father, help me. Am I dreaming?” asked Zogi.

“My brother is King!” shouted Nana. “We’re going to be rich.” “No, you are not. I’m no King and I’m not interested; no one can force me to be King.”

The apple in Zogi’s pocket was completely quiet, not making any noise or moves, no signs, no warnings; it was like a radio with a flat battery. At least, Zogi was glad about that, as there were too many eyes on him – he couldn’t cope with the stress of the apple too.

The Wise One walked around to Stash, and pulling him to the side, said, “You will have to help Zogi as the head of the

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‘*Caretaker Committee*,’ once it’s been set up. The committee will be made up of you, Queen Binta, and me. If Princess Bibaje were old enough, she would have joined us. We will oversee the Kingdom of Harlem and perform some of the King’s duties until we crown our new King.”

Chapter 36

Threat of War

At that moment, a messenger from the Kingdom of Ekity arrived. He was led to The Wise One by Paga, the head of the royal guards. The messenger handed The Wise One a letter in the form of a scroll, saying, “Elderly Jereco and the people of Ekity asked me to deliver this letter to you; and you have only 21 days to respond.

The Wise One headed towards the direction of King Bantu to hand over the scroll. The expectation was that the King would give him the necessary orders to open the scroll and then determine who would read it. It could be anyone within the close ranks, so The Wise One didn't take it for granted. Without the King's permission, no one could open the scroll. Suddenly, he remembered that Zogi was the new head of the 'Caretaker Committee,' so he turned and headed to where Zogi was standing with his parents. As he got closer, Zogi stepped aside, looking bewildered, not knowing what to expect. The Wise One stood right in front of Zogi and thrust the scroll at him. Zogi refused to take it.

“You need to know that protocol has changed regarding the King’s duties. As the head of the *Caretaker Committee*, you will now perform some of the King’s duties or give orders on how they should be performed.”

“I don’t care – please, take that scroll away from me.” “But you are the new King.”

“I’m not, and please take it to your King.” Zogi pushed it back at The Wise One.

The Wise One didn’t know what to do. If he were following protocol, then he would have had to insist that the head of the *Caretaker Committee* give orders. But, stranger things had happened, and he couldn’t blame the young man. A lot still needed to be clarified, but things needed to carry on as normal, at least for now. The Wise One continued to stand in front of Zogi, who found it all funny that it was his call to give orders on who should read the scroll, and he wasn’t ready to oblige The Wise One. “My call?” asked Zogi, adding, “what a joke.”

The Wise One walked back to King Bantu and asked him to give orders, since Zogi refused to follow the standing protocol. The King looked embarrassed. His humiliation seemed to be never ending. He really didn’t want any attention on him; he had had enough for one day. “Protocol broken,” King Bantu muttered to himself, making sure no one heard him. He had no crown on his head, so he was no King. “Please, read,” ordered the King, “but before you do, make sure that the citizens are dismissed, leaving only Zogi and his family.”

The Wise One rose and made the announcement, but some citizens shouted, “Scroll, scroll, read the scroll.” The Wise One and the King didn’t understand how the citizens had the guts to question the King’s orders. But it wasn’t their fault, was it? Without a crown, the King had no power and no authority. He

sat back; glad that for once that he wasn't in control of anything, with no Queen Binta present to remind him of his humiliation.

Just before The Wise One opened the scroll, Royal Maid One decided it was the perfect moment to report back to Queen Binta. There was so much to say that she couldn't delay reporting any longer. Royal Maid One made her way out of the Square, saying, "Excuse me," and occasionally tapping people to move out of her way. The Wise One broke the red ribbon on the scroll and immediately dismissed the crowd, asking them to leave. They refused and stayed back. A few began to leave, not wanting to see any more of the day's drama. The Wise One ordered the royal guards to get rid of everyone. The royal guards moved in, shoving, and dragging anyone who refused to leave.

"You must read now - ignore the crowd," the King said, with a sense of urgency, to The Wise One.

The Wise One ignored the crowd and beckoned Zogi's parents to move closer to the King, since he knew this would be the only way to have Zogi's contribution in any form.

The Wise One opened the scroll, showed it to them, so they would see that it had not been tampered with, and began to read:

*From the people and the Kingdom of Ekity, Your Majesty,
King Bantu Banujala IV,*

To the people and the Kingdom of Harlem, Notice of Immigrant War

Your HMP has been killing our people who have been carted away from your kingdom without any justification or explanation and contrary to our Ancestral Rules.

We do not have the exact numbers, but we know that about 150 of our people have disappeared or been killed. Your HMP was an evil plot to trap and kill our people so you can destroy and erase the Kingdom of Ekity from the earth.

The Adventures of Zogi

We have asked you to explain to us where our people are and what you have done with them. We have asked you to produce our citizens.

In keeping with the laws that govern our regions, if our citizens are not found and returned to us in the next 21 days, the Kingdom of Ekity will be waging a war against the Kingdom of Harlem. You must take responsibility for the Harlem Beast. So, return our citizens in 21 days or prepare for war. Yours

Elderly,

The Most Elderly JERECO,

For the people and Kingdom of Ekity,

Chapter 37

Queen's Heartache

Queen Binta was in her room with Princess Bibaje when she heard distant noise coming from the Square. Walking to the window, she sighed and looked out; wishing she knew exactly what was going on. “Perhaps I should have gone with King Bantu to give him moral support,” she whispered and burst into laughter, knowing she was being insincere. All she wanted was to know exactly what was going on and what she needed to do to protect their daughter and herself. Queen Binta knew she couldn’t have gone to the Square on the *Resolution Day*, because of the humiliation she knew her family would face. “What will happen to Princess Bibaje if King Bantu is found to have another child? Not worth thinking about,” she whispered to herself. “Princess Bibaje must be protected at all cost!” A frantic knock on the door brought her back to the present. “Who is it?” asked Queen Binta, walking to open the door.

“It’s me, Queen Binta, Royal Maid One.”

“Come in,” answered Queen Binta as she opened the door

for her to come in, feeling apprehensive about what she was going to learn. She had sent two of her most trusted maids to the Square and asked Royal Maid One to report back to her immediately about any major development in the King's affairs.

Royal Maid One scurried into the room, feeling flustered with excitement, and blurted out the whole story to the Queen, recounting to her what had happened so far. How they had found the King's son, leaving out vital details that she knew would upset the Queen.

"No! King Bantu can't have a son," she cried and slumped on the floor. The royal maid rushed to the side of the Queen and helped her up. Settling her to the couch, she went into the bathroom, grabbed, and dampened a face towel. Rushing back to the room, she placed the towel on the Queen's forehead. After making sure that the Queen was comfortable, Royal Maid One picked up Princess Bibaje, who was crying.

"Tell me, who is this child? Who is the mother? Do they live in the Kingdom of Harlem?"

"I will answer your questions one at a time," replied Royal Maid One, certain that any of her answers would upset the Queen.

"So, where did they find this child?" asked the Queen.

"One of the citizens of the Kingdom found the child. Her name is Meena, and as a matter of fact, she seemed to have raised the child as her own."

"Who is his mother?"

"This is where the story gets complicated. The mother of the child is said to be a royal maid, Tiera, who worked in the palace as a teenager during the time of King Banujala III and when King Bantu was a teenager."

"Who is this child?"

“A boy called Zogi. You know, the same Zogi who took his friends beyond the Hago Gate.”

“Noooo,” screamed Queen Binta and fainted.

“Queen Binta, get up. Please, get up,” whispered Royal Maid One as she stood over the Queen, gently shaking her by the shoulders to wake her up.

Chapter 38

The Beast Attacks

“**N**ooo!” cried The Wise One, dropping the scroll after he finished reading its contents. “We must find a way to resolve this. We haven’t been at war since the time of your great grandfathers and we have no ‘*Gate Keeper*’ to protect the Kingdom of Harlem against any war. War is destructive. What proof do they have of these allegations they’ve made against the Kingdom of Harlem?” he said to no one in particular.

“What shall we do?” asked King Bantu. “What is going on? Why is this happening in my time?”

Everyone turned to Zogi, the new ruler and head of the interim committee, as The Wise One asked him, “What shall we do? What’s your decision on this?”

“Firstly, tell me who, what, and where do we find the *Gate Keeper* to defend the Kingdom of Harlem against the war.”

“It’s not a story for here,” replied The Wise One. “The Kingdom of Harlem lost the ‘*Gate Keeper*’ when King Banujala

III moved the palace out of the Hago Region to the region of Shakula.”

“What happened?” asked Zogi.

“It’s a story for another day,” responded The Wise One. “All I need to know now is what you want me to do. What shall we do, Zogi?”

Zogi turned away without answering. He was now worried, as his apple, which had been quiet for a while, had begun to vibrate. He was certain that something was about to happen. He looked around but saw nothing, only that a few of the citizens were lingering behind, waiting to watch and know what was going on so they could spread more gossip about the King’s humiliation.

“Have you decided, or do you want to think about this?” asked The Wise One. Zogi ignored him and looked ahead, beyond the walls around the Square, and what he saw frightened him.

Suddenly, he noticed that the wind disappeared, and the sun went behind the clouds. He saw that the sky had turned darker, with a band of grey clouds gathering, looking pregnant with water. And then, it began to rain heavily without warning. This was followed by an approaching whirlwind.

The Wise One stood to attention, the King sat up abruptly, and they saw that some of the citizens had started to run away from the Square, while others ran back to it.

“What on earth is going on?” asked The Wise One and the King in unison. They didn’t have to wait too long to find out; suddenly and without warning, they saw a creature flying very low and towards the Square, with a purpose. Stash, Meena, and Nana ran for cover. Zogi ran towards the King without having any control of himself. Others remained where they

were, dodging and pointing. “It’s the Harlem Beast; it’s come for the King.”

People ran as the beast appeared from nowhere, hiding behind large stones they thought created a refuge for them and behind bushes and leaves, as if these could save them. The beast flew very low, growling, and roaring, with a determined look and only one purpose, which was soon to become known to those who were still in the Square. The King began to run at the sudden realization that the beast was heading his way. The beast took a deep and low dive down, making a swing for the King.

The King shouted, “Paga, get this beast away from me!” King Bantu struck out with his hands, as if trying to fight off the beast. “Get this creature off me.” He continued to run away without waiting to see if any of the royal guards were at hand to help.

He hadn’t run far, when the beast flew very low above the King again, so low that he lost his balance and fell. The royal guards were running and scampering behind him, but this time, it was in an attempt to at least rescue their King from this creature, which was attacking him. “Stop this thing,”

Paga yelled at the other royal guards behind him, adding, “We must make haste to rescue our King.” Paga ran towards the King, feeling sick to his stomach, remembering that King’s Mother had been taken away by a beast, one that looked like this.

The beast hovered on top of the King as he continued to scream, wanting to be rescued. When he looked back, he saw that the royal guards were close enough to him. But they had nothing to fight the beast with, after all, no one expected the day to end with the beast coming for the King and no one had seen something like this during their lifetime in Harlem. Of those

there, only Paga and the King had been present when King's Mother was taken away.

The King clung to a wooden frame, not too far from the square gates, which was as far as he could reach, to stop the beast from taking him away. He looked around frantically for help but knew in his heart that he was fighting a lost battle. The beast yanked at the King, but the King stood his ground, not making it easy for the beast to lift him off the ground.

Zogi and his family were now close to the scene as well. The apple in Zogi's pocket was vibrating. He knew the apple was trying to give him instructions or direct him in a way, but he couldn't bring it out in front of all these people. He prayed that his pocket wouldn't burst into flames and made a mental note to find a replacement for his bag; he'd lost it to flames when they were rescuing Harsha. The apple was his secret, which he shared with Loga and no one else.

Without thinking too much about their actions, Zogi and his parents joined the royal guards and instinctively began striking the beast while the royal guards continued to pull the King away from it. If the situation were different, they would have laughed at the sight and irony of it all. They all tried to free the King from the beast, but they were failing in their attempt. The King wailed, "Somebody, help me, this thing must not take me away." Those close-by heard the tremor in the King's voice when he cried out for help. "What have I done to this beast?" he asked in a muffled voice.

The atmosphere had turned desperate, and people were wailing, "Save our King..."

The Wise One walked briskly to where they all were and pulled Zogi to one side, saying, "You must come with me, my child."

"But I want to help the King, Wise One."

“You must leave that to the others,” he responded. “You must be protected, Zogi, you are going to be in charge.” Without waiting for him to respond, The Wise One pulled Zogi to the King’s resting area in the Square, which was like a small room.

There was darkness all around as Zogi was taken away from the crisis into safety by The Wise One. Before he turned to go, Zogi saw Harsha from the corner of his eyes, thinking, *at what point did she enter the Square? Did she witness everything that happened?*

With determination and force that no one could stop, the beast positioned itself on top of the King. Diving very low and without warning, it hovered over the King for a while; it then flew high, floating above all the royal guards and citizens to see, finally diving low and yanking the King off the ground. Everyone watched with shocked looks on their faces. Even the citizens who had left saw the beast carrying their King away like a weightless piece of paper.

“Help me,” cried the King as he continued to wrestle with the Harlem Beast. Everyone watched from the safety of their hiding place, but they couldn’t stop the beast, neither could they help the King. A few smirked with happiness at Harlem being relieved of the most useless king in the history of the Kingdom of Harlem. Some were pointing at the King, but no one could do anything to save him. Zogi looked out of the window and saw the King being taken away by the beast and remembered the exact scene at the HMP where the beast had taken a man during one of his visits there.

Zogi saw Harsha running towards the King’s room. He was tired of her – really – she seemed to be too curious for her own good. He saw as she tripped over a large stone hidden by leaves, and he instinctively ran out to help her up.

“Harsha, why do you get yourself in difficult situations and what are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see what was going on. You know, I will need to tell my aunty and uncle in detail.”

“I didn’t know you had an aunty. Where is your uncle?”

“Oh, Uncle Jaja is back there, in the crowd, I left him behind. I do have an aunty who doesn’t like to be seen. She is always in the Kingdom of Ekity, and sometimes, she travels to the other Kingdoms, and I don’t see her for months. She says it’s best for everyone, which I don’t understand. I have asked why she says that, but she never gives me a straight answer. Since I’ve known her, she has never travelled to the Kingdom of Harlem.”

“Oh, anyway, you shouldn’t be here, this is dangerous.” “Ouch,” she cried as Zogi pulled her hand to lift her up. “Let me have a look, seems you have injured yourself.” “It’s my upper arm!”

As Zogi lifted Harsha’s sleeves to see how badly she had bruised her arm, what he saw shocked him so much that he dropped her hand as if he were holding a hot potato.

“What is it?” cried Harsha. “Help me,” she continued, “my arm is burning...err...hurting,” as she held her sleeve up and tried to rub her arm. Zogi moved closer to her and examined Harsha’s birthmark. It was exactly like his own and that of Princess Bibaje’s.

“What is going on?” Zogi asked quietly. He turned his back to Harsha, saying, “Let me find something to clean your bruise.” Instead, he turned his back on Harsha and dipped his hand into his pocket, bringing the apple out for a sign. However, what Zogi found shocked him; he now had two apples in his pocket, and he could have sworn that when he brought them out, his old apple was smiling. “What does this

all mean?” whispered Zogi, before Harsha’s voice brought him back to the present.

“Are you helping me or not?” asked Harsha. “Please, be quick, I need to go and find my uncle, he needs to know I am safe.”

The Wise One had now almost reached them, when he said, “Zogi, we need to talk.” Zogi jumped up from where he was, kneeling over Harsha, he pulled Harsha to him with a firm tug. Reaching quickly for Harsha’s sleeve, Zogi rolled it down, saying, “Go home, your uncle will help. You need to get out of here right now or you will get in serious trouble.

Don’t worry, I’ll come and find you.” “You will?” asked Harsha. “Don’t worry; I’ll come over when things have settled down. I promise to tell you all about it.”

“Um...promise?”

“Yes, I do.”

Zogi needed Harsha to leave the Square immediately; he didn’t want The Wise One to notice the birthmark on Harsha’s arm. This would get his parents into trouble. Would it? He didn’t know, and he wasn’t ready to take any chances. Did his mother tell a lie? Where did Harsha get the same birthmark from? Who was she?

Zogi walked towards The Wise One, waving his hand about, trying to distract him away from Harsha, before muttering, “I need to get to the bottom of this.”

“Bye, Zogi,” Harsha shouted over the noise of the Square as she prepared to leave. “Bye,” Zogi responded.

As Harsha began to walk away from Zogi, she stopped to say, “Uncle Jaja and I are travelling to the Kingdom of Ekity tomorrow. I’ll tell my Aunty Tiera and Uncle Jereco about what happened here today. Uncle Jaja should be able to add to my story.”

Zogi exclaimed, and then lowering his voice almost to a whisper, asked, “Aunty...who?” He looked and sounded frightened.

“Aunty Tiera,” interjected Harsha, not allowing Zogi to finish his sentence, adding, “She and Uncle Jereco are the only family I have living in the Kingdom of Ekity. Uncle Jaja is Aunty Tiera’s family and mine too – you know, distant relative – but he lives in the Kingdom of Harlem. I still don’t know why Aunty Tiera doesn’t visit him here.” As Zogi turned to ask Harsha more questions about her aunty, he saw that The Wise One had arrived and was standing beside him. He could only watch in horror as Harsha left. He began to put two and two together, but it didn’t add up.

Zogi had a very bad feeling about Harsha and her aunty, Tiera, not to talk about the impending war with the Kingdom of Ekity.

Zogi must find out from The Wise One, and quick, about how to find the *Gate Keeper*, since that seemed to be the saving grace for now. He made a mental note to visit Harsha and find out more about her birthmark and her aunty, Tiera.