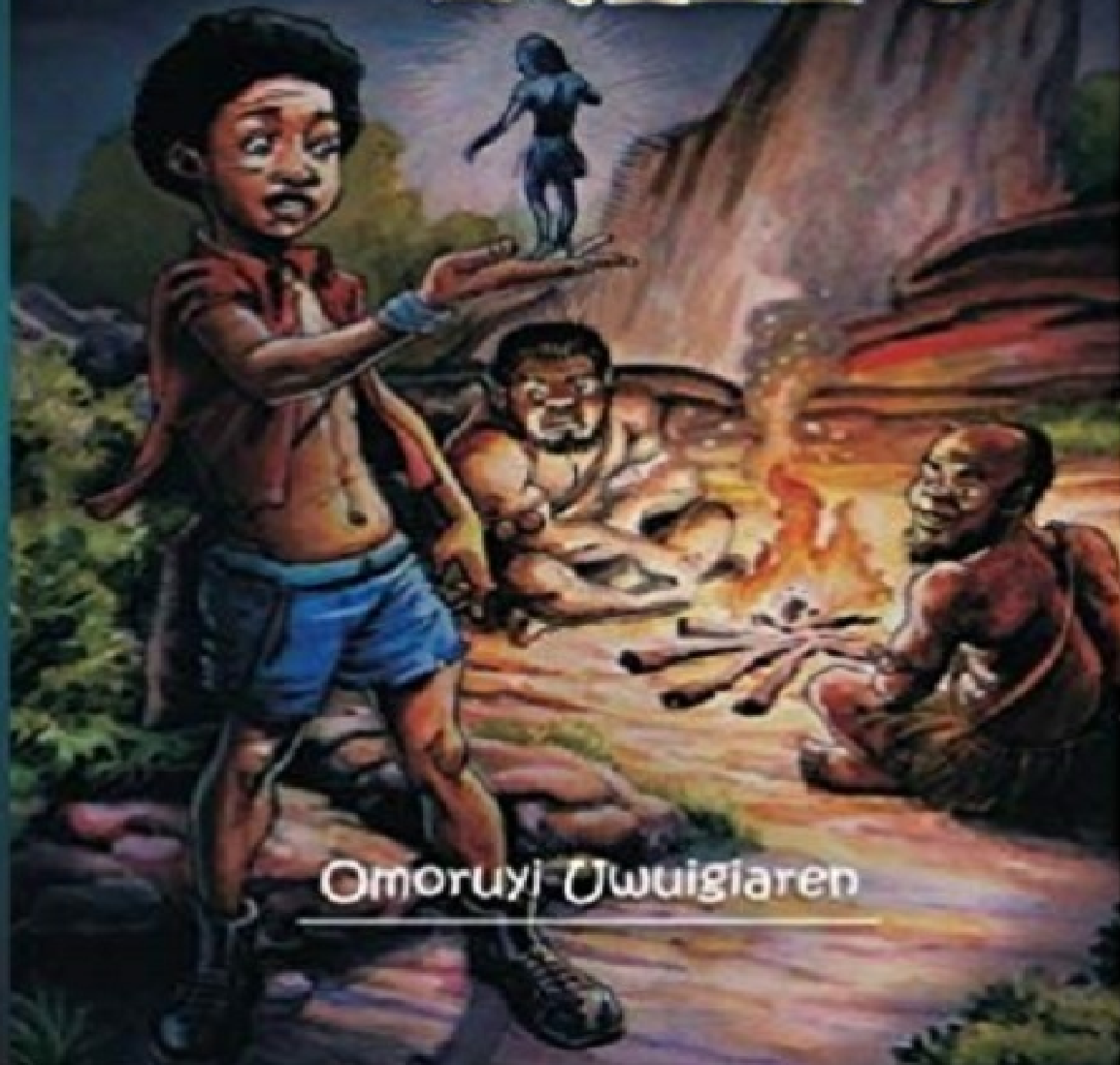


THE Adventures OF **NIHU**



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The Adventures of Nihu

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CHAPTER ONE

THE LONELY FOREST

As the evening gradually took her place in the scheme of things, farmers observed it was rather too late to continue their ambitions on the hillside. Thus, they began to journey back to their proud heritage—the countryside that they called home. As they walked, the bush paths felt their coming, and their wild hits of feet wrote frustration on the face of old Earth. Rickety legs would do no harm to such a hard Earth—she would laugh if such feet would keep treading all day.

Gubado also had his share of a good day and was returning home --pride hung from his neck like an Olympic medal. Those who knew what pride could do also assumed that his high mindedness was because he was going to be given a piece of land that set him apart from his brother, Goudonas, the father of Nihu. This transfer of property would render Nihu's father as one of the poorest in the family.

As the farmers reached their various destinations, Nihu, a young hunter who was known for playing flute in his local district, was out that evening with bow and arrows. It all began well for him, for an opportunity came his way immediately. As he advanced into the forest, he ran into an antelope that was busy grazing near a bush path void of human activity. Nihu squinted his eyes and took aim, but his shot went wide and the arrow stuck into a tree. Meanwhile, the antelope rose, noticing the action that was against its poor soul, and faded safely into the nearby bush. As for Nihu, he did not go to recover the arrow that struck the tree. He drew another arrow from his quiver and went another way, still in search of an animal for the night. When all effort to get one failed, he retreated home to grab his dinner and put the day behind him.

After Nihu had gone, a robber, who had seen the shot to the antelope, was lying in ambush, awaiting his prey of the evening. He got hold of Nihu's arrow to use as a weapon if, eventually, he ran into anyone. Like any thief that would never want to be caught or seen, he took cover like a militia in the woods, knowing that his prey would be along shortly.

When Gubado emerged from the evening's shadows, the pride of a champion was still alive within him. One could see the high look standing far taller than the pair of legs that

carried him. That pair of rickety legs could provoke laughter in a congregation of people with dark conscience. Laughter would reign gloriously on their faces because of what nature made out of him.

Pride and fulfillment walked on the most precious streets of Gubado's heart. Perhaps an orator had sold the new look to him. The glory within the noble farmer did not encourage him to take a careful look here and there. Maybe Gubado would have seen the robber when he came out briefly to see if a victim was on his way.

As Gubado got close, the robber fell upon him. They had a fair struggle. Gubado fought back with the cutlass he hung around his neck, but his blow came late as the robber had already driven the arrow into Gubado's chest. As he staggered, his cutlass fell to the ground and he began to battle very hard to overcome the cruel hand of death that gradually enveloped him. The robber got hold of the cutlass that was lying somewhere in the dirt and zapped off Gubado's head.

The deal was done. Gubado's body rested peacefully on the bare chest of the Earth as his head rolled unto the edge of the bush path. Quietly, the thief collected all that was on the severed countryman. Rings, beads and all his belongings were placed in his pockets. A future of plenty emerged from just a few minutes of assault. The robber fled into the night, carefully looking to every side to make sure that no one saw him carry out such an evil act.

A few days later, Gubado's body was found. The massacre had tongues wagging in the countryside. The arrow that stood in his left chest was still there and the severed head invited flies and ravenous animals to have their share of the free meal. Before the bald vultures could eat what the robber had served them, the people began to cry for justice to take its due course.

The news reached the King who sent his soldiers to get the body for proper examination. Gubado's corpse was brought to the palace, Nihu's arrow still sticking in his chest. A farmer, one who had seen Nihu shooting arrows in the forest, visited the palace to report the incident. With this confirmation, the King and his council of elders concluded that Nihu was the murderer. He must have done it so that his father, Goudonas would finally be in possession of the land that had set brother against brother.

In the midst of the trouble, Goudonas and his son were summoned before the many eyes that were begging justice to fall upon Nihu. The King's court was flush with nobles and commoners who took their respective seats as their standings in the community implied. Angry looks hung on the faces of the observers who raised a roar immediately Goudonas and his accused son walked into the court. "Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!" The cry went like splitting rocks. "Hang the owl, Your Majesty!" a section of the crowd chanted. As the crowd booed, about three hundred eyes waited anxiously, while others sat in perpetual anger in the sockets

of the faces that bore them.

Their looks were begging for justice that they felt was timely for a man so full of courage and bravery. Gubado's love had prevailed everywhere. With a wave of his bejeweled hand, the King signaled stillness. The roar ceased. The murmurings slowly quieted as the King cleared his throat and said, "Nihu, come forward."

Nihu did so and bowed in obeisance, as was the custom. But the king sneered, "Don't bow to me. Eat your regard. Just let me know now. Did you kill Gubado or not?"

The King's baritone voice filled the air as everyone nodded, and some shouted, "Yes! Yes! Good question for the spoiled brat!"

"I did not do any harm to my uncle," Nihu replied.

"Then who did it? Your arrow was found driven into his chest. How would you prove to me and the people that you did not have a hand in the death of your uncle, Nihu?"

"My lord, it was true that I shot an arrow in the forest, but it was an antelope I intended to hit but missed. The arrow struck on a tree and not in the chest of my uncle as you have said, Your Majesty."

"You are a liar. Your arrow sent him to the silent world. If as you claim, your arrow struck a tree, why then did we find Gubado dead?"

"I don't know. Someone else must have done that."

The king spoke nonchalantly. "Were I in a festive mood, I would have ordered your neck right away. But I do not see fit to take your life today. You will be banished for thirty years. Moreover, it is to no other place other than the Lonely Forest. Go and prove your innocence in the forest! If you survive, you survive. But if you die, it is your own evil that will have killed you. And as for that piece of land that must have prompted you to commit such treachery, it shall be given to Gubado's children."

The king turned to his guards and ordered, "Let him take a parting gift!" Then he went into his chamber.

The guards pounced on Nihu and carried him upon their shoulders like a sacrificial lamb. The crowd chanted victory songs and cast stones at his father who tasted confusion and frustration as his meal for the day. With his legs kicking the air, Nihu was carried to the field where he was tied to a stake. One of the hefty guards, as dark as the midnight, drew his whip and laid it forty times across Nihu's back. With every stroke, the boy yelled like a farmer from the bush tribe suffering a dismal turn at the wake of a bountiful harvest. His fellow farmers paraded smiles over their faces.

When the guard was finished with the breathtaking exercise, he threw the whip away and washed his hands in a bowl of salt water. His colleagues did likewise as if it was an abomination to see a person in agony. One of them carried the bowl of water and emptied it on

Nihu who was already covered in a pool of his own blood. He wept as a hungry baby for the salt water tormented his battered flesh. He rested on the stake like a frustrated man reduced by the dreadful sting of his fishwife. The guard, who had flogged him, brought out a knife and cut the ropes that held Nihu to the stake. Set free, he fell as the guards left the scene, one after the other leaving trails of huge doubt of a better destiny for Nihu.

After some time, Nihu's mother rushed to the field to see her son battered and slipping in and out of consciousness. Seeing what the guards had done to her boy, she wept bitterly and began to clean Nihu's body with the edge of her wrapper. She ran home to get a clean cloth, Nihu's rucksack, and flute. When she got to the field, she dressed Nihu in the clean cloth and gave him a pain reliever as well. Since it was an abomination for anyone to be seen with a condemned murderer, his mother had to sneak away before anyone noticed. Before sunset, Nihu found his feet. He got hold of his rucksack and left the village to confront a destiny he did not want to imagine.

Leaves cracked helplessly under his old pair of boots as he forged ahead. A humble serenity reigned in the forest making it seem like an under world, a lost world where evening devils are always ready to make anyone a meal. Behind the tall trees standing like Rocks of Gibraltar, the scorching sun was apparently defeated and could not leave its trademark on the ground. It was forced to stay on the mountaintops, plains, and treetops without penetrating down to rob the Earth of its cool shade. Yet the sun still happily made itself felt, sending reflected rays around the coast, as the streams and rivers waited to receive its glow. They received what the sun threw at them with much humility. The sun lay low like one with a dismal past who had not plucked up his spirit to confront the challenges. A light wind blew and trees bowed gently as a few gleams of sunshine lit up the gloomy afternoon. An underworld, the den of evening devils, was what came to mind in the quiet forest.

The trip-trap, trip-trap of Nihu's feet displaced dry leaves. More were pressed under the crushing steps of his old boots. A few fell a distance away as if receiving a blow from an enemy. Nihu barely raised his feet off the ground, though they descended like wreckage on the heart of the Earth.

Fruit bats made the forest and her fruits their heaven in the night. In bitter nights, when bats come from nowhere and fill the air, dark powers send appropriate meals to hell. Many fruits were not thoroughly eaten and rotted in the litter, leaving a trail of waste. Nihu's boots slipped on one such black pool, lifting the boy from the forest floor. As he was descending to be received by the open arms of Earth, the old baobab tree behind was all that was needed for him to adjust to vertical. Even a tree can have an existential purpose. Nihu crashed and yelled aloud. As soon as he realized that he was not injured after all, he threw the incident behind him.

Slowly, he got back on his feet, picked up the rucksack that had slipped off his hand onto the ground. After he slammed the bag on his back, he turned around. Perhaps someone was lurking in the creepy environment, but there was no real threat to his life yet.

Confusion settled on his face and frustration too. The beauty of the environment was a deafening silence. This kind of stillness provokes not only curiosity, but also prompts the heart to skip a beat. Fear of the unknown creates anxiety that can set the legs in different directions, encouraging uncoordinated steps, successfully setting the mind in total disarray.

Dead woods, limbs, and climbing shrubs slowed his feet and added to Nihu's uncertainty in the twilight. Any rational person prefers to steal along in order to avert a miserable hit from an unknown. Nihu held his bag firmly, supporting his frame with his left hand that he rested at intervals on the trees separated from each other sometimes by yards and sometimes by inches. Every now and then, his thirst beckoned, begging for an attention that only water could help. At intervals, he would break forth and grab his water bottle a true companion from which he could drink.

No named destination guided his feet and soon they began to make demands of their own. Luckily, his mother had thought to include provisions in his rucksack. As quickly as he could work his mouth around the walnuts from the sack, he sent them much needed refreshment. The sun retired gradually from the busy torment of the world it was ordered to serve since creation. Nihu, too, had his own share of the diminishing return that is like plague when it is taking its toll. His shoulders sagged as much as his legs that were already too difficult for him to deliberately maneuver. Finally, the sun rested on the bed of sudden death somewhere in the sky, and then was gone to find its own peace.

There were few stars in the bare chest of the sky. They happily gave their lights near the moon. When darkness began to tread the sun's old path, Nihu knew that going further would be a dangerous choice in a creepy kind of place like this. He found succor under a tree and rested on his rucksack that he made into a pillow. As the twilight continued to ride on the wings of the evening, the glowing insects and crickets began to inhabit their world and Nihu's eyes stumbled on the full moon. The trees would bow gently to the natural hand at work, revealing the beauty of the sky that sustained the moon in the face of the dull evening.

The night crept in and thoughts began to crowd in Nihu's head. First, he thought of a beast that could ravage him as he lay under the foot of the tree. He quickly sat up and gave a careful look at every side of the night. No devil yet, but glowing multitudes of insects were like the eyes of a wild cat with the utmost desire to feast on prey right away. A ravenous look alone could kill a dove. Unsure of what he was seeing, perceiving that the lights from the insects could be what he most feared, Nihu jumped to his feet. He quickly climbed a nearby baobab tree and found comfort on one of the branches. That became his retreat as long as the night

continued to have its way. At least, he was now safe from what the night might bring against him. Perhaps formidable rodents, whose bites stung dreadfully and could, send a body to hell.

The comfort was good and timely. Nihu was yet to find sleep when he heard a roar a few poles away. He raised his head and stared in the direction of the sound, humble fright written on his face. But the night hindered him from seeing what was beyond so that he could know the devil behind such a heartbreaking roar. Everything, including the light from the glowing insects was misleading. The roar persisted, disrupting his comfort as he held tightly to the tree branch that held him. A slip could eventually rob him of his life if he fell on the path of a beast that would not spare him a breath before he would make a meal out of him.

The ground was as dark as the night and Nihu's efforts to see the source of the roar hit a brick wall. He would need at least a lamp before he could see beyond his nose. In spite of the many glowing insects hanging here and there among the leaves, the boy could see nothing. The insects were having fun in the tense night, chasing each other from one end of the tree to the other. Nihu feared everything that was happening around him as the roaring of wild animals grew by the second. He reached for his torch inside his rucksack. He lit it, punched it towards the direction of the roar and received a heavy fright in return. His heart skipped a beat, knocking hard inside his chest when he saw that the sound belonged to an old lion. In less than a second, he switched off the torch. The darkness mounted on the wings of the evening as the lion went near the tree and smelled the ground as if he were tracking an antelope. When it could not find anything, the lion hastened away to another place where it would find a meal for the night. Nihu heaved a sigh of relief that could have felled many trees. Finally, he bowed to the demand of the night and slept on the branch, the tree at last bringing temporary relief to his worn out body.

CHAPTER TWO

NIHU MEETS OLD PHIL

At daybreak, the forest walked briskly into brightness. Alive for the right reasons, it carried on its inevitable duty, to give light to the world. Happy birds sung aloud a morning song. One might be carried away, thinking there are some instrumentalists having a field day with their keyboards a little distance away. Nihu thought this as he sat up and yawned a million

times. The beauty of the morning was like a bed of roses. Still comfortable in his apartment on the tree branch, the activities of the birds had stolen away the urge to sleep. When he looked quietly on every side, his eyes fell upon some monkeys, which prompted a beautiful excitement to overwhelm him. They had their eyes on him as they swooped from one tree to the other as if inviting Nihu to join them.

As he watched the fun, Nihu was struck by thirst. He reached for his water bottle so he could continue to observe the antics that lifted his spirits. There was nothing left. Thirst made watching the continuing monkey-sports difficult. He had to get water. Just one drink and he could be happy again.

He got down from the tree, and embarked on a journey to put his thirst under control. Knowing how he could be reduced by it, he slammed his rucksack on his back and traveled northward. As he proceeded further, he ran into a tree stained with blood. Flies hovered around it like bees in their hive. Nihu slowed down. He quietly went close to see the kind of insects that were on the tree. When he was considerably close, he noticed a hollow in the tree gushing out blood, which the insects were happily working on. Nihu's head snapped back. Gradually, he went backwards to find safety before the unknown could ravage him. As he tried to find his way, a big movement under the leaves, set his mind in disarray. He looked towards the direction; all he could see was bloodstains on the ground. He began to fight with his thoughts, pondering over what must be going on in this strange forest. *This is strange. Blood is everywhere. Maybe a wild animal just finished feasting on a prey*, he thought. *No, it cannot be. It must be something else.*

The tree gushing out blood reminded Nihu of the ancient Iroko tree, the home of witches and wizards. The tree looked like the last Iroko that had been felled by over fifty able-bodied men with the assistance of some spiritual people whose families and children had been casualties of the powers that be in the countryside. Blood gushed from the tree the day it was brought down.

After the tree fell, hosts of people in the village died. They were those who met at the tree to donate blood and flesh of whomever they wished to send to hell. It was after the fall of the Iroko tree that the people realized they had been living in the midst of devils. But this tree was different. The stain was continuous, as if something had been dragged to the spot from somewhere else. Nihu followed the stains in the direction it came from as if they were precious things that could prompt a gold seeker to give away his hand to gain a piece of diamond ring.

He found himself in a traditional shrine where human heads and that of animals are sometimes used to appease the gods. As he fixed his eyes on the shrine, he remembered his trip to the stream with his father many years ago.

The place was a long way from their home. The goddess Ijokpa, a demon that reared livestock and kept her fortress as clean as any well-bred village woman keep, ruled the land. As Nihu and his father headed up the hill that lead to the stream to get the water, which was believed to be medicinal, and could cure all sorts of stomach related ailments, Nihu broke the long silence that had reigned between them.

“Father, who owns these fowls?”

“Sssh. We do not talk too loud here. If you do, she could push you out of her territory. That is the least she would do to an ignorant person.”

“Who is she? Whom are you talking about?”

“Ijokpa. She has existed before our ancestors were born. She owns everything here.”

“What an old crone! What does she do with these hens, cockerels and goats? Does she sell them?”

“I don’t know. Not even our forefathers can tell why she is so delighted in keeping them.”

“Then she must be rearing them for a thief. Or what do you think Father?”

“No one dares touch them. If you do, you die. Let me take this opportunity to warn you, do not touch anything here. Do you hear, boy? There have been people who tried to steal her things—they ended up paying with their lives.”

“Then she is very wicked. Is she taller than Grandma?”

“I don’t know. But those who claimed to have seen her said she has two heads. One is that of a man, the other like a woman. She has a shrine over there. Some people visit the place. You can, too.”

“I’m not going there. I don’t want to be hurt.”

“She does no harm to a just person.”

“Are you sure? Can I meet her in there?”

“Maybe. Sometimes she is friendly. When one spends too much time farming, she alerts you; lets you know it’s time to go home.”

“How does she do that?”

“She pushes you out of the farm.”

“That’s interesting. Then I have to visit the shrine.”

His father stopped and put a hand on his shoulder, “Nihu, please, do not touch anything there. Is that clear? It would be good to return to me immediately after you set foot in that shrine.”

“Okay. I will return quickly.”

As they rolled down from the steep hill, Nihu raced to the far end while his father went to the stream to fill the water pot. As Nihu went, one of the cockerels making a meal out of some grains cleared his throat as if he wanted to say something. Nihu was startled. His eyes flew to

every side to see if someone was nearby. When no one met his gaze, he peeked quietly into the shrine. A lifeless body lay massacred on the floor. Terrified, he did not bother to go in and left the place with devastating speed.

As his feet took him back down the hill, the cockerel that cleared his throat earlier, said, "Boy, have you seen who you were looking for?" Nihu screamed for all he was worth.

He was panting when he reached his father, "I found a dead man in the shrine!"

"A thief no doubt that came to steal her things. That is exactly what she does to unjust people."

"Not only that, a cockerel spoke to me. But I didn't see her."

"Only the gods could determine who would see their nakedness."

"What do you mean, father?"

"If she wants you to see her, she would have revealed herself. Let's go." Nihu clung to his father as they left the stream.

* * *

Nihu now remembered standing in the shrine in front of a headless body covered in blood with feet chopped off. The corpse had been opened as if a doctor's knife in a laboratory had cut through it. Nihu trembled and folded his hands close. *Why all this is happening to me, he wondered to himself. If I had known, I would have asked the king to execute me. That would have been better than wandering in a place I have no knowledge about. A place where everything is evil and one could be sent to hell with the snap of a finger.*

In the far end of the shrine, his heart jumped into his mouth. With a yell, he ran out of the place at the speed of light. Suddenly, he missed a step and fell. As he battled to his feet, a creature as thin as a rope and with an eye as large as a crystal ball came out of the ground behind him. He attempted to crush Nihu with his club. Nihu ran the race of his life, the ugly creature giving hot chase. As they whipped past bushes, trees, limbs, dead woods and shrubs, it was obvious that the devil would not spare the boy a breath if he eventually caught hold of him. Nihu raced like a demon whose place in the future would be determined by how well he could maneuver the pair of legs that carried him.

The path led to a swamp. Wailing and shouting at the top of his voice, he waded waist-deep through the mud to the other side. As the one-eyed creature approached the swamp, he faded from the chase. Gradually, the creature sunk into his underworld home. His crystal ball eye glared out as the Earth finally swallowed him.

No longer hearing the crashing of branches or the sounds of his pursuer, Nihu looked back to see if the devil was still in the chase. Trying to keep his pace and looking back at the same time, he crashed into a tree. After a time, he recovered consciousness and moved to

relax in the quiet of the dewy morning. The cool smell of a river met his nose. His eyes peered anxiously, looking for the solution to his thirst. The river was just behind the trees. An observer might be tempted to believe some gardeners must have worked here many years ago. Planting the trees in a way that would help people who visit the river to find shade where they could relax after swimming or washing themselves in the river. The sight was comforting, and Nihu was cheered.

Nihu rose like a discouraged man who has just seen light at the end of a dark tunnel. He threw the ugly experience he just had behind him. Then he got hold of his rucksack with a firm grip and raced on rickety legs towards the river. When he got close, he threw his sack on the riverbank and threw himself into the river. Washing and drinking happily, he was soon lost in pleasure. He swam in every direction.

Meanwhile, old Philominenges, a bald man living alone in the Lonely Forest, was behind a tree quietly watching Nihu in the river. The old man had been cleaning his musket when he heard a shout at the river that was not too far away from his little hut. First old Phil thought the noise was a roar from a wild animal grabbing their usual fun. So he loaded his musket and went quietly to the place to see if he might catch a good meal. But the hope of finding a rhino or hippo was dashed when he got close enough to see the boy. He decided to watch from a distance before making any decision that could make or mar his destiny. What must have brought such a person to a devilish place where the hope of a better life hangs in the cruel hands of fate, he wondered.

After sometime, Nihu came out of the river and went to brush his pair of boots. Soon they were clean and good to look at again. He filled his water bottle and hung his bag carefully on his back to start on his journey once again.

As he shuffled off, Old Phil followed quietly. He stole along so carefully, Nihu did not notice the old man behind him. Around a corner of the path, Nihu ran smack into a warthog making a meal out of a dead animal. The warthog charged. Nihu took to his heels, heading back to where he came from, the angry warthog in hot pursuit. Nihu thought his time had surely come. He raced, screaming to the high heavens as the warthog gradually closed on him.

Old Phil, who had seen everything shouted, "Boy! Climb any of the trees ahead of you. Just climb, the devil will retreat!" His voice sounded to Nihu as if an angel was ministering to him. He threw himself upon the next tree and climbed to the top in a hurry. He was just in time as the warthog charged up furiously. Still intending to teach Nihu a lesson, the animal began to hit the tree with all the strength he had.

As the tree shook with each ferocious hit of the warthog, Old Phil climbed another tree not too far away and took his aim at the rampaging devil. The bullet pierced its skull and the

warthog roared in agonizing pain. The warthog finally bade the world goodbye at the foot of the tree after the old man sank two more bullets into his head from the same distance.

Slowly, Nihu came down from the tree. The heavily bearded old man in a coat made of animal skin approached him.

“Are you all right?” he asked the boy, stretching out his hand.

“Yes, I am all right. Thank you for saving my life.”

“You are welcome.”

Nihu shook Phil’s hand. “Do you live here?” he asked, smiling.

Old Phil returned the smile saying, “Too early to discuss my adventures here. We shall talk when we get into a very safe place. No holy thing exists here. We have to leave this place right away. Other warthogs might soon be on the look out for this one before us. If they eventually find him here with us, it would spell doom for us. The devil in them might bring us low. Warthogs in this part of the world are brutes that are never fair with their prey. They are strong-willed, and have what it takes to bury a thousand army. So it is better to avoid them.” He got hold of the dead animal, slammed it over his shoulder, and started off.

Just then, a beastly hand came out of the tree and took hold of Nihu. He screamed and tried to shake it off. But the evil already had a firm grip on him and began to pull him into the tree. Old Phil threw the warthog down and came to battle for Nihu’s life. As Nihu wailed and cried, Phil pulled him one way, while the hand pulled him another. Finally, the old man went for his musket. He quickly buried two bullets into the hand. The wrist that grabbed the boy fell, while the other part retreated into the tree. Nihu was free, but the hand that fell began to crawl in their direction. The boy hid behind the old man as he sank two more bullets into the wayward hand, at last putting the devil to rest. Without saying a word, Old Phil got hold of the warthog and they hastened away.

They had just covered thirty yards on the bush path when they almost walked into the back of a demon standing more than thirteen feet tall. His name was Anjonu, and he was clothed in a flowing white garment. Sometimes he could appear as a dwarf covering himself with a mat and walking on the air. Hunters and farmers who entangle him never return home with good songs on their lips. Instantly, the heads of the boy and the old man began to swell. Old Phil, a quick-thinking warrior in his heyday, managed to pull Nihu and himself behind a tree. Right away, their heads returned to normal and they began to pant like a couple of terrified lizards.

Nihu whispered, “I can’t explain what happened to my head when I set my eyes on that devil.”

“That’s what happens when one sets eyes on him. We are very fortunate he didn’t see us.”

“Are you sure he didn’t see us? But he was standing on the road.”

“If that devil had seen us, we would have become imbeciles. That is the least of what he could do. Even the most powerful army on Earth cannot survive his onslaught.”

“Are you sure?”

“Boy, I am very sure. Before I served in the village army, I was a proud hunter. I have plenty of experience running through this baldhead. Anyone he sees will be useless. He doesn’t even need to cast a spell before one becomes a nit.”

Nihu took a deep breath. “What do we do now?”

“Nothing!”

“Nothing? What if he comes after us?”

“Then we would say our last prayers, while we book a passage to the silent world!”

“But you have a gun—can’t you use it on him?”

The old man chuckled. “Guns have no use against him. You can only deal with Anjonu when you follow the rules that were handed down to us by our ancestors. I expect you to know the rules. You don’t go out late at night, you don’t go to the stream on a sunny afternoon, and you have to watch your back when you go to the farm very early in the morning.”

“Let’s try another way. Or let’s go back.”

“I can’t take that risk. Something tells me he is not out for us. You can see he is not facing this direction. That means he might soon leave.”

“How soon?”

“I don’t know. We have to wait. Patience wins the race of exploit. Whether in the farm, forest or on a market day, you can run into Anjonu very early in the morning, in the sunny afternoon or late at night.”

The explanation began to work in Nihu’s mind. Now he began to understand what he had seen that sunny afternoon he went to the farm to get the tubers of yam his father had left in a basket. He got them and decided to rush to the river to wash the tubers to take them to the market. Earlier, his father told him not to do this, for it was an abomination for anyone to go to the farm on market day. But greed and eagerness to start earning money at such a tender age led to the disastrous act. Anjonu always roamed the forest or the farm on a market day and could destroy anyone he found.

While Nihu waited for the tubers to dry, he heard a strange sound behind him. He turned to see a short creature covered with raffia palms, whose legs were not touching the Earth, and spinning like a whirlwind. Nihu’s head began to swell. He took to his heels leaving the tubers behind.

While Nihu’s mind was still busy, remembering, old Phil tapped him, “Boy, he’s going away. My guess was right. He is not out for us.”

Nihu heaved a sigh of relief, “I was reminiscing about the encounter I had with Anjonu a few years ago. I was dumb for days afterwards. It wasn’t until after my father sacrificed a black goat and a white fowl at a three-way junction to appease the gods that I finally recovered.”

“You were very lucky. Because if he went for you, you would have been a dead person.”

“I disobeyed my parents. I went to the farm on a market day.”

“What? Do not do that again. Such an offense hanging on your neck, you are like a man that commits murder.”

“My father told me that too.”

They waited quietly behind the tree until Anjonu finally walked into the forest. Then they got up and went quickly away.

CHAPTER THREE

THE TRAGEDY OF MACQUESEMIS

Wits and might are far too irrelevant to be deliverance for anyone. Moreover, it takes more than human discretion to survive in this part of the world. It is a tragedy to remain in a world you cannot control and all the more tragic if you do not have control over your own life. People who have surrendered leadership of their lives to others are always at the mercy of those they serve. Such was the tale of Macquesemis.

It was a lazy sunset. Old Phil stoked the fire as the boy watched the warthog roast. The thatch roof had courageously withstood the heat of the day. As smoke went up high to rest on the bosom of the fair weather, Old Phil scrubbed ashes off the animal and broke the long silence that hung between them. He cleared his throat. “Boy, what brings you here?” he asked quietly.

“The King’s order. I was wrongly accused.”

“Oh, I understand. All criminals are innocent until the day they are caught. Please, do not feel offended for what I have just said. Or do you have any evidence to prove your innocence?”

“Yes, I have. The arrow I shot only struck a tree and I saw it. The next day, I was summoned to the palace to meet the King—who had been basking in the euphoria of palace life, and was accused of murder.”

Phil dropped the carved wood scraper that he had been using against the carcass. “It happens everywhere. People sometimes pay for what they do not know about. Nevertheless, I will be the last person to vouch for a hunter. His shot could go anywhere. Most especially in the forest, it could bring you a fine meal or usher a prince into silence. In hunting, shots go where we never directed them. The arrow may have struck a tree or it could have strayed away. So the King could be right.”

“No. I saw it hit the tree.”

“Then how did people find it in the body of a man?”

“That’s a mystery. I still don’t understand how it got there.”

“It’s no mystery. It was just a silly mistake that cost you your freedom. Although, I am not a diviner, maybe I would have been able to tell how your arrow ended where it did. However, mistakes make our world go round. When we learn from our mistakes, it makes us richer in experience. I would have gone for my arrow if it had struck a tree. If you have done that, you will not have found yourself here. That is the bitter truth, boy.”

Nihu heaved a sigh of relief. “You are right. My youthfulness was my undoing. I was not wise. I should have gone for the arrow.” His countenance fell as he sat back against the tree behind him then added, “What brings you here?”

Old Phil took a deep breath and replied, “My ordeal is an adventure I would have avoided if I had not been bewitched by arrogance. That was my downfall until my mid-thirties. My experiences over the years have helped me become a better man. I had a good friend, called Macquesemis, Macques for short. He was a man of innocence, and had a large farm in the countryside. He was blessed far more than his contemporaries were, including me. Women, whose beauty can throw men off their feet, flocked around him. One day, thieves visited his rich farmland and made away with what he had in his store. As for Macques, they tied him to a tree and left him with nothing.

“As they were leaving, he heard one of the thieves saying they should head southward to consume the loot. Eventually, one of his servants set him free. That terrible day, I visited him and when I heard the misfortune that had befallen my friend, I was moved with compassion. A kind of wicked anger came over me and I was bound to avenge my rich friend, for I had benefited greatly from his generosity over the years.

“I joined the party that organized to go to the south to recover the loot. Before the sunset, we set out for the journey, riding hard on our horses. My anger was already reaching the high heavens. Macques is a friend for whom I can fight with my last ounce of strength. We picked up the bandits who had yet to reach the mountains. If they had gone up, it would have been almost impossible to find them or recover the goods of my dear friend. The mountains are full of caves. Most thieves I have run aground when I was a soldier have a cave or two where they keep their loot. However, they were by the wayside, making merry, thinking that no one would come for them. While they were dancing happily round what they had stolen, we fell on them like jungle raindrops pelting a window.

“Macques and I were ex-service men. We have seen the horror of warring and the victory of survival. We know the rules of the game, which in our army states when you find your enemy hit him hard and harder until you can no longer find his shadow. So, we fell on them massively and fought like Trojans all day long. Our men were falling like primitive people that fall stone dead at the blast of muskets. The rule in our army says save yourself first before you help another man. That was why I stood my ground, and fought for my safety, not to lose my neck while trying to save another man when not in the best position to do so.

“In the end, Macques and I were the only people that survived from our camp. People trained to work the farm, were all lying dead on the plain. Some faced the sky like happy people, while others had their faces buried in the red Earth as if they were paying homage to a powerful god above.

“The bandits also suffered loss. My sword made mincemeat out of the soldiers that came against me. Macques’ big belly did not hinder him from throwing himself here and there like a wildcat. They fell like leaves before us until there was just one man left alive. Their leader was a man whose long hair almost reached his shoulders with two incredibly large eyes sitting on his sun-tanned face. He was covered in grime and sweat and had bloodstains on his animal skin coat. Blood of our men that he had crushed with an iron axe held in an iron grip.

“I pounced and hurled a blow that could sink the Titanic. However, I missed because he dodged, and I almost lost my balance. Were he to have lashed out at me with his axe, it would have spelt doom for a one-time war veteran like me. My heart jumped into my mouth, but Macques was there. As I regained my footing, I called to Macques to stay away, that I could handle the foul toad that had much height to his advantage.

“As I got up to face him, the devil gave me a blow that cut through my helmet to my head. It hit me like a sledgehammer. Nevertheless, as a soldier, I intended to punish him dearly. I fought back gallantly in the pool of my own blood for it was the only way I could remain alive. My next blow felled the iron axe from the devil’s hand. He yelled as if he had just lost a vital part of himself. The axe fell too far away for him to recover it quickly. I also had my axe

displaced in the process. Since we could pick up our weapons, we faced each other like wrestlers in the old tradition that ultimately determines who is the strongest man in the local district. He roared like an old wounded lion. I beat my chest for I was ready to give his remains to the bald vultures that were already waiting patiently for the dust to settle so that they could begin their feast. We fell upon one another and although not properly trained to fight without weapons, I could cope in the game of body slamming. The leader of the thieves was a brawny brute and got the upper hand as we traded punches. The ballistic missiles he threw, none would survive. As they rained down, I would whine like a miserable dog that has just been robbed of ears and tail.

“Soon we could no longer cope with our hands. Mine dangled as if I had lost total control of my arms. We began to stagger here and there. Bleeding and losing strength, I sought a means to break the deadlock. At any moment, he could throw a lucky punch that could mark my end. I remembered my knife and drew it from my boot, stabbing the hard fighter in the chest. He yelled up to high heaven and tried to bite, but I fought gallantly out of his dreadful grip. As he fought to remove the knife, I limped to my axe and exacted a mighty heave that zapped off his head. I had no strength left in me.

“I was breathing like an antelope that had escaped the attack of a predator when the King’s guards arrived. They must have been informed of the bloody battle in that part of the local district. They arrested Macques and me and detained us for many days in the King’s stockade.

“After this investigation, the King ordered us to his palace saying that we were guilty of murder. We had taken the law into our hands instead of informing him so that his army could have arrested the gang of thieves. My belongings and that of Macques, including his large farm were seized. We lost all we had inherited from the army retirement. We were given the choice of banishment or execution. But we chose to be banished, hoping that we could still find a better tomorrow after we had have served our punishment in this Lonely Forest.” Old Phil paused at last after the long oratory.

“That’s quite a story. So where is Macques?” Nihu was transfixed.

“That man of innocence. Old Macques was an encourager, bold and manly.” He pointed to the coat he was wearing, “I made this coat out of a deer he killed. It is quite good clothing. I have had it for over a year. My old friend died a few days ago. A mamba snake bit him when he was felling a tree. So I buried him at the foot of the tree behind you.”

“Why the foot of a tree? You should have buried him in the field as is the tradition in the countryside.”

“That way is not befitting for Macques. He had been a hard worker who had taken many hits all his life. I wanted the cool breeze and the shelter of a serene world to blow over his

grave. Maybe that would send him comfort anywhere he is. Because he died in great pains, I made a befitting rest for him so that his ghost will be happy.”

“It is unfortunate he died. Do you not grieve? Since you loved him so much, I would have expected you to have done that.”

“There is no call for grief. You find no cure for ailments here. This place is death. I do not know when I will meet my maker, but I know he is coming.”

“I pray we survive.”

“I am sure of it. I have just a few days left to spend in this Lonely Forest. I would have been so happy if I had made it to the end of my time here with Macques. But now, I will be starting my public life all alone if I make it to the countryside in the next weekend.”

Nihu’s face fell. “So you mean I will be here all alone?”

“Are you not man enough? You have no choice, my boy. Since Macques’ death, I have been living alone. You can too. If you were wrongly accused as you claim, the Almighty will surely protect your life.”

Nihu pondered that. “When you get to the countryside again, will you marry?”

“That’s the least of my worries. I have many things I must do. I must find a job, perhaps as a gardener, to keep my mind busy and forget the ugly past. That does not mean I will not have anything to do with women. I prefer to make concubines out of women rather than keep in the lap of a woman all the rest of my life.”

Nihu quieted at last as Old Phil took up the wood scraper he had dropped at the beginning of his reminiscence and continued to scrub the roasting meat. At last, the meal was ready. “I love this warthog, Nihu,” Phil remarked. “It tastes like flesh of mutton, doesn’t it?”

What Old Phil said was ignored because Nihu’s attention was on a creature a few poles away. When he realized the boy was not listening to him, Phil tapped him in the shoulder and said, “What is it? What are you looking at?”

“Look there!” Nihu pointed. “I saw a dwarf holding a mat over there!” Old Phil raised his eyes in the direction and did not see anything.

“I didn’t see the monument you said was standing out there. On the other hand, has he gone for shopping in the village square? Let us keep our fingers crossed. Maybe he will be back soon.” He grinned.

“Believe me. I saw a dwarf standing near that oak tree.”

“I do not doubt your ability to see beyond your nose. However, where is the creature you claimed was standing near a tree? Oh, maybe the devil is playing hide and seek game and wants us to be part of the fun.” He chuckled and turned back to the roasted warthog. The tasty supper was reviving his spirits.

“You don’t believe.”

“If I tell you I do not believe, we must go on arguing about a creature that cannot prove or disprove his existence. And if I tell you I saw the dwarf, then I am not sincere, because all I see is darkness.”

“The creature disappeared the moment I saw him.”

Old Phil took a deep breath and said, “If what you say is so then you must have seen one of the Agbere demons that roam the forest. They are nomadic dwarfs. They have no home, no shelter and no place of their own. Whenever evening rolls in they roll out their mats and pass the night wherever they happen to be.”

“He was too far away. I could not see if he was hairy or not. The mat he held was considerably small. He had nothing else with him. Apart from the animal skin around his waist, he had nothing on.”

“Don’t look down on that dwarf. What he’s got is enough to make you smile all your life.”

“What does he have?”

“That mat of his is priceless. It’s worth more than a sack of diamonds and can be used to produce charms.”

“You mean it?”

“Of course. If it were not dark, I would have suggested we go after him. If we get that mat, whatsoever we want, will come like a flood. All you need do is sitting on the mat and make your wish or request.”

“Then the darkness can not hinder us from getting that mat. If I get it, I’ll wish not to remain in this forest anymore.”

“Such a wish is worth it. Anyone trapped here would do likewise. But what if as we try to collect the mat, the dwarf pounced on us? Our survival would depend on which way the wind blows. We either wait for providence or the cruel hand of fate to take its toll.”

“I don’t think it’s going to cost us our lives.”

“Boy, what an old man would see while seated, a younger man standing would never see. Put your rashness behind and be logical. If we were barely able to survive the onslaught of the devils in the day by chance, what do you think could happen to us if we chase a dwarf in a night so dark that we can hardly see what is lurking? I must confess, chasing that dwarf tonight is like building a castle on your nose or fighting against one’s shadow.”

Nihu’s frustration mounted. He inhaled sharply. “I wish we could go after the dwarf. If it is so very difficult to get the mat, how do hunters get it at all?”

“When the dwarf is asleep, sometimes they roll off the mat and lay on bare Earth.”

“Apart from that, is there no other way one could get the mat?”

“Apart from what I have told you, any other way would eventually be a highway to hell.”

Because the fortune you would make out of Agbere's mat is almost equal to the evil you would face when he discovers you have his mat!"

Old Phil got hold of his musket and got to his feet. "I have had enough for one day." He went into his hut and Nihu had no choice than to follow and to put the day behind him.

CHAPTER FOUR
MONKEYS ARE FOOLISH

Next day, the new friends were back on their feet. Hungry, Nihu thought he would not mind some fruits for breakfast. He came out of the hut to find Old Phil, sitting on a log of dead wood, hoping that the day would leave them as well as the last with an evening of roasted warthog.

Old Phil was cool in his own world. Already settled comfortably on his log, he would break forth into a yawn, his old hat calm upon his baldhead. The morning breeze was tender as usual, a whisper out of the forest. Finding comfort in the outside world, Old Phil was not in a hurry to attend to his stomach.

A happy cry reached Nihu's ears. He snapped around and in a moment, a river of excitement flowed through his hollow cheeks. Monkeys! Just as they were the other day, before Old Phil rescued him from the cruel hands of death. The monkeys were hopping through the trees. The fruits on the tree were ripe enough to serve their hungry purpose. And so it was with Nihu, too. He called out, "Old Phil, I want to get some fruits from the tree, can you assist me?"

Old Phil barely raised his head. "Assist you to do what?"

"Get the monkeys. Although, I know it is sometimes difficult to dispatch them. I have no musket like you or I would have tried myself. Perhaps I could send at least some of them to an early grave."

The old man sat up and cleared his throat, "Nihu," he began, "The monkeys have been here with me for a very long time. I do not make them my enemy and we live in peace. I prefer to use them to get what I want. And they have been fair enough to me."

"You use these monkeys to help you? How do you do that?"

"Monkeys are very foolish. They are very foolish indeed."

"Then it is better we kill them for a meal if they are so foolish. Or send them away by shooting a bullet into the air so that I can climb the tree safely to fetch my breakfast."

"Nihu, no need send them away, nor make them into a meal. I seldom eat monkey. I use them to get the fruits for me."

"How do you do that?"

"Just get some stones and throw them at the monkeys. You will see what will happen."

"Wait a minute, Phil. Is it not dangerous to do that? You told me everything here is devilish."

"If you are ready to eat, you will do what I tell you." The old man returned to his reverie. Nihu had no choice than to do what the old man said. He gathered stones and threw

them at the monkeys. Immediately, the monkeys responded by plucking the fruits and pelting Nihu with them. Nihu, amazed and happy shouted. "Phil, your trick worked. It worked!" Excitement paraded across his face.

Old Phil removed his hat from his baldhead. "It always works. Throw the stones until you have enough to fill your belly." He set his hat back on his head as if to meditate upon some portions of the Holy Scriptures.

Nihu collected the fruit into his hat as quickly as the monkeys tossed them. When he was satisfied with the loot, he retired to the shade under an almond tree, and ate his fill, smacking his lips as a glutton denied food for days.

When Nihu had finished eating, he relaxed in the shade and was soon asleep. In a dream, he found himself in the midst of a crowd of people in the forest, wailing, screaming, and fleeing for their lives as ravenous dragons come hard upon them. The dragons were not just coming for their necks but also destroying the forest with their breath of fire. Those who fell, or could not sprint fast enough, were crushed or burnt to death by the rampage. Some of the people fought back with swords, spears and arrows that they had with them. They fought tirelessly to destroy the invaders. Nevertheless, they could not check the onslaught of the beasts that left a massacre of waste. Many people were crushed under trees that the creatures blew to the ground. Others perished in the dragons' piercing claws. Everything in the forest became a weapon for the dragons to use on the doomed humans.

As the evil raged, Nihu ran into one of the beasts as he tried to run in a different direction. The dragon let out a breath of flame that sent Nihu falling from a steep cliff. As he tumbled down, the creature bellowed more fire that is devastating; burning the forest and field until Nihu was sure he must meet his end. Finally, Nihu regained his feet at the foot of the slope, fled swiftly to the river, jumped in and swam to the other side. As he splashed up the riverbank, he threw a look behind him to check for a pursuing dragon. The air was still.

Nihu awoke with a start. Free of his nightmare, he went back to sleep. As for Old Phil, through with his morning meditation, he began to clean his boots with a piece of rag he brought out of his side pocket. From the corner of his eye, he noticed something fall from Nihu's tree.

Phil fixed his eyes on the spot. A fierce looking green mamba began to glide toward the sleeping boy.

"Hey, hey, hey! Get on your feet. Snake! Nihu, snake!" Old Phil threw his boots aside. He got hold of his spear and rushed to the boy's side.

Nihu was already on his feet. Old Phil raised the spear above his head with enough aggression to reveal the old country soldier in him. Still under the spell of sleep, Nihu misjudged the nearness of the snake. Before he could react, the mamba struck his left boot.

He let out a yell as Old Phil threw his spear.

The hit crushed the snake, sending it off to the silent world. Panting in fright, the boy barely noticed that his boot had prevented the venom from taking its toll. If not, he would have also walked beside the snake into the darkness of the Lonely Forest. The old man gave the snake another heavy blow. Then he turned to Nihu. "Boy, you know very soon you will be all alone here. If you want to survive just as I have done, you will have to keep your eyes open, even when you are asleep."

He threw the spear on the dead snake and went off as Nihu stood speechless looking at the dead mamba on the ground. Suddenly, Old Phil fired a bullet into the air. Nihu raced to the old man's side, "What were you shooting at?"

"That bird." he pointed to the sky at a fluttering dove. "It will not survive the shot. It might fall on the other side of the grove. Shall we go for it?"

"Why not? We could roast it this evening."

"You are right. Let's go."

They went in the direction of the unlucky bird whose fortune was dwindling due to the bullet it had met that day. By the time they reached where the bird touched down, they discovered a crocodile with three large eyes, squirming in agony on the bank of a stream. As they stood in wonderment, the creature crept into the water. The pair went round the area in search of the bird and could not find it.

As they were about to give up the search, a thrashing struggle drew their attention. A boa had attacked the crocodile in the stream. The creatures were heavy against each other, and the water was red with blood. The crocodile let out a human yell with every lash that hit him. Was the croc a witch or wizard that transforms to bats and other creatures when it suited him?

While the battle raged, Nihu and Old Phil watched from a safe distance. The crocodile broke loose from the boa and was crawling to land with the last ounce of strength left in him. The boa, which also had gotten an ugly share of the water battle, followed. One of the trees cried out, "You better take your battle away from here if you don't want to incur my wrath." The reptiles paid no heed and set against each other again. The tree angrily broke one of its own branches and stabbed the boa in the side as he received a devastating lash from the crocodile. The boa screamed and raged upon the tree. It gave it a bite that shriveled its leaves.

"Nihu," Old Phil whispered, "I want to shoot one of the creatures."

"Why?"

"Are you not tired of watching their fight?"

"No. I haven't seen anything like it before."

“Things like this are new to young hunters. I will aim at the boa. He appears to be very aggressive. We can use his skin to make good boots.” As Old Phil raised his musket to pick his aim, a large dove came out of the trees and flew straight at him. Flabbergasted, Old Phil slowly lowered the sights.

Meanwhile, the boa had finally overwhelmed the crocodile and slithered back to the river. Before Old Phil and Nihu could blink, the dead crocodile transformed to an old crone who turned to dust and was blown away by a gentle breeze. With eyes round as saucers, Nihu whispered, “I can’t believe what has happened here today.”

“The boa must have settled his score.” Old Phil mused. “Sometimes it happens just that way. Let us return to the hut.”

CHAPTER FIVE

A STRIKE TOO LATE

Old Phil’s time was up. The next day he would be leaving for the countryside. “I am already dreaming of home. It will be the new start to the life I have always wished to live. It will be a heaven every night. A man is for himself, but God is for us all.” Old Phil was once again seated on the log outside the hut.

“Yes. You are right.” Nihu was straddled next to him. He nodded. “God is for everyone.”

“Even me. Surviving the perils in this Lonely Forest means so much to me. I ought to give gratitude to the one that protects my soul. I do not do it ordinarily. I have to be tough.”

“I expect that of you. God is a tough mogul. We need to be worthy if we hope to find His favor.”

“But which god do you think I’m talking about, Nihu?”

“The god of our forefathers.”

“Does he really exist?” He brought his hands together, making recitations as if he was praying. Then he stopped and turned to Nihu. “Any result in that? Nothing. I will say my prayers facing heaven henceforth. My deliverance must have come from there.”

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t know. I just want try new things since my past had not yielded any result other than troubles. However, I have prayed throughout my life. Good moral conduct must be

trapped somewhere in my heart ever since I set my foot into this world of beauty and terror. Do you believe me, Nihu?" He looked deep into the boy's eyes.

"I can't find falsehood in that, at all. But I think it is too late to start finding perpetual faults in your life."

"Oh, faults? They are gone. In the past, I had many. My life was no better than a rat's, which is left to struggle for survival in the heart of the red sea. My weaknesses brought me a hard knock life. Macques would tell you my odds of survival if he were here with us. He tells my story more accurately and with a lot more feeling than I do. However, he had a talking impediment. Often, his tongue added more excitement to every word that walked out of him. One would think his words drop like wind-blown rain."

"That's a terrible burden to carry." Nihu thought of something else Phil had said. "Do you derive much pleasure in meditations?"

"Yes, oh yes. My meditations have yielded results. The last time I was under the influence of morning meditation, I saw dwarf angel. It looked like a green mallard. It told me all would be well with me. I am sure it had come to give me hope of returning to glory after the truckload of the misfortunes I have experienced here. I will hold a holy service of songs when I return home. That is the first thing I will do when I get there."

"But you have nothing now. The King now owns your house."

"Of course. I expect to join my brother right away. He will be very happy to see me alive. The celebration will carry to the next level."

"What does he do for a living?" Nihu shifted on the log.

"He is a farmer. And his well is deep enough to swallow ten of your stature."

"Then you will be well. I thought you were just like every journeyman whose heaven is the street inn or corner. After every blessed day, he seeks comfort in a wonder of unholy women. When the police come to raid, you will only see his back."

"This journeyman has served his time for offending others." Old Phil removed his old hat that revealed rivers of sweat that were carefully gliding down his hollow cheeks. With the back of his hand, he rubbed them off his face and slapped the hat back on his head.

"I have a dream, a big one indeed. My survival means I was not guilty at all. There are people who believed in me because I have had a positive effect on their lives." Old Phil straightened his shoulders, raising his chin.

"Things will be different for you now. Your travails are over." Nihu sighed quietly, chin in hand.

"Surviving the Lonely Forest to tell the people of the devils here is news. No one in recent memory has returned from here alive. Do you realize that? I am the first. If you survive too, you can expect to increase your fortune ten-fold when you get back to the countryside.

God will see to that.”

“That will be a grand accomplishment for an old soldier like you. I can not hope to follow you.” Nihu revealed a trail of discouragement on his face. “I will be well into my years by the time I am allowed to walk out of here. If I survive to that day.” He gazed desolately at the old man.

Old Phil looked straight into the eye of the disenfranchised youth, “Nihu, there is always hope. God has made sure of that. I believe you can survive just as I have survived all these years. Live bravely, your day will come.”

He rose to his feet, “Let’s go out together to hunt for the last time. The animal we bring in will be my parting gift for you.” He smiled at the boy. Nihu returned it weakly. Old Phil would soon be gone for good.

“I will be with you in a moment.” The old man said. “I want to bring my old Dane gun that has always hit its mark.” He entered the hut as Nihu lowered his head between his thighs scratching in the Earth with a stick.

In a few minutes, Phil emerged, fully dressed in his hunting attire. “Boy, you must get ready. The forest awaits our ambitions. So it would seem. But it is a beginning that brings us closer to the end.” Nihu got slowly to his feet, as if he was being forced to go against his principles. He went into the hut to get all he would need for the hunt. He took the spear that was in the doorway and returned to Old Phil’s side. “I am ready,” he said quietly.

“Look, Nihu, upon our return to the cabin, we shall have a long swim in the river, you hear me?”

“Okay.”

“And I remember you told me you have a flute and that you can play very well. You must play for me. I will dance like a man celebrating in triumph before leaving for the countryside.”

“I will play as well as I can. May the gods find favor.”

“You will engender favor by celebrating with me. It is well that a body casts doubt and fear aside so that he might honor another’s good fortune. So, Nihu, I want the best from you.” He coughed and his hat fell off his head. He went for it and added, “I will send prayers for you every day that your sojourn here will be as uneventful as possible.”

They walked down the path in silence for a while. Presently, Old Phil inquired if Nihu had his flute with him.

“No, I left it in my rucksack in the hut.”

“I was tempted to ask you to play now a dreamy song of the countryside.” Old Phil sighed. “Oh well, it will wait until we return.”

They trampled the dry leaves, heading for the interior of the forest, Old Phil leading Nihu

who followed slowly behind. Phil was almost skipping in happy anticipation as if heading to a glorious altar. After some time, the forest swallowed them up, as if wanting them to become a part of the Lonely Forest forever. It is hard to say which of them would have bargained harder for his freedom.

By sunset, the two had not yet found a single animal that Old Phil could have gotten with a clean shot. The evening was beginning to stare them down and there was no animal in sight. The day had finally surrendered to the coming of the evening powers. Both were tired and had little strength left. Old Phil's shoulder has sagged and Nihu could barely lift his feet. Without speaking, they stopped to rest under a tree. Old Phil broke the long silence that had stood between them. "Nihu, what shall we do? We cannot remain here like stagnant waters on the street of the local district. I wanted to celebrate properly, not in such a weak manner. The fun must start right away."

"What shall we do?"

"Just watch me. You may learn the way the army of the countryside celebrates their victories after a hard fought battle." The old man got to his feet and sent bullets from his old Dane gun into the air. As excitement within him grew, he let more bullets into the air, chanting old spirited songs of victory that every soldier of the countryside sings when the mission has gone the right way. Old Phil let go more bullets until he had none left in his gun.

Satisfied he turned to Nihu, "Boy, let's return to the hut. The bullets have served their purpose. I feel as good as if they had brought down a tasty beast. What is more exciting than forest life? A forest where even the trees now believe in my prowess and wits?" He caught Nihu's eye. "I can see you are glum. Lively up, Nihu. No need to bury your head in discouragement. We can get one of the monkeys near the hut to fill our bellies. I will show you the stores of provisions I have made and of course, the hut is yours to live in. Tomorrow, I leave you to your life. A solitary life is not such a bad thing. I have new-found confidence after I have eaten and lived with the jungle devils that never cease to arrive at my doorstep."

"At least, I was able to get to know you for a little while," Nihu was resigned to his fate. "Living with you was not written into my banishment order. It was luck that I met you here and now circumstance is now setting us apart. Your time here is done. The providence that kept you alive all these years can also deliver me from painful claws of death."

"It is good to hear you say such things. Nevertheless, be careful. Macquesemis had much faith in providence, but today his remains rest under the shade of an old oak tree. Let us go." Old Phil put his hand on the boy's shoulder as they set off in the direction of the hut.

The light was waning and they went along quietly. The dry leaves crackled under their boots. Nihu's eyes spied a walnut tree; the ripe fruits among its leaves spoke to his stomach. Up the tree he went. With a hand on one of the tree's fruits, he called out, "Phil, I will be along

presently. No need to wait but a moment.” He went for another as Old Phil continued alone.

“I will wait for you by the river. Just be careful.” His voice carried back as Nihu faded into the tree.

“Who would find me up here?” Nihu wondered in a whisper. “I will pluck some walnuts and catch up to him before the river.”

Old Phil waved his left arm into the air by way of farewell as he went down the path, suffering the dry leaves and grasses under his worn boots. Just as he pursed his lips to whistle a tune for companionship, a lion leapt onto his path. Seeing the old man, it charged without hesitation. Old Phil had less than two seconds to face the animal with his Dane gun, ready with his finger on the trigger to dispatch the animal to its grave. In a twinkling, it dawned on him that the gun was empty and he had no other option but to flee. As he turned to run, the lion pounced.

Nihu heard the roar and knew Old Phil was in peril. An agonized cry from the old man and another roar from the beast set the forest ablaze in the quiet night. Nihu jumped from the tree, took hold of his spear that he had left leaning against it, and hurried to the scene where Old Phil was battling to stay alive underneath a wild lion. The lion had the attack advantage and had Phil pinned to the ground. Old Phil was trying his best to roll away from the lion’s claws and teeth, but he cried aloud and panted for air.

Nihu raised his spear above his head and raced into the melee to save Old Phil from becoming a meal for the wild beast. He struck the lion in the neck, a little below the mane. The spear stuck deep in the neck of the lion, but the handle came apart in his hand and Nihu could only hope that a second strike would not be necessary. He stood back, as the lion, knocked off his feet, struggled with fate. Old Phil, battling hard to overcome blackout, made a final effort to send his foe to the world beyond. He drew his jackknife from his boot, sat up and slit the lion’s belly. The lion lay still at last.

Old Phil sank back and began to gasp for his life in the pool of his blood. Nihu rushed to him in a horrible fright, to see if he could save the old man from dying at the brink of his release. He knelt by the old man’s bloody head, took it onto his lap and tried to encourage the old soldier back to life. “Phil, you are strong. Stronger than the willows in the brook. You must not die.” Tears flooded his eyes. “I will care for you in the hut for as long as it takes.”

Old Phil struggled valiantly against the incoming blackness. “No, Nihu, it is too late already for medicine. I have met my fate today. A soldier never travels through the woods with an empty gun. Had I remembered that, I would be worthy to see my home again. Former deeds cannot insure survival in hell. My life is tragedy and I hope you might learn something from it. I advise you to take your own life, my boy. Do not wait for the devil of beast or disease to ravage you. You must find a way out of here . . .” He gasped and choked as speech left him.

His head rolled to one side as the last of life faded from his lips.

Nihu stroked Old Phil's face and wept bitterly as he recognized that the old man's ghost had gone. "No, no, Phil. No! You cannot leave like this. This is not how it's supposed to be!" He fell on the dead man and wept, harder than ever before in his life. He wailed aloud in the dark until he could cry no more.

Somehow, he managed to drag the remains of the old man back to the hut where he found a shovel to dig a grave. After he finished the mound, he built a small fire and went in for his flute. Returning to the graveside, he began to play Old Phil his last respects. The melody was a dirge, played for fallen heroes in the countryside. It was equally good enough to move one's feet. However, Nihu remained seated on a log as he played out his despair.

Presently, a deer came out of the woods into the clearing. It made few steps toward the fire and transformed into a white dwarf that began to dance to the melody. Nihu's heart jumped into his mouth. He stopped playing and watched the creature, fear gripping his heart. In the absence of music, the dwarf continued to dance. The flute slipped from Nihu's grasp as his grip relaxed and the dwarf, cloaked in animal skins, laughed. The eyes in the sockets of his skull were incredibly large and yellow and quite terrible to look at. The dwarf skipped forward a few steps and laughed a terrifying laugh in Nihu's face, revealing a crooked set of yellow teeth.

"You are good. You play well. If not, I would have had to eat you." The dwarf stared into the boy's eyes. "I have watched you bury your dead countryman and when you pulled out your flute I forgot everything to dance. I don't get much chance for festivities anymore."

Nihu's eyes widened. He plucked up his spirit to ask, "Who are you?"

"I am Magonda, the god of the Lonely Forest. I rule everything here." The bulging eyes of the dwarf were fixed on Nihu. He did not look pleasant or friendly. A dwarf's countenance can send one's courage packing at the drop of a hat. Being stared at by one of them was an invitation to flee.

Cold jitters ran down Nihu's spine. The bravery that had come to him in the face of the lion had gone. Nihu could only wait for the kind of consolation that old Philominenges got or the slow death that swallowed Macquesemis. Yet something the dwarf had said prompted an inquiry to the quick-thinking boy. As if probing a weak spot in the dwarf's reply, Nihu crossed his arms over his body and threw out his question. "If you rule here as you say, why didn't you prevent the lion's attack and the snake bite that killed the men that lived here for so many years?"

The dwarf was unfazed and laughed, covering his mouth with a hand as rough as the back of a turtle. This protected the dismal sight of his teeth from the eyes of the boy. The laugh bowed his body to the ground. Then he stopped abruptly, and threw a wicked look at Nihu. "Why didn't I save your countrymen from their deaths? I ordered their deaths. It was as I

wished. Your friends caused me no end of trouble since the day they arrived here.”

“So you killed them?” Nihu could not take his eyes from the proud creature’s face.

“Yes. Moreover, I can end you, too, with a devilish zap such as this. He drew a short battle-axe from his cloak and threw it at a tree. The piercing not only ravaged the tree, it destroyed other trees in a wide swath behind it. When Nihu turned to see the ruin, his eyes widened, for the battle-axe had cut down over ten trees with that one hit. The dwarf raised his hand to catch the axe that flew back to his grasp.

Nihu realized his peril, and his knees knocked ferociously together. “Please, let me go.”

“Yes, indeed. Your fancy flute playing has saved your life. I will let you go on one condition. I want you to go to the western mountain.” He pointed with his left hand into the gloom beyond Nihu’s fire. “It is at the far end of the forest and is a home of evil powers; a place of frequent volcano eruptions that has cost this forest and other areas their natural beauty. When you get there,” he brought out a smooth, round stone, “you will drop this stone in the pit of fire. If you do that for me, I will spare you forever.”

“Where is the pit of fire?”

“It is right there in the mountain. Your intuition will lead you to it.”

“Can’t you tell me the way?”

“You will have to find it yourself. That is my price for your freedom. If you fail, I will kill you as I did to a thousand-man army that came to war with me many years ago. I am sure they are from your land. Look here and you will see.”

Magonda opened his cloak and raised his arm as if forming a large wing. Nihu saw a scene of a bloody war revealed in the cloth. A battle was being fought between the wood demons led by Magonda, and country army sent by his own king, who had believed the powers in the Lonely Forest, could be conquered as any foreign enemy they had successfully driven from the kingdom.

* * *

Men approached the Lonely Forest like insects with swords, javelins, long spears, and short-handled battle-axes with heads as big as the head of a four-fisted wrecking ball. They carried shields meant to protect against the onslaught of the wood demons. As they advanced, the plain in front of the forest began to vomit horrible looking creatures. Zombies formed out of the ground, carrying weapons like those of the enemy. They prepared to confront the intruders in a showdown.

Seeing the zombies readying themselves for attack, the invaders roared and charged, raising their weapons above their heads. As they were about to close in, the army halted as if

sizing up their opponents. The leader stepped forward. A man of a considerable height, his neck was as thick as the handle of his battle-axe. He instructed the soldiers handling the bows and arrows to step forward and then commanded them to shoot. A thousand arrows were let loose, which descended like night rain on the wood demons. They received the shots as if there was nothing significant about them at all. If an arrow pierced anywhere in their bodies, they drew it out and bit off the point, as if eating from a plate at a banquet. When the country army saw that their shots did no harm to the wood demons, the leader cried out to attack right away. The soldiers roared, raising their spears and axes to high heavens and raced across the field to the clash. Likewise, the wood demons ran down the plain to meet their adversary.

Heads began to roll and blood flowed like a river. The zombies had the upper hand and the army fell like a pack of cards. Suddenly, the zombies began to vanish, disappearing into the forest as if they had lost all lust for battle. Greatly encouraged the survivors pressed their advantage and advanced into the woods.

The battle took a new turn when they got to the forest. The soldiers stood in amazement as they discovered that the demons they had chased were nowhere in sight. They seemed to have mixed with the air. As the armies were still looking confusedly to every side, strange cries like wild wolves filled the air. The howling grew and the men stood in fear, holding their weapons in an iron grip.

A rumble shook the ground and moments later a pack of giant wolves leapt upon the men from every direction, sending a host of them to early graves. The soldiers did not give up in the face of the massacre. They fought gallantly and were able to overcome the wolves that turned to ashes when a capable soldier's lance made good its mark. After a ferocious onslaught, the wolves retreated into the wooded forest.

The men were still lamenting the huge number of deaths to their camp, when they noticed trees around crackling. They fixed their eyes on the developing cracks. Mythical zombies like the ones they battled earlier began to come out of the trees. Immediately, they pounced on the remaining army and another round of breathtaking battle ensued. These zombies were even more horrible than the first contingent was. They were cannibals whose fingernails skewered their prey as they feasted on all they could lay their hands on. This completely demoralized the remaining troops. They took to their heels. As they ran, trees began to vomit arrows after them. At every turn, men fell and died. The zombies increased their numbers and made many meals out of the corpses. They were still in frenzy when Magonda, the ruler of the Lonely Forest, emerged to survey the scene. Recognizing him at once, the creatures got up and bowed to their god. Then quietly, they retreated into the trees from whence they had come.

Nihu watched the scene fade with a heavy heart.

“You are but a gnat in my teeth,” said Magonda. “A wolf would make short work of you.”

“That is what I want. Kill me now. No need to send me to a place where I will die like a poor dog. And now I know I am not meant to return home from this place.”

The dwarf laughed, “So you prefer to die, Nihu?”

“Yes. It is better. I am ready now.”

The white dwarf opened his mouth. A whirlwind came out of it and transformed into a great gorilla. The beast roared, beating hard on its chest. Without thinking of his prior resolve, Nihu took to his heels with his feet almost touching the back of his head like an antelope broken loose from the snare of a desperate hunter. The beast had the speed of ten men and chased Nihu around the camp. They went past trees and bushes with amazing speed. Nihu was no match for the agile beast who finally pounced, crushing him to the ground. He roared with the roar of a rampaging river that has broken free of a dam. He grabbed hold of one of Nihu’s legs and suspended him in the air. Magonda came forward.

“STOP!” the dwarf ordered. “I have no reason to want you dead, Nihu. You did not disrupt my home like your compatriots. You did not upset my animals, you did not hurt my trees, and you did not make noise. I am pleased with your playing. Those countrymen of yours got what they deserved.”

“Will you free me?”

“I will. Are you ready to do as I asked?”

“I will, if you let me go.”

The dwarf signaled to the gorilla. He dropped Nihu on the ground and stalked off into the dark night. “If you do as I instruct, the powers in the mountain will not destroy you. However, if you try to outsmart me, you will never come back alive. The trail to the mountain is as difficult as walking on the wheels of fire. However, the quest must be completed. I must confess, even if I knew where the pit was, I could not tell you. I will give you this battle-axe. Once you cast the stone into the pit, it will start work for you.”

“If I may ask, why can’t you cast the stone yourself?”

“You will find out when you get there.”

Magonda handed the stone and the battle-axe to Nihu. He took them gingerly. “The axe will work for you immediately upon accomplishing the task before you,” repeated the dwarf.

Nihu was still contemplating the Herculean task that was ahead of him when the dwarf became a black panther and bounded beyond sight of the glowing embers. Nihu shuffled

through the dark to the hut and sank onto the wooden bed, covering himself with a cover of animal skin he found on the bed. The darkness grew as a giant troll, making it dangerous to venture out for a night hunt, as hunters would do in the bush tribes. Stars refused to smile, starving the Earth of brightness.

Nihu had yet to put the day behind him. He kept thinking of the white dwarf and could not sleep. The days ahead held so much uncertainty. There was no lamp in the hut and it was pitching dark. As the night sunk into every crevice and corner, Nihu threw the cover off his body. He got hold of the battle-axe and the stone and began to run his hands over them in the huge darkness. After some time, he sank into sleep. An old soldier like Phil or Macquesemis might have been wakeful, knowing from experience what things he might face by embarking on such a journey, a mission full of danger and with little hope of success. Nihu however was only a boy and he began to snore very hard in the quiet hands of the night.

CHAPTER SIX

NIHU IS CAST INTO A STONE

The birds were singing before dawn as usual. The boughs of the trees danced quietly and bowed carefully to the sweet movement of the morning breeze. The morning rose from the dust and settled in the sky, gazing down at the Lonely Forest. A bright day was a beautiful welcome after a night of grief and fright. The darkness was replaced with new hope the moment the new light chased it to its unholy interiors. One could rest easy in the comfort of such imaginings.

As the birds paraded through treetops, making a life out of nothingness, Nihu stretched on the wooden bed. He was alive again. Alive to face the Herculean task that now hung around his thin neck. He sat up; exposing a bare chest that had yet to grow hair, although one could count a few. They stood like a monument in a vast land. His dark face was still covered in grime and sweat from the day before.

Nihu buried his head in his hands. His thin legs were not too good to look at. He was not a fellow of fine physical attributes, scrawny with large innocent eyes stuck in the sockets of his skull. Yet his brain worked quickly and there had never been a streak of meanness in him.

Nihu was ready to cope with whatever situation the world threw at him.

He sat on the edge of the cot with his old boots as his gaze fell upon the stone that he must cast into the pit of fire. It seemed as if a slow luminescence came over it. It was as beautiful as the eye of evening thunder. Nihu studied the stone for a long time. The boy was convinced that surviving in the Lonely Forest would take more than valor. Unlike his compatriots, in whose path he would walk if he disobeyed Magonda, he would surrender to the will of the creatures of the Lonely Forest. Going against the rules of the jungle would be walking on the wheels of fire. Nihu let his thoughts flow freely. *If I had broken any laws, I would surely be on my way to the city that is six feet under. I did not kill my uncle. Moreover, I have never hurt any creature for no reason. Nor will I. I pray that the god of my ancestors remembers what is in my heart and will save me from the cruel hands of an unjust fate.*

He lifted up the stone and placed it near the battle-axe that was before him. A long sigh left his body. There is nothing to fear, nowhere to fall, when one has done nothing wrong. Nihu folded his arms, closed his eyes, and raised his face, as if praying to the first messiah of the morning. Lost in meditation, he was without words for some time. Eventually, he rose from the cot and threw on Phil's old animal skin coat that was hanging by the doorway of the hut. It suited him well—a good look for a boy that was about to embark on an unknown adventure.

Nihu took up the stone and battle-axe. First, he strapped the battle-axe at his side and put the stone in the pouch on a belt that held up his shorts. The stone would be safe there. He slung his rucksack on his back and left the hut. He went to the river to wash himself. When he was through, he set off in the direction that Magonda had pointed.

Just as it was on the first day when he set out for the Lonely Forest, the day was seasoned with grace. Tormenting the innocent leaves under his boots, Nihu went deeper into the forest. It became more and more creepy. Strange noises kept him looking to every side as he went along.

The sun was well up and Nihu had covered a considerable distance. He had filled his bottle in the river near the hut, but that was long ago. His steps were starting to fade like those of a starved camel that has journeyed too long and needs full humps of fat to put him back to rights.

Nihu was looking desperately for water to quench his thirst. At last, his eyes fell on a flowing stream down a steep slope, just off the path. With a hoot of relief, he hurried down to get some liquids before his parched lips cracked. When he got to the stream, he drank in a hurry like a hungry dog that finds a meal after days of starvation. He filled his water bottle once again and returned to the path that he felt sure led to the mountains.

He had barely trotted a few steps when the ground began to shake. As he tried to run, the ground gave way beneath his feet and he fell into a hole. Calling out the names of his

ancestors “Ukeme” and “Edinko” as if he was reciting a line in a super story. Nihu fell and fell as if in a dream. Finally, he crashed through the roof of a compartment deep in the abyss. Nihu groaned in pain, gnashing his teeth as he rolled on the floor. He held himself to check for fractures. His body seemed to hurt everywhere.

Catching a breath, Nihu lifted his head and looked around to see where he was. A room full of treasures met his gaze. Almost instantly, he forgot his pain and lay quiet. The revival was overwhelming. Many precious stones were within easy reach—diamonds like seas of bird heads. They glittered like a million stars shining in a beautiful night sky. Seeing the goodness that was before him, Nihu threw his sack to one side and got up. It was as if he had never fallen.

He looked to every side in wonder. The room was like a dungeon with a small barred window cut into the stonewall directly opposite where he lay. A finely wrought table and chair stood under it. Beautiful artifacts, holy statues, prayer bowls, iconic figurines, as well as chests filled with jewels lay piled on the floor and on shelves along the walls. Slowly, Nihu approached one of the treasure chests that was made of fine gold and touched it. *Whose treasure trove is this? Is this the beginning of providence in my life?* Nihu pondered. *The god of my ancestors must have remembered and decided to free me from the affliction that I have gone through. This is my chance for the riches as Old Phil had mentioned. These things are beautiful indeed.*

He stole a glance around the room to assure himself of solitude. Nodding as one that has discovered a long time fact that has been well hidden; he set his hands on the chest and tried to open it. The top lifted easily and the sparkle of diamonds almost blinded him. He jumped backwards as if dodging the spit of a black mamba. He returned swiftly to the box to admire the beautiful things, shiny like the evening stars. Staring at the precious stones an idea stuck him with such emotion that it overwhelmed his senses. He hurried to his rucksack and returned immediately with it. He intended to empty the whole luxury into the sack and as much of the rest as there was room for—human desire is sometimes boundless.

As he poured the stones into his sack, a shadow shape extended onto the wall behind him. Menacing laughter erupted and Nihu’s heart jumped into mouth. Testing his courage, he turned around to see whom he had disturbed. His sack dropped to the floor as he looked in agony at a wildcat of a man that stood with skeletal arms akimbo. The form was silent, glaring at the boy through hollow, almond eyes, yet with a hint of amusement on his angular face. Terrified, Nihu stood as a stone. It dawned on him that he had fallen into the den of yet another devil. His life, his freedom was paramount, he could not endanger that, yet indeed, and he had. His breath began to come very fast, in and out like tiny bellows. His heart banged hard on the roof of his chest.

Suddenly, the lithe body turned as if he had no business with the scrawny boy that had

fallen through his roof. He strode to the chair, graceful as a cat, and seated himself regally. He threw a frightening look at Nihu, furrowing his forehead. His eyes shone crimson in his dark face. Once again, he burst into laughter. Again, the room began to heave and a large crack appeared in the floor under Nihu's feet. Nihu's legs shook and he struggled to keep his footing. As the quake subsided, Nihu sought to flee. He abandoned his rucksack with the diamonds and raced to the opposite side of the room. He reached to climb the mountain of items piled to the ceiling in an attempt to leave the scene through the hole from which he came.

The shadow-creature reached for a rock at his feet and threw it, hitting Nihu in the lower part of the leg. He lost his footing and crashed to the ground. As Nihu looked around wildly for another exit, the eruption came alive again. Everything quaked harder than before. Rocks and molten lava rolled and flowed into the room through the many cracks in the ceiling.

The menacing form in the chair was still coolly laughing at the comedy of sport taking place before him. Realizing that no escape would be possible, Nihu faced his new adversary.

"Who are you?" he asked, "What do you want?" His nostrils flared and his knees knocked, but despite this, he strode towards the being and took hold of his rucksack. "I say who are you?"

"All who inhabit the inside of this mountain call me Argon." A gravelly voice seemed to echo from all sides. "And you are Nihu. Yes, there are no secrets that this mountain keeps from me. There is a toll to pay for traveling over my land. I brought you down here to pay it." Argon pushed forward and grasped the front edge of the old table with long bony fingers. The large almond eyes glowed crimson both frightening and beautiful at the same time.

"I can't serve you. I can't!" Nihu shouted at Argon.

"But you have no choice. As we speak, lava and molten rock are moving into the crevices and burying my treasure room once again. Not much will exist in here very soon. You cannot get out and you cannot survive in this little room. I have the power to protect myself, my treasures and whatever is under my care."

Nihu looked around at the stonewalls that were gradually giving way and swallowed very hard. "Are you saying you can save my life?"

"I can. However, I have a journey to make. I intend to keep you under my shadow until I return."

"A journey? How would you be able to leave?"

Argon chuckled and said, "Silly boy, don't you understand how different we are. I am not made of flesh and blood. I can walk on the wheels of fire."

"Where am I to stay?"

Argon pointed at a black box on the shelf and said, "I will cast you into that fair stone on the black box. You will find a lot of comfort in there as you waits for my return." He was yet

to end his words when the volcano raged once again. Nihu was swept off his feet immediately. Argon laughed and said, "If you were under my care, this would never happen to you. You would find much comfort in all your days with me. Time is running out, Nihu. Make your decision quickly. I must be gone right away. Would you have me cast you into the stone, or try your luck with death that will surely swallow you in any moment." Argon rose to feet and stood close to the stone on the black box.

"How long will you be gone?" Nihu felt for the axe at his side and the stone in the pouch at his waist.

"Boy, I can not tell you. But it will take me some time."

"Can you not take me with you?" An unknown adventure with the shadowy Argon somehow seemed a better choice than being left alone for who knew how long inside a stone.

"You could not cope where I am going. It is not meant for people of flesh and blood. Nevertheless, you can see that I am very generous. I did not require your neck for payment for intruding into my home. If I had no compassion, I would have cast you into the hottest part of the volcano. That would have meant your quick exit from this world."

Nihu contemplated the small obelisk on top of the box. It was growing very hot in the room and he was sweating profusely. Outside he could hear the fall of mountain rock, and the roar of the lava flow while the little room continued to give way.

"I leave you to your fate. I am on my way." All of a sudden, Argon was at the little barred window. Nihu stopped him.

"Wait, I have one more question."

"Ask, but be brief, I haven't time for your indecisiveness." Argon folded his arms, completely unconcerned.

"Will you set me free when you return?"

"Yes. Of course, your freedom will depend on what you can do for me. Simply awaiting my return is not payment for this disturbance."

As Nihu stood at the crossroad of his decision, part of the little room finally gave way. The lava started pouring in like a flood. The walls on every side began to crack when he looked at them and molten rock was filling in as fast as they opened. From trembling lips, he finally nodded to the erect figure under the window.

"Do as you say. I will wait in the stone."

Argon's long arm reached out, took Nihu around the waist, and shoved him close to the face of the fair stone on top of the black box. Immediately, Nihu felt himself shrinking as he watched the stone appear to grow larger. He soon was completely swallowed up as the roar of the crashing room became deafening and faded from sight behind him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CITY OF FORGOTTEN HEROES

Nihu was thrust into darkness that sat like a healthy troll in the face of a lazy evening. The night held sway everywhere. As his eyes adjusted and his body found its way back to senses, he could perceive a world that was as creepy as any of the frightening places that he had ever been. The kingdom in the stone was a desolate city whose inhabitants ate their meals on a table of grief in the holes of their estates—a city on death rows where songs of sorrow have become a daily routine and a way of life. The hustle and bustle of glowing insects and rodents were conspicuously missing. Skeletons of animals and dead men's bones littered the rubble like a forest of ancient branches lying across a bush path in a cold evening. No structures provoked a second look. All were dilapidated like a war-torn country. Not a sign of life appeared to exist in this ugly heaven. Captives here could do nothing but await the morrow for a twist of fortune that could better their lives.

Nihu seemed to be standing at the gateway to this world of woe. He sneezed and bones beneath him cracked under his weight. When he discovered what he was standing on, he quickly stumbled to the side, pulling his rucksack with him. He lifted it onto his back and turned

around. His eyes found more skulls that were like wild drunks awake in a cold night. He turned back to stare into the ruin of the ancient city—he could not catch sight of one good thing. Where was the comfort Argon had promised? Nihu imagined a devil would soon rear his ugly head from one of the skulls and that thought got his feet moving forward.

As he walked along the creepy road, he noticed strange movements on every side. He squinted into the blankness to see what was emerging from the heart of the darkness. Frightening creatures approached—Gagus led a few dwarfs carrying mats. Following Gagus was leading Suli, a creature of dual appearances. From her waist to her head, she was the head and torso of a frog. Her fine legs were those of a beautiful woman. In a moment, she could reverse the likeness, becoming a beautiful woman on top, with powerful frog legs below. Either way, she could move as fast as the speed of the light. Also advancing upon the boy was Mogono, a massive, upright hulking fellow of incredible strength, and Ndolo, a tiny figure only six inches tall. Barely noticeable, Ndolo was actually the god of fire, who had the ability to see into the past and future.

In their former positions, these creatures could hold their own in tough circumstances. They had long ago come up against the might of Argon and forfeited much of their power. Argon's spell now held them captive, and reduced them to the mean, suspicious lowlives they had become.

Nihu held his rucksack close and drew his battle-axe as the four of them came too close for comfort. His breath came fast and his heart kept hitting the roof of his chest. The speechless group advanced carefully like bald vultures waiting for death to swallow a wounded dog. Forming a circle, they suddenly pounced on him with a roar. Nihu sprung into action under the torment of their frenzied attack. For every lash thrown, he would yell to high heavens, and hit back relentlessly with his battle-axe. The axe fell, leaving large cuts on bodies and heads. Nevertheless, the creatures fought ferociously. Nihu threw his axe at Mogono, his biggest adversary, taking off a slice of his ear. Screaming the high cries of a bush baby, he held his head, and raced with devastating speed into the dark, never to return to the battle. Soon the others had to flee as well from the face of Nihu's defense when they could not overpower him. Suffering from a few bruises and cuts from the painful blows from claws and teeth that the creatures sank into his body, Nihu's eyes shot back and forth watching for their return. He raised an eyebrow as a thought flit through his mind. He quickly reached his hand down to his abdomen where his belt was still holding his shorts firmly to his waist and brought out the mysterious stone from the pouch. Could it emit some powers of destruction? If it was meant to calm a mountain perhaps, it could at least protect him from malevolent powers in this world.

Unseen in the dark, and never having thrown one blow against the boy, Ndolo, the little

god of fire, was gazing at Nihu in admiration. He blinked slowly. He walked up quietly to stand in front of him. Tearing his eyes from the stone in his hand, the boy noticed a small glow at his feet. Immediately, Nihu jumped back in surprise and recovered his aggressive stance. He drew his battle-axe and raised it above his head, intending to crush Ndolo to the ground.

“Friend!” Ndolo cried out, “I am not your enemy. Please, I am your friend.” He looked calmly into Nihu’s wild eyes, “My name is Ndolo. I did not strike you once, nor cause you any harm as my cohorts who rose against you. Do you remember?” He held out both his little arms, palms up, watching as Nihu’s axe remained in the air. “I can see your worry and mistrust like a miserable dog in your eyes. Lower the axe. Let your mind be at ease. Do not worry, I mean no harm to you.”

He smiled but Nihu was still suspicious. His eyes darted behind the figure in front of him to observe the holes in the darkness. He had no need to be surprised again, and did not intend to lay low his guard. Perhaps it was a trick. He took a deep breath and turned his head slowly from side to side, his eyes flitting off Ndolo briefly and then back again. The night was completely quiet. He lowered his axe and fixed his eyes on the little creature. “What do want from me?”

“Nothing. I want us to be friends is all.” Ndolo pointed at the stone. “That piece with you. Is that why you have fought with your life in your mouth? Do you know what you are holding?”

Nihu stuffed the stone back in his belt and grasped his axe handle again. “What of it?” he growled.

“Boy, I can see you have been through troubles. It is written all over you—accusations and the hand of providence. Although, I cannot see which way your life will go hereafter, I can see your past carries many bitter waters. They are hindering you from making friend with a good soul like me. I am no foul toad or windbag. Do you know you are captive here as we all are? Your death will come if Argon wants your neck.”

“Who told you about me?”

“News travels fast to those of us in the stone. Although we are trapped, we still know everything.”

“I am not trapped. I will soon be out of here. I have a deal with Argon.” Nihu’s voice was harsh but trailed off as Ndolo laughed and rolled over, kicking the air in glee with his thin legs. Nihu stared.

“Boy, don’t you know you are now a permanent resident of Argon’s stone? Do you understand that?” He righted himself and took pity on the boy’s stricken face. “I guess you don’t know. Do not let this revelation baffle you. There is no way out of here. Argon deceived you by placing you here. This is the City of Forgotten Heroes and Argon has trapped you here

for life. You must pay to get out with your blood or be one of his servants.”

“What are you saying?” Nihu’s heart dropped to his stomach as his grip whitened on the battle-axe.

“That beast whose head you cut? He has been here over a decade. None of us is new to this camp anymore. Argon is treacherous. Do not think he will ever let you go. His sweet promises only deceive and his prey is always unaware.” Ndolo sighed, as if unhappy to have to break the news to Nihu. “You are no different than any of these bones that litter this hell. Argon will always be Argon - a beautiful deceiver that only draws his sword when he can see sunlight in the midnight.”

Ndolo’s words threw Nihu into despair. His spirit collapsed like an ancient monument reduced by a sand storm. He gave a yelp of agony and dropped to the ground, miserably holding his temples. Presently, he took Magonda’s stone from his belt and began to fiddle with it. Ndolo came close to take a good look at the stone in Nihu’s hands. “Can I see what you have?” the little creature asked, simpering.

“It’s for my eyes only.”

“It’s a pity you still don’t trust me. I can help you.”

“Why haven’t you been able to help yourself all this time? You are no better than a thief buried in a gold mine.”

“That is one of those things bad happenstance brings upon an upright fellow of good birth. I am ridiculed when I deserve some respect. I am the god of fire. If the others were here, they would testify that my life was a triumph before I met my waterloo in the hands of Argon.”

“You should have proved your strength before him if you are really as strong as you claim.”

“Argon did not reduce me completely. I went against my ordination and now I am paying dearly for it. Let me show you something. Watch me.” He raised his tiny hands above his head and struck them together. A fire kindled immediately. The bright glow lit up the whole place. Awed, Nihu watched wordlessly. As the fire burned warmly, comfortingly, Ndolo smiled. “I think you can see, I am not trying to play tricks on you. I am paying the price for my wrongdoing years ago. Disobedience breeds misfortune.” A sad look crept across his face. “You have no reason to believe my good intentions. I give you my good word and must let my honesty speak for itself. I can tell you the mystery behind your stone. I swear. Just let me see it.” Ndolo lifted up himself high above the ground with hands stretched out.

Nihu was taken aback at first when he saw Ndolo floating on the air. He swallowed, debating the request. It took but a moment. He had heard sincerity in Ndolo’s voice and knew instinctively that the little god would not have let himself be seen floating through the air, unless he believed it safe to do so. Ndolo might be the true friend he so badly needed on this

journey. He opened his hands from around the luminous stone, so that it was in full view. It was now glowing with a deep blue light of its own. Ndolo gasped.

“Oh, what a piece it is—and I do know where you got it!”

“You do?” Nihu was impressed.

“It’s from, it’s from . . . Yes, and it is from the white dwarf of the Lonely Forest. You are on his mission. It is a good quest, my boy. Wait a minute,” he paused, rubbing his cheeks like a beetle polishing his feelers. “I need to sort it out. I am seeing many things now. However, I am right, aren’t I? You did receive this from the dwarf god of the Lonely Forest?” Nihu nodded.

Ndolo gave a huge grin, rubbing his hands together gleefully, “Oh, my goodness. I feel a revival. The more I look at the stone, the stronger I become. It has powerful magic. Perhaps a magic strong enough to bring down Argon.”

“Really?” Nihu looked at the stone with new respect and not a little hope.

“I ought to be cautious in my predictions, but it is possible that an end to many troubles is at hand. I cannot know this alone. My cohorts should be part of this. If they could receive the same consolation from the stone, as I have . . .” Ndolo was practically dancing in excitement. “I will return in a moment.”

Like a shot, the glow of his being retreated, bounced down to the ground and scooted into the darkness. Nihu watched him out of sight, and took a deep breath. Quiet blackness wrapped itself around him again. In such creepiness, eyes that cannot differentiate the appearance of shadows from darkness are set to become a casualty before others who could easily read such handwriting on the wall.

Nihu looked down at the beautiful stone once again. The blueness was muted, sitting quietly as if veiled. Reveling in Ndolo’s recent words and excitement, Nihu pondered his quest and his new entrapment, wondering if the white dwarf’s power had a means to set him free.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MISFORTUNE

Mogono was a weird one-eyed creature, terrifying, even when he hung a smile on his face. The eye was as large as the ripe oranges sold in the markets of the Black Empire. He had a hulking posture with hands almost reaching his knees. He bore an obvious resemblance to a hairy Stone Age man and any who might think to rise up against him, would be the worse for it. His oblong head barely missed being crushed by Nihu's axe and now sat with half an ear on his solid neck. One could hardly see the flesh of his body through his hair. Even in broad daylight, Mogono could give brave warriors nightmares in the days before he became a captive in the ancient city. No longer with a mountain home of his own to defend, Mogono was lost. Frustration was a constant companion in the kingdom of his heart.

Once a happy cave dweller, rolling boulders across the paths of unsuspecting travelers, Mogono was now retired to a dismal fate, having spent many years under the torment of Argon. High hopes that rode freely in his heart on Argon's promise of freedom had long ago been dashed, and he lay hopelessly on his belly in the darkness. He had spent more years in the ruined dungeon of a city than any other captive spend and sadly awaited the day of Argon next visit when he would surely be done away with for good. As he lay prone, in misery on the ground, Ndolo ran up to him and got right up beside his good ear.

"Mogono, come with me, you will have every cause to smile. There is light at the end of the tunnel." He pulled on the lumpy earlobe, "Do you hear me?" Ndolo was so excited he started darting back and forth in front of the prone Mogono who did not utter a word. The single eye in his wrinkled face had closed perhaps less in pain of his grievous wound and more in shame for having to succumb to a boy flinging a battle-axe. Maybe he had been swallowed up by thoughts of his eternal misery.

* * *

Mogono's tale began one evening as he relaxed outside a cave in his mountain home. As he basked in the euphoria of an easy life, an antelope limped past. Having just broken lose from the cruel hands of death in the form of an unlucky predator, the creature was gangling away like an old crone. Mogono went after it for an easy dinner.

As the animal fled from attack, Mogono picked up a large stone, took aim at the antelope and hauled it in his direction. The stone caught him in the hind legs. He fell and could not move. Mogono picked another stone and rushed to take life out of the creature. The antelope cried out, "Please, don't kill me, Mogono! I am your friend. It's me, Shoz!"

Mogono paused in bewilderment. "Shoz? How did you come to be like this?"

Shoz burst into tears, wagging his head.

Mogono dropped the stone and strode forward. "What happened to you?" he asked his dismayed friend.

"I was on the other side of the mountain hunting a wolf I had discovered was lurking when that being Argon rose up and demanded I leave the territory. I refused to go and he conjured jackals and wood wolves out of the ground and commanded them to devour me. I gave the creatures a good fight. You remember how well we served together during the Great Wolf War. The animals fled before us and these were no different. How was I to know what was in store?" Shoz burst into fresh tears.

"Argon set a great beast upon me. We fought like mortal enemies and in the end; I defeated him with a devastating blow that crushed his head against a rock.

"Finally, Argon threw his hands into the air. A whirlwind reared up and advanced towards me with devastating speed. I tried to flee but before I could move, it swept me off my feet and threw me against the rock. While I was rolling in agony, Argon came up close and cast a spell over me. Before I could blink, I began to transform into this, an antelope – a creature I used to catch for lunch. I, Shoz, must now eat grasses and run from every predator in the jungle. Mogono, what can you do to help me. I am finished." He lowered his head and wept bitterly.

"Don't cry, Shoz." Mogono said. "Resurrection is never in the hands of mourners."

"Why shouldn't I cry? I should have listened to that brute when he ordered me to leave the region."

"He had no right to say that. No one can ever claim ownership of the mountain. How dare him! Do you know where he is?"

"I don't know but I can show you where he disappeared."

"That's good. Let us go and find him. There is no crime in fighting to restore what has been taken from you."

Mogono clenched his fist and set his jaw firmly. A tough time awaited this Argon should he face the two of them. All the creatures of the woods knew that Mogono and Shoz were not to be messed with. He marched behind the limping Shoz to the part of the mountain where Argon dwelled.

Shoz stopped at a bend in the path and pointed to a slit opening in the rock face, "That's

where he entered.”

“How can we get in there?” Mogono asked.

“I can’t tell. But I know he went in through the wall.”

“Okay, stand back!”

Mogono went backwards and returned swiftly, crashing into the rock wall like a battering ram. The wall suffered cracks here and there, but did not give way. He went back for a second and a third time. On the fourth charge, the wall crumbled, leaving a hollow entrance through which he and Shoz stepped.

Argon had already been alerted on the other side. As soon as Mogono broke into the chambers, angry and ugly-looking trolls attacked them. Mogono battled diligently, but Shoz, who was in no good form to withstand the onslaught, began to retreat. As he backed step by tentative step in the dim corridor, he slipped and fell into a crevice and was lost.

The battle raged intense as the adversaries used might and wits to claim an advantage. The creatures launched everything they had against Mogono in order to bring him down, but Mogono took the upper hand and killed them all. Their bodies littered the cave as dry leaves in the heart of the Lonely Forest. Like any warlord having snatched victory from the face of defeat, a gleam of triumph began to light up Mogono’s rugged face. All of a sudden, the bodies of the dead trolls melted, congealing and transforming into a live python. The snake started to wind its long body around Mogono to crush him to the ground. While Mogono fought to find his feet, the leviathan struck hard with its tail of enchanted spikes that were almost six inches long. Mogono barely had time to get out of the way and prepare himself for a new defense. The spikes almost cut through his right hand. A fierce new battle for survival erupted between them, and they shared blows that had both of them falling in turn like packs of cards.

Just as the python seemed it would make good on its bid to crush him to death, Mogono grabbed his head and gave the snake a powerful blow that cracked its bones, eliciting an agonized roar. The snake fought back and wrestled Mogono to the ground as the mountaineer tried to push his advantage and inflict more injuries. They battled into the cave corners with rasping breaths, rolling on the ground and lashing hard. Once more, Mogono grabbed the python’s head, and sank another blow into the body of the crazy beast. At last, the snake loosed its hold on Mogono’s torso. With life ebbing from its body, it flopped on the floor before him.

Mogono looked up to find Argon standing before him. The lithe apparition hurled a fireball that hit him in the face, burning out one of his eyes. Mogono covered his face with his hands, staggering and yelling in pain. In his agony, Argon cast him into a stone that was on top of a black box on the shelf along the wall. In addition, that was how the great mountaineer found himself in the City of Forgotten Heroes.

Ndolo was still trying to get Mogono's attention. He went close to his face and began to make high, funny whistling noises that sailors often do to keep their hopes up when they are trapped between the devil and deep blue sea. The noise carried to Mogono's brain, yet Mogono did not acknowledge what was happening around him. Realizing that he would have to wait for Mogono to give him an audience, Ndolo, disappointed, ceased his antics and sat quietly. He fixed his eyes on the silent cave man, wondering what must have gotten him so down. It was not like him to succumb so readily to any wound. Perhaps he feared his ruin at the hands of Argon should his retreat from battle be discovered. Ndolo clicked his fingers and a spark of light kindled the air. The fire was bright enough to light up Mogono's countenance. Ndolo raised his index finger above his head and checked Mogono's breathing. He also took this opportunity to have a fresh look at the remaining piece of ear.

After examining Mogono, Ndolo put out his light and sat quietly as a man who has come to terms with a poverty-stricken life. Bread of affliction remains the cake on the table of such fellow.

Ndolo sighed and stood up. He stepped away to head into the darkness once again, turning on his light so that he could see beyond his nose. At last, Mogono fluttered his eyelid and noticed that the little feet of Ndolo were fast moving away. He raised his avocado-shaped head and called to him with a kindly brogue, "Ndolo, what is it?"

"Nothing, I already have answers to the questions I wanted to ask you." Ndolo replied diffidently without looking back.

Mogono sat up. "Ndolo wait. Let's talk!"

"No need, Mogono. Get some rest. What I have to say will keep until later. Rest is a supernatural thing and only wise people know its worth. It is only in frustration that rest might give birth to worries. Quiet time is as productive as any money-spinning venture. So grab it with both hands and good night."

Leaving Mogono to rest in the darkness, Ndolo went to find Suli and the two dwarves. Suli Dah Goulivan had been bewitched by the spell of Argon and rendered mute with the mind of a two-year old child. The dwarves were from the Agbere clan who had been living near the mountain that had been the home of Mogono and Shoz. One by one, Argon had deposited them in the City of Forgotten Heroes for various infractions.

Ndolo found them in a group lying on their mats, all snoring heavily like nineteenth century steam engines. Suli lay close to Gagus, seemingly having lost control of some bodily functions. A trail of drool seeped from her mouth into the Earth. Ndolo went up to Gagus, the

dwarf he was most fond of, and tapped him on the lower part of his cheek. Gagus did not make a move. He continued to snore, loud and rapidly. In the effort to bring Gagus to consciousness, the little god of fire hit on an idea. He directed his flame into Gagus' ear. The dwarf screamed awake, his sleep fading instantly as if he had been wild all night. He focused his eyes on Ndolo.

"What are you trying to do? Rob me of my eardrum?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Ndolo smiled. "Gagus, you and your friends will soon be delivered from that brawny brute, Argon."

"What do you mean?" Gagus replied letting go a yawn that took some time to mix with the air. "I still don't understand you, Ndolo."

Their conversation brought the others around. Dulo rolled up his mat, got up quietly, and came over to hear what was being said. As for Suli, she appeared dazed as she struggled awake. Evening hours were not often kind to Suli. Although the light in the City was usually dim, the darkness sapped her strength most of all.

Ndolo watched her tenderly as she peered around. "We must atone for our actions this evening," he told the dwarves. "Let us go and apologize to the alien we treated badly today."

Gagus and Dulo looked at each other quizzically "Who is he?" Gagus asked, blinking his eyes at Ndolo.

"I still don't know much about him, but he has suffered the same fate as we have." Ndolo rubbed his head trying hard to contain his excitement over his meeting with Nihu.

"How do you mean? What does he know about our world?" Dulo asked moving forward to stand before Ndolo who was now floating in the air, fire burning on his index finger.

"You will get to know him better when I bring you to him. For now, it would be misleading if I say I have much information about the youth with such innocent eyes. But I strongly believe he may become the best ally we could ever hope to arrive in our midst." Ndolo raised an eyebrow that gave birth to a furrow on his forehead.

"For him to have been deposited here, he should be part of our world. Or what do you think, Dulo?"

"You are right. Only spirits dine with spirits." Dulo assented.

"Besides that, I do believe in humility," Gagus said. "Moderation is the soul of precaution. If freedom can be achieved by mere alliances, I think we should do the same in this circumstance. Let us do as you say, Ndolo, and apologize to the alien. Let us go to him."

CHAPTER NINE

NDOLO

Ndolo led the pack like an exodus of people leaving a troubled land to a kingdom flowing with milk and honey. The dwarves followed him sheepishly. The irritating sight of the ancient ruins was kept at bay by the light of Ndolo who was walking on air as if cruising through the most beautiful section of countryside. As the huge darkness enveloped the path behind them, Dulo broke the silence that had overtaken them. "Someone is not here."

They stopped abruptly, took inventory of the party, and discovered it was Suli who was missing.

"Oh, it is Suli who has fallen behind." Ndolo cried out. "Poor child. Argon's spell did not spare her any useful attribute." He sighed, knowing how terribly fond of Suli they all were. She could not take care of herself and so gave them a reason for being.

"Gagus, you and Dulo go and find her. We all know she gets weaker as the evening takes its toll. I will wait here." Ndolo increased the light that sat upon his index finger so that the two dwarves could see beyond their noses as they hurried away. Soon they arrived back at the spot with Suli clinging to Gagus' back and Ndolo led the little group to Nihu, who had not yet found sleep in the foreign darkness.

Nihu felt the change in the air as the silent group approached. He scrambled to his feet and drew his battle-axe to ward off any further attack. Seeing him prepared thus, Ndolo, who had chosen to fall in with his cohorts in a sea of legs, called out, "My friend, we are not here for war. Let your heart be at peace." The others nodded significantly.

Nihu's eyes surveyed the unnatural creatures. Unconvinced that they had come all for good, yet he let his axe drop to his side and crouched in the dirt. He poised like a prepared warlord that would draw his sword if a fly so much as buzzed between them.

"Just as I said earlier, we did not treat our stranger fairly." Ndolo nodded to Nihu and addressed his folk. "Therefore, we mean to apologize like true yoke fellows. We know that tomorrow hangs on the cold, cruel hands of fate. It would be very wrong for us to walk as he who has banished us to this ugly heaven. When I die, I do not want to walk into my grave with hands stained with blood. And if I am still blessed to remain immortal, to be trapped in

immortality as a murderer is no better than to remain lifeless in the street like a slain foul toad.”

As if mediating between lovers in a cloud of misunderstanding, Ndolo turned to Gagus and saw that pools of remorse had filled his eyes. The words had touched him deeply.

“I am Gagus,” he stepped forward. “I am so sorry for my wrong against you. I cannot really tell what prompted me to raise my hand. Maybe it is this burden of hard life that has rendered me such a low life fellow. Forgive me. What is your name?” He lowered his eyelashes and grasped his hands together over his chest.

Silence. The group was expecting Nihu to say something or at least tell them his name. Instead, Nihu fixed large innocent eyes on Gagus, whose teeth were now pulling in his right cheek, as if he was grinding in penance. The others took turns throwing glances at first one, then the other.

No words yet. The silence was as thick as the huge darkness that surrounded them. At last, Ndolo emitted a cough that rent the air like a rap on a wooden door.

“Gagus asks a good question. We came here to apologize, but it is still good to get to know you, just as we have learned about each other over the years. I doubt if there could ever be a happier family than me, Gagus, Dulo, Suli—even if she cannot relate as expected, and Mogono, who is still in the dark. So tell us your name.”

“Ni-hu.” Nihu pronounced the syllables smartly.

“Nihu?” Gagus lifted his eyelids. “What a wonderful name! Nihu, we are sorry we molested you earlier. Please forgive us.” His voice was bright.

“I have forgiven all of you,” Nihu replied quietly, but intensely, fire burning in his eyes.

“You have shown good character that is well to imitate.” Ndolo said, and threw a befitting smile at Nihu. “When you build a castle in the air, you leave tongues wagging and men wondering, but when you express good character, it leaves your name on the lips of generations to come. A good character will bring more honor than swallowing precious stones in a gold mine.”

“Thank you. You can return to your rest. I am well alone.” Nihu replied with dignity.

“No. We shall not leave you in a hurry. Let us share our stories of how we have come to be here. It is one of the best things that can ever happen in a friendship. We shall not be parties chasing shadows. Nihu, let’s share our misfortunes, and the good life, too as the case may be.” Ndolo said, looking him in the eyes.

“Ndolo is right.” Dulo cut in, rubbing his bearded cheek, “My tale is that of Gagus and other dwarfs that are not here today. We live in the forest eastward. On the other side of the mountain where Argon makes his home.” Recognizing that Dulo was speaking of the Lonely Forest, Nihu pricked up his ears.

“One day, we gathered together to travel westward on a quest to silence the evil spewing

forth from the western mountain. Our chief, who has magical powers to see into the future, told us about the source. He claimed he had what it takes to bring hell to her knees. He also told us we would erase the evil by throwing a stone into a pit of fire. He had the stone with him while we embarked on the trip that led to our misfortunes. I can still remember what he said about he who casts the stone into the pit of fire. He said the mountain would be forever calm and whoever cast the stone would be so powerful that he would be able to live anywhere and be a force to reckon with among all the powers in high places.” Dulo swallowed and rubbed his head wearily.

These revelations held Nihu in rapt attention. He grasped the pouch on his belt where the stone lay quiet and nodded his head as if he was enjoying the oratory.

“Dulo, tell Nihu how you got in here,” Ndolo prompted.

“Of course,” Dulo replied. “That is what I want to say now.”

Gagus interjected. “Let me continue from where you stopped. I remember our chief said only he and whomever he allows can bear the stone. Let us leave off about the stone for now. Our new friend needs to know how we fell.

“We were closing in on our victory, Nihu. Suddenly, the mountain path we were walking upon gave way and Dulo and I fell into a strange world. I do not know what happened to the others. We have never seen them again. I loved our chief. He was a good friend and caretaker of our forest. I can remember what he said before we were swallowed up. He said he was feeling unusual, and that whatever was to happen, we must take what destiny had to offer us. I do not believe our chief is dead. Perhaps he is trapped somewhere in the deep recesses of Argon’s mountain, Perhaps he found a way to escape.” Gagus took a deep breath to continue.

“As we stumbled to find our way out of the cavern into which we had fallen, Argon found us and our doom was sealed. He questioned us very hard about where we were going before he cast a spell on us. Dulo and I gave him no good answer. Maybe that was why he did not spare us.”

“That is why we are here today.” Dulo concluded and lowered his head sadly.

After hearing the dwarfs’ account, Nihu contemplated his position. He could not reveal at once that he knew who the dwarf chief was and that he was in possession of the stone they knew so well. He decided to wait it out. “You are from the Lonely Forest,” he exclaimed. “So am I. What is the name of your chief whose whereabouts you do not know?”

“Magonda, the white dwarf. I believe he is as strong as Argon. Sometimes however, the game of life treads the way we never expect it. Maybe some powerful being has him captive, for I know truly, if our chief was able, he would come for us. He could give Argon a fair fight, a war of casting spells. I wish I should live to see it.” Gagus appeared misty eyed and sighed in bewilderment.

“What will you do now?” Nihu asked.

“We are short of ideas now.” Dulo replied. “What do *you* think we should do?”

Ndolo interrupted, “I think it’s too early to ask Nihu such a question. He has yet to meet Suli.” Ndolo looked over to Suli sitting nearby, gazing vacantly in the dust, “Nihu, our friend on the ground here is Suli.”

“Let him speak for himself.” Nihu said.

Ndolo laughed wagging his head, “She can’t. Only a miracle will restore her sensibilities. More is the pity for you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She is the only one who could have told you about the pit of fire. She is now an imbecile, rendered useless by Argon. You can see for yourself. Suli was the servant of that miscreant. She kept watch over the pit of fire in her good years. Now she can no longer control herself.” All their eyes were fixed on Suli whose saliva was dropping from her wide mouth in a torrent.

“You can see her miserable situation. She has suffered much for her transgression. If anyone should be helped through the use of magical powers, it is she.” Ndolo gave Nihu a sly look. He knew what the boy held in his belt.

“Yes, Nihu, you may have the power to help her.” Ndolo, tiny as he was, caught the boy’s gaze and held it. “I mean it. Could you not bring forth your stone and let us see the effect? The moment I lay eyes on its smooth surface, a kind of healing strength took hold of me. I am sure it would have an affect on Suli. She could then tell us how to defeat the powers of Argon. We may yet sing our victory songs again.”

At that moment, a hulking figure emerged from the darkness. “Yes, Ndolo is right. Let her see what you’ve got, Nihu.” All eyes turned to see Mogono, the gigantic mountaineer as he settled himself in their midst.

“No longer happy in the darkness as a lonely low-life fellow, are you?” Ndolo mocked with good humor. “We are glad you have joined us, old friend.”

“You must apologize, Mogono, for the wrong treatment we gave to our new friend Nihu,” said Gagus.

“I have heard all that has been said,” Mogono grunted. “Gagus, even if you did not tell me. I have vowed to do that. Nihu, I am sorry for behaving with such malice.” He set his arms akimbo. “What else do you want me to say?”

“Nothing more. You have said well,” Nihu responded. “I have no further grievance with you.”

“Come, Nihu,” Ndolo pressed gently. “Let them see the stone, too.” He smiled encouragingly at the boy’s bony face.

Nihu had no choice but to comply. A strange sensation came over him, a feeling in his heart that he was fulfilling a destiny. The five pairs of staring eyes all needed a lifeline. Nihu reached down and brought out the stone that was in his little pouch. The stone glowed serenely, a beautiful princess that set the hearts of holy men on fire. As the assembly gazed upon it, veils appeared to drop off their bodies, layers that had held them tightly bound for so long. Mogono's injured ear healed immediately. Everyone seemed to have arisen from the dust, standing surprised and wordlessly looking at themselves and each other. The biggest change had come over Suli. The strange creature stood strong on shapely legs, found her voice and spoke for the first time after many years in bondage,

"I can see the pit of fire once again." Everyone was riveted. They fixed their eyes upon her. "O glory of Argon, your unholy strength thrives in the heart of the naked Earth. Your bare hands govern the highway to hell and your laughter is a devastating sepulcher. You ruined me!" Then she burst into tears, pounding hard on the Earth as if she would like it to break open and swallow her misery that was now free to find its way back to the box on the shelf in Argon's ancient chamber.

CHAPTER TEN

BATTLE IN THE STONE

As a flood of tears glided down the face of Suli, an ill wind began to blow among creatures waiting for their day of reckoning in the City of Forgotten Heroes.

At first, Ndolo and the dwarfs were happy and felt that Nihu's coming was a blessing. Their faces blossomed into smiles as they hopped and skipped about, free of Argon's spell at last. Mogono, however, had fixed his eye on Nihu's stone. As the healing powers settled over his body, a kernel of greed filled his soul. The more he looked at the stone, the more his countenance changed. An angry look came over his suntanned face like a gold digger overwhelmed by greed in a cold night. He wore a frown like a man deprived of love by the wife of his youth. An angry look sat on his brown face. Such a look had sent jitters down the spines

of many of his opponents in the course of his active life. He gave a sudden roar like a hungry lion and beat vehemently on his chest. All reason and kind feelings of camaraderie left him. He had one thought and one thought only.

All eyes turned to him and Mogono threw himself at Nihu. His aim was to collect the mysterious stone. Before Nihu could blink or draw his axe, Mogono had pounced on him and crushed him to the ground. They grappled in earnest, Mogono trying frantically to displace the boy of his possession, While Ndolo, Gagus, Dulo and Suli watched in shock, the stone fell from Nihu's grasp and rolled a short distance away. Gagus and Dulo looked at each other. The same idea occurred to them at the same time and they sped off like two opposing football players. Off they went, shoulder to shoulder, in hot pursuit to get the stone.

They were a few steps away when the stone exploded violently, shooting clouds of dust and flint into the air, causing them to fall backwards like retreating whales of Pookerdoo. Mogono, who had been busy pounding Nihu into the ground, looked behind him and realized what had happened. He left Nihu gasping for air and went for the stone before the dwarfs could recover from the hit of the explosion. Nihu, Ndolo, and Suli could only watch helplessly. Before Mogono could lay his hands on the stone, it sparked light and again shook so mightily, it appeared an earthquake was about to ravage the city. Everyone, including Mogono, sat on the ground, holding onto whatever they could for dear life.

In the midst of this, the dead bones that littered the place began to rise up and take human form. Soon two standing armies, fully armed and ready for battle were facing each other on the plain before the city ruins. These fierce and angry looking creatures had inhabited Argon's stone for centuries. They had been the great warriors of Azakunda and Uzalla and had been on the warpath for a decade over an unresolved land dispute in the eastern part of the great mountain. Eventually tiring of the noise, Argon had cast a spell on them and, to keep things tidy, had cast the entire lot into the stone where they remained in pieces among the rocks and sand. No hope of resurrection could ever have stayed in their hearts.

As the two ancient armies lifted themselves from the ground, the earthquake subsided. Dumbfounded, Nihu and others watched the mysterious event unfold before them. As the number of soldiers steadily increased, all six of the little party, including Mogono, who had quite lost his nerve in the face of this new development, started to look around for some place of retreat. Nihu, Ndolo, and the dwarfs gathered up Suli and took cover, moving back into the unseen world beyond the reach of the ring of armies. They peeked out cautiously from behind the dark trees.

The old enemies roared and shook their weapons ferociously, eager to continue the old rivalry that had existed between them. As the Azakunda warlords roared again, their adversary on the other end did not spare them a minute. They rushed together brandishing clubs,

swords, axes, and spears. Right away, heads began to roll, as it was on the day Argon had interrupted the battle so long ago. As the battle raged, Mogono worked himself up to snatch the stone from its place on the ground. As he advanced again, one of the Uzalla men hit him with his club smacking him very hard on the side of the head. In a roar filled with pain and anger, Mogono retaliated with a hit that swept the warlord off his feet. He then fell on the Uzalla strong man and pounded him hard into the ground. Another warrior, noticing the peril of his tribesman, came to help. He gave Mogono a punch that knocked him off his feet. In a flash, Mogono was lost in a melee of flashing swords, and fists.

Meanwhile, still on the sidelines, the dwarfs hid themselves under their mats. Nihu, however, who had recovered his faculties, watched the battle as it carried itself away from where the stone sat on the ground. Carefully, he maneuvered his way in its direction. On his way, one of the warriors noticed its faint glow and picked it up. Instantly, he received repercussion. As he was looking at it, smoke came out of the stone and covered his face. The smoke formed into six large blackbirds that began pecking him mercilessly. Crying and wailing at the top of his voice, he let the stone drop from his hand. Since the battle was on, no one bothered to pay attention to his cry and he was finally ravaged. The blackbirds again became a cloud of smoke and forced its way back into the stone.

Mogono, meanwhile, had gotten quite busy, defending himself on all sides from the eager onslaught. Every time he thought, he had breathing room to escape the fight and find the stone another Uzalla warlord would make him battle for his life. On every side, the battle raged. Spears and swords pierced armored chests while the unholy axes compelled heads to roll. Blood flowed like many waters. Mogono was not only having his way; those who could use cutlass did it judiciously. Gradually, the Azakunda warriors retreated from the battlefield as if preparing to surrender. The Uzalla army roared triumphantly, thinking they had finally won the battle. They raced after their old enemy into the darkness. The Azakunda soldiers regrouped and struck at them with their spears in close combat. Before the Uzalla could recover from the sudden attack, the Azakunda drew their knives and raced in a swift dart to overwhelm them. When they clashed once again, the Uzalla army suffered many losses.

As heads continued to roll, and blood spilled like rivers of fire, Nihu kept up his cautious move towards the stone. All of a sudden, one of the soldiers from Azakunda, who was as dark as midnight, grabbed him from behind. In one quick move, Nihu drew his axe and buried it three times in the head of the soldier, sending him immediately to an early grave. Relieved, Nihu crept to where the stone was took it back in his hands at last. The battle continued in earnest and the combatants began to drop like logs of wood. Nihu scampered as fast as he could back to the safety of the dark trees. As he ran, something amazing started to take place on the battlefield. Once he reached a good distance away, Nihu turned around and

observed that the armies appeared to grow weary as if their strength had been sapped out of them. They began to return to their skeleton forms, wavering and collapsing into dust. Mogono stood surprised in a sea of lifeless bones. Everyone—the dwarfs, Ndolo, Suli and Nihu—looked in wonderment at the scene. A bright thought flitted through Ndolo’s quick mind.

“Quick, Nihu! Drop the stone,” he commanded.

Surprised, Nihu obeyed. As soon as the stone touched the Earth, the forms rose again and once again took on their human shape, preparing to return to battle. Mogono crouched down where he was and the dwarfs covered their heads with their mats once more.

“Pick it up!”

As soon as Nihu took up the stone, the fearsome creatures lay down their weapons and sunk into dust.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE PLOT

Nihu replaced the stone into his pouch and calm returned to the city. Argon’s spell took control again. Suli’s eyes took on their vacant look and drool spilled out of her Froggy lips. Mogono lowered his head in shame as his strength drained out of him. The dwarfs came out of hiding, looking haggard and unkempt and the little god, Ndolo, stepped up beside Nihu, sad and defeated. As the group gathered, Nihu drew himself up to his full height, his right hand holding his axe in an iron grip.

“See here. The stone stays where it is. If any of you attempt to frustrate me, I am ready to give that fellow a good fight. I have been banished unjustly, and now my life hangs in the balance.” He pointed his axe at Mogono. “I won’t be thwarted by the likes of you. I’ll feed you to the bald vultures, I swear!”

“Mogono did wrong by molesting you. We are sorry for that.” Ndolo looked around him and the others nodded.

“As for *you*,” Nihu replied furiously, daggers shooting from his eyes, “YOU are not to trick me again with your wily lies of healing powers. I will leave you far behind in this treacherous city. You can stay here another one hundred years, for all I care.”

“Nihu, calm down. We are pleased to have you with us. We mean you no harm.” Gagus smiled ingratiatingly at the angry boy.

“Keep quiet, Gagus. What was your purpose in rushing after the stone? To keep it for yourself? Your chief would have given you the responsibility if he had found you worthy. Instead he left you here to rot.” He shrugged his shoulders as if flicking a fly. “Such a fate is well deserved,” he added, looking hard at the dwarf.

“Nihu, I *am* sorry!” Mogono dropped to his knees in supplication. “I don’t know what came over me. Don’t let my actions turn you against the others. We need your help. Please, don’t be angry anymore.” He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and clasped his hands at his forehead. Mogono, having lived the longest in Argon’s stone could not bear to see this bit of hope walk out of his life, leaving tomorrow to hang in the cruel hands of fate.

The faces of the others registered true remorse. One would think they were mourning at the funeral of a sage. At the sight of this, Nihu’s anger began to fade. He took a deep breath, lowered his axe, and fastened it to his belt. It was obvious that the boy would have to forgive the wretches again if anything was to move forward.

Gagus was the next to speak, “Nihu, you have not yet told us how you came to be in the City of Forgotten Heroes.”

Resigned, but wary, Nihu muttered, “Someone sent me here.”

“Ah ha! Well, Argon has sent every one of us here. What was his beef with you?”

“The same as with the rest of you. I was crossing through the western edge of the Lonely Forest. All of a sudden, the ground cracked open and swallowed me up like a hungry fish. I fell into a chamber full of treasures and when Argon discovered me there, he claimed he had the right to exact a toll from whoever passed through his land. I had no other choice but to accept his terms and await his return here.”

“Where were you going before you fell into the hands of that foul toad?” asked Dulo.

Nihu glanced at Ndolo, who looked back at him calmly, scratched his chin, and carefully answered the dwarf. “I was serving a term of banishment in the country to the east. While I was there, a white dwarf came to me and charged me with a task. My survival depends on completing this mission for him. He will have my life if I do not do what he has asked me to do.”

“What did he ask you to do?” Gagus asked his eyes wide.

Nihu looked down at his boots and spoke quietly. “He said I should cast this stone into the pit of fire.”

At the words “pit of fire” the two dwarfs turned their heads to each other. Together they looked back at Nihu. “Boy, are you sure about what you just said?” Dulo asked.

“Of course. Do you doubt me?” Nihu flung another glance at Ndolo.

Gagus and Dulo exchanged another silent look and shook their heads simultaneously. “No, not really,” said Gagus slowly. “There are many white dwarves with stones. Every clan of

dwarves has one. Why this one would have given you his, I have no idea.”

“It certainly has led you to no good end, though,” added Dulo. “I am sorry you had to step on Argon’s fat toes for someone who wanted you dead. Pity it is that sneaky deceiver who took the last laughs over one of us.”

“I am not finished,” Nihu replied with measured words. “I am going to reach the mountain in the west. I also intend to have the head of Argon.”

At that, the dwarves burst into laughter, falling on each other like splitting rocks.

“Why couldn’t you have done that before the foul toad bundled you into this hell?” Gagus wiped his eyes, still giggling. “Oh, how refreshing is youthful exuberance; a shadow of valor too difficult for little ones to understand. In ignorance, they can enjoy foolish bliss. Listen to me, Nihu. Argon has nothing to do with flesh and blood. That scoundrel is not of your world. He won’t be brought low by your battle-axe.” Gagus’ laughter was still alive on his wrinkled face.

“You need more than you to reduce Argon,” Dulo put in. “Maybe your ancestors could help. Did you consult them before embarking on your journey? If you did not do that, it means you really planned to fail. Call to them now. Perhaps they can keep you from making this city your permanent home.”

The amused creatures mocked the boy and Ndolo suddenly cleared his throat. The dwarves stopped laughing and stared down as if seeking to hear more words that would provoke good laughter. As they waited earnestly for the god to talk, Nihu responded, “So you don’t believe I can do it?”

Gagus sniggered. “How is it possible? You don’t have what it takes to defeat Argon.”

“Every one of us here had more magic available to us than you,” Dulo continued. “If someone, such as Ndolo here, can be laid low by the likes of Argon for so long, what makes you think you can take the upper hand?”

“I have the stone,” said Nihu. “You have seen what it can do. All I need to figure out is how to get to the pit of fire. When I get there, I’ll throw in the stone and the mountain will be satisfied. I’ll take the upper hand with Argon then, and all of you will be free.”

“That’s a balloon dream,” Gagus said. “We are all trapped for life. Freedom only comes if that deceiver wants us dead. When he comes, none of us has any resources left to return the blow. As for the stone you claim would calm the mountain, you do not have the right one. It is with our chief, the powerful dwarf that fell with us. He is certainly trapped somewhere beneath the mountain or he would have come to our rescue. Your claim of having what could reduce Argon is just the kind of misfortune that drives a youth into a tragedy. Just wait for the countdown to the day of your death rather than think of an escape route here. Remember you are in a stone. Argon will not spare you!”

“Look at every side, what do you see?” Mogono raised himself from the dust where he had settled. Nihu looked around as if he was obeying the instruction of a schoolteacher. He faced Mogono without saying a word.

“You see white bones, don’t you? Some of them were as zealous as you are now. Maybe even more determined to escape Argon. Today their bones have become our headrests.” Mogono expected Nihu’s courage to fail, as had that of everyone else who had been forced into the darkness.

“Whatever power they had and lost in becoming Argon’s captives does not concern me. I do not need Argon to show his shadow self to exit this place. Whether you believe in my ability or not, I have what it takes to continue my journey. I trust in a divine providence. I will do as I have said.” Nihu concluded stoutly.

“You can be so proud?” Gagus sneered. “I thought you were as tender as a dove the first time I set my eyes on you. Now I know that is true. Nihu, you cannot do anything!” Muttering and grumbling, he stalked away into the darkness to put the day behind him. The others watched him stumble a number of times before he was finally out of sight. Dulo stared after him in dismay.

“Argon is a good deceiver,” Dulo intoned. “He has always told his hostages the same sweet story. He strikes the day that you least expect it. He has struck dead many with lesser boasts. I have seen your courage and I know you would be ready to war with a thousand soldiers all alone, but Argon’s sneeze is enough to cost your thin legs. A glowing stone that you hardly know how to control is no shield against the will of Argon.” Dulo gave a discouraged sigh and turned to follow his fellow citizen. Neither was ready to be part of a plan that they felt would not see the light of the day. Somewhere they found a place in the darkness where they could cast mournful lots upon the state of their condition.

The exit of the dwarves had an effect on Mogono. He wagged his head as if the dilemma to stay or go had just knocked him down. He, too, saw no bright dawn in the words of Nihu and hurried away, leaving Ndolo and Suli alone with Nihu.

“What do you think, Ndolo?” Nihu asked. “Won’t you join your friends who do not believe in what I could do?”

“I don’t go with the crowd. I have seen many battles. There is no valor in living in fear. I am immortal but must remain trapped as I am now. I want my freedom as much as you desire to have Argon’s head severed.”

“What about Suli, is she like you? Nihu asked.

“No. However, no man born of a woman can end her, or the dwarfs. Only an immortal can have his way in our lives. We are beyond the ordinary,” Ndolo said.

There was a momentary silence as they took a moment to observe Suli, who lay

prostrate in the dust, drool forming a grimy puddle at their feet.

“So what shall we do, Ndolo?” Nihu watched as the tiny god rose up into the air with an eerie glow. “Do you believe in the power of the stone? Will you come seek out the way to the mountain with me?”

“I am with you. Yet, I have no means of escape from here and I am not too conversant with the routes that lead to the pit of fire. Perhaps Suli can help. She has been with Argon all her life. If she can talk, we can bank on her information to get us to the pit of fire.”

Nihu nodded and stuck his hand into the pouch to bring out the stone. He placed it before Suli so that she could see it from where she lay without it touching the ground. Suli's revival was as dramatic as the first time. The dull, lazy look on her face gave way to a lively countenance as she quickly got to her feet. While she was stretching, Ndolo hovered in front of her.

“Suli, our new friend would like to free us from this dungeon. However, he does not know the way to the pit of fire. You can set him straight.”

“That route,” She shook her head vehemently, “the only route is full of thorns and thistles. Only one sort of bravery can make you a victor in that hell. A bravery that would keep you awake even if you were stoned with a deep slumber. Without it, you cannot survive the antics of Argon and you will be no better than those he has disposed of. Never turn right. In this mountain, it is delusion to do so. Very few know that. Only I, who has walked with Argon, can tell the world that bitter truth. The left is your way. That is the path to the pit of fire. Yet you must move with care, it is not completely free of enemies. Sword, axe, or whatever weapon you have will not do them any harm. They come out of nothingness if you have no light that would show you the way.

“It could be like the light of Ndolo; the kind of light that the dark does not want to see. Once you throw it at them, they bid the world farewell. That is what you need. If you go with one, your chances are good that your life will be spared.” Suli coughed noisily.

Nihu threw a hopeful look in Ndolo's direction. Ndolo was now shining his inner light fondly over the bizarre former servant. Nihu's breaths were quick and shallow. Despite his earlier show of bravado, anxiety was taking the top most seats on his face. “So I shall only turn left. Is that all I should know about the pit of fire?”

Suli smiled. “No one that finds himself on that path has ever lived to tell of his woes. Do not think of valor in that place. Valor lies without thought in the heart of any courageous man. Also, remember, obedience is worth the sacrifice of pride. Just do what I tell you to do.”

Nihu heaved a sigh. “So how do we begin our journey?”

“If we can find our way out of here, it is because Argon has allowed it. His motive could put us far from deliverance. So far away that we could no longer dream of freedom but rather

accept the fate that we must die the poor death that he has to offer. If Argon comes for you here, he will take you as his servant for all time. There is nothing you can do to stop him. Only pray. Pray that you may find another light to follow before that scoundrel makes you his lackey.”

“If I may ask, what is your story, Suli?” Nihu questioned.

“The great deceiver made me a foul toad. He accused me of staring at him while he was offering a sacrifice in the pit. He often feared that his servants would want to find out the source of his power. While I was insisting that I had no evil intention against him, he cast this spell over me. So I find myself here today. Me, Suli Dah Goulivan, not even half the woman I was before. Now, I must await my fate. Argon wants to kill me for something I did not do.”

She began to sob and the tears rolled down her smooth frog cheeks. Ndolo and Nihu waited soberly. “Nihu,” Suli continued, “I must advise you, do not visit the pit of fire. The way is madness and we are not likely to survive the antics of Argon. You do not even have a light for the journey.”

Nihu turned to the little creature in the air, “Ndolo, I have made up my mind to escape and complete my mission. Will you promise to go with me?”

“I can not answer yet. It might be disastrous to decide such fate on my feet. I will not make any commitment I cannot honor and I need time to mull over the issue. I prefer to commit with pure compassion to someone with a clear conscience than be merry with him of covetous instinct. It is the joy of every being to die a good death. Of course, I cannot die as a mortal being such as you, but my life can be joy even in bondage.

“We have many years to spend in this stone before Argon returns—we shall have time to get acquainted better.” Ndolo knit his brows together, “it may not be as long a wait as we think. You must always be on your toes for the time when our captor makes his next appearance. It is time to take my leave, my friend.” Ndolo turned to go.

“Don’t go yet, Ndolo. What about Suli? Who will lead her through the dark?”

“You can take her while I light the way.”

Nihu returned Magonda’s stone to his pouch and lifted up poor Suli who had shrunk immediately into catatonia the second the stone was removed from her sight. Nihu slung her over his shoulder and the three of them went to find their rest.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE CONQUEST

Years passed and a beard had begun to take shape on the face of Nihu. The thin line of a moustache had erupted on his upper lip. The time he had spent in the city had left an advanced look on his face. However, he was still the agile person he had always been and his heart was as steadfast and true as any of the forgotten heroes.

The animal coat that had belonged to old Phil was almost too small for him and he would have retired it if he were living the kind of life he had counted on. He had increased on every side and had a new look of a shepherd who had been in the wilderness for many years.

His companions, Ndolo, Mogono, Suli, Gagus and Dulo, although there had been more than a few flares of temper, had coexisted peaceably and, like a family that cannot choose their relatives, would have easily lay down to take his place in death.

On the other side of the world, Argon had returned from his sojourn. He laughed menacingly, beating his chest in thick darkness like an angry ape. The stone obelisk trembled on top of the black box in his chamber. Everyone felt his or her world sway and rock as if an earthquake was threatening a tiny island. Tragedy could tear a world apart in less time than it takes one-eyed Mogono to blink.

After the quake had gone to rest, quiet returned to the city. The captives looked at each other and cautiously went about their business sneaking carefully to avoid a hit from a monster lurking in the dark.

Suddenly a hand with long, scaly digits emerged out of the distance, and with the speed the light snapped Nihu from their midst. As the hand retreated, the rest of them took off after it, chasing the whooshing sound into the edge of the darkness. Nihu hollered mightily in the firm grip of the evil hand. Ndolo and Gagus screamed his name and put on their best speed to catch him. Ndolo clapped his hands above his head igniting a flame of light that enabled him to head straight in the direction of the fast retreating boy. Just as Nihu was about to fade through the portal that was opening to receive him, Ndolo got hold of the edge of his coat and both of them disappeared from view.

The rest of the inhabitants returned to their place in total bewilderment and wretched

sadness. Their long faces were those of people who are facing the darkest side of life due to the coming of hard times that have them eating dust. Suli was lost in her own world of incomprehension. In her present state of mind, her fractured thoughts could create no memory over which to grieve. The others were left to contemplate their ultimate demise. What they had long expected all these painful years was coming true. The midnight sucker, Argon, was starting to end them one after the other. The loss of Ndolo and Nihu was only the beginning of sorrow. The mischief was a horror. Argon, that brawny corrupted brute, feasted on the agony of innocent leaving a trail of waste, like the coming of death.

Nihu and Ndolo had been drawn into a place that was as creepy as the Lonely Forest. Nihu, bruised and sore, wept aloud like a man mourning the demise of his forthright wife. Soon he realized that tears would not help him get over his predicament, and there was nothing threatening around. It dawned on him that he was in another world, outside of the City of Forgotten Heroes, and that perhaps deliverance had finally come his way. He quieted, throwing a nervous glance here and there. He held his side and, groaning painfully, got on his feet and took some courageous steps forward. The place was as quiet as a graveyard. Such that is prevails in the neighborhoods of hell—better for a devil to dwell.

Caught under the fold of Nihu's coat, Ndolo had since crawled up towards his shoulder, light as a moth wing. Sensing a foreign movement in his cloak, Nihu called out, "Ndolo! Is that you?"

"Nihu, I am here." The little creature hitched himself up onto the back of Nihu's collar. "I came out with you, safe under your coat."

"Please hang on tightly. We will need each other to get out of here. I surely need your help now."

"Okay. We are better together. Just keep moving, I will remain here so that I can be your eyes from behind."

Nihu drew his battle-axe and began to sneak on silent feet through the murky forest. His eyes ran back and forth to catch glances of whatever dread might be lurking on the trail.

He had not gone far when a tall, lithe specter flitted across his path a few yards away. It paused and threw a frightening look at the youth from crimson, almond-shaped eyes. Nihu felt his heart quicken in his chest and he inhaled a squeaky breath. Whenever Argon appeared, a stench of treachery hung in the air. Nihu's knees almost buckled and it took a conscious effort to remain on his feet. As he battled to regain his courage, Argon disappeared into thin air. Nihu's heart knocked on the roof of his chest as if intending to break down a wooden door. A haughty laugh, dreadful for tender hearts to bear, rent the air. Nihu's fright made him stagger like a poor apprentice at the mercy of his master in his workshop where coffins are sold on daily basis.

Nihu continued his way forward and Argon appeared again. This time, Argon was only a few paces away from Nihu, and too close for comfort. The youth cringed in terror and chose to back away from the wicked apparition, dark intent flashing in the coals of his eyes. The torment of the devil's advance was unbearable.

All at once, Nihu turned on his heel to race away as if in hope that that was the way to freedom. Willing speed into his legs, he fled before Argon who gave chase as a predator finding prey on a cold night. Nihu's legs did not carry him for long before he stumbled and fell, shouting aloud as if already feeling devastating blows sink into his body. Before he could recover, Argon was standing over him.

"I have changed my mind," he announced. "I was about to eat up right away. Yet I do not waste any useful resource that falls into my hands. You are a swift runner, and I am interested to see how the game will go. I am sending you on a mission where your tomorrow lies in your wits. You might think it better if you had not existed before now, because I am sending you to a heaven that would be best imagined. Get up and get on your way. Ahead you will find three paths extending from this one. Take the third and follow it to the end. When you get there, tell the Lord of the Knight's Table that I want a meal of fifty bush pigs. Go quickly! You will find much comfort on the way." A wild smile revealed his carnivorous teeth. "Go now!"

Nihu leapt to his feet and fled down the path, heading to where he would find his destiny. As he raced away like a freak, falling at intervals, he could hear Argon's menacing laugh echo in his ears. Flinging glances behind him to see if Argon was chasing in order to rob him of his poor soul, he soon saw that he was quite alone. Chest heaving like a bellows, he reduced his speed. After he had covered a considerable distance, he came upon the place where his path broke into three. He stopped, panting as hard as an antelope that has broken from the den of a hungry lion. He stood in a thoughtless stupor, trying to remember what path he was supposed to choose. Ndolo popped out from where he had been hiding in the collar of Nihu's coat.

"This is exactly what Suli was trying to describe. Do you see?"

"Oh, Ndolo! I thought you might have fallen while I was running." Nihu took in a regular breath. "What shall we do now?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Nihu retorted, "What can you mean?"

"I mean nothing more than what Suli advised. Take the left." Nihu made a move towards the leftmost road. "Wait!"

"What is it?"

"This time, I prefer to stay in your little pouch so that you can draw me out whenever you need some light."

“Remaining inside my pouch will not do me any good. I will not be able to see the way. I could be attacked from behind and that would be the end of both of us.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“You ought to be on my head. You could shelter yourself in the long hairs as we journey on. Your light would spread out and I could see a lot more of this miserable place.”

Ndolo continued Nihu’s train of thought. “You are right. If I were on your head, I could help chase away the creatures that Suli warned us about. She said they would be repelled by a strong point of light.”

Nihu took hold of Ndolo and set him on his head. Ndolo pushed aside the curly softness to nestle in under the fine strands growing from Nihu’s scalp. He threw his head up and clicked his fingers. A steady light shown forth like a large glowing insect burning through the darkness. With his homemade miner’s light glowing comfortingly, Nihu drew his battle-axe and glared into the darkness as if to ravage any foe that crossed his path. Together they forged ahead on the left hand route.

The authorities of the forest, lords of the night, began to throw all their wickedness at them. Their best was not good enough to reduce Nihu. Giant winged creatures with evil beaks flew out to sink their talons into his body, and giant spiders with hairy legs dropped out of the trees to pierce his skin with a devastating bite. As soon as they lay eyes upon the light, they would scream and burn to ashes. As the youth put on his best speed to the spot that would reveal his destiny, Ndolo shown his light like the beacon of an avenging angel and Nihu flung his axe with perfect accuracy at any creature that failed to wither immediately on sight.

Nihu ran on until he came to some steps in front of an entrance to a cave with dreadful creatures standing like monuments on each side. They dashed at Nihu like old vampires that were dying to feed on blood. Nihu held up his axe, preparing to give them a good challenge as soon as they came out of their dark shadows. One by one, upon sight of the light, they fell and rolled to the sides of the path. As they withered into dust, Nihu zapped off their heads.

Nihu stepped up and looked into the cave’s wide entrance. He saw a red glow and could hear rumbling, like a boiling of a mighty cauldron. Cautiously, he entered the chamber, threw up his eyes, and saw a burning pit of fire roaring with intense heat, an open mouth that could send anyone who fell in to hell. Nihu could not step any closer. The heat from the pit was enough to melt steel any day of the week.

“Nihu!” called Ndolo from over the roar of the flames, “We have found the pit of fire. Quick, the stone! Throw it in now!”

Nihu sought to advance closer, but the torment of the heart did not let him go further. He reached down and pulled the stone from his pouch. It was glowing richly with four shades of blue emanating from the center. It seemed to want to jump from Nihu’s hand. Nihu straddled

his thin legs and took careful aim to throw the stone into the pit from the distance he stood.

“Foolish cricket, that won’t work!” Argon appeared at the edge of the pit, directly in front of the youth. He walked forward and arms akimbo, struck an intimidating stance. “I can strike you deaf, dumb, and blind faster than you can blink.” He threw out his menacing laugh. The mountain gave a great shake as he did so, and Nihu recalled his first encounter with Argon in his mountain chamber. Again, he lost his balance and fell to the stone floor. He watched Argon, laughing so horribly as if he had nothing at stake. Nihu tightened his grip on the stone, hot sweat beginning to roll down his face. He closed his eyes.

A vision of the white dwarf, Magonda, burst forth from behind his tight lids. He saw the little fellow pointing with hard intent straight into the pit of fire. Nihu opened his eyes with a bang and his courage returned immediately. He was determined not to let his only chance of survival go by the wayside. He glared back at Argon and jumped to his feet. The devilish creature did not bother to check his fury—he did not even spare Nihu a glance. Red flames leapt from his eyes as he prepared to cast a final spell over the hapless youth.

In a moment, Ndolo, who had remained unseen buried in the hair atop Nihu’s head, sprang forth like an angry bee. He darted first right, then left in the space between the adversaries. Diverted, Argon’s eyes flashed back and forth, following the movement. Instantly, Nihu pulled himself up and launched the stone into the pit of fire.

The stone disappeared from view and the flames leaped higher. The giant cauldron began to rumble. A shower of sparks blew out of the pit and a visible wave of intense heat rolled up and over the edge like a storm. Argon was not spared. A giant whirlwind of flame swept him off his feet and threw him against one of the cave walls. The deep roar of twenty hefty men sounded in his ears. Nihu and Ndolo covered their own ears and watched the demise of the evil mountain god. Argon’s limbs burst off his torso, whirling around his leftover body. The whirring cloud of parts rocked closer and closer to the edge of the pit until at last it tumbled in. The roar became a high whine like that of a hundred mosquitoes, which rent the air as the cave began to give way. Ndolo dived into Nihu’s hair as Nihu raced for the doorway. He ran the race of his life among the falling rocks throwing himself outside before the place collapsed upon them. As Nihu urged his legs to safety, the pit of fire erupted like a volcano and the cave collapsed into rubble.

With Ndolo clinging tightly to his head, Nihu put on his best speed, racing down the path without a glance behind him. He had no idea what would happen next. The two had barely gotten a few yards away when a mighty wind rose out of the ground, caught them up and whipped them at top speed through the gloom. Nihu and Ndolo were carried up, screaming and expecting death at any moment. The wind blew them so fast; their surroundings became a blur until they were dashed onto the floor of a secret chamber safely

hidden in another part of the exploding mountain. They fell with a thud that knocked Nihu senseless.

After some time, Ndolo, whose faculties had been strung out from the velocity of the trip, popped his head up and looked around. Seeing nothing that signaled danger, he slid to the floor and came to slap Nihu on the cheek to awaken him. Slowly, Nihu gathered himself into consciousness. When he opened his eyes, his first sight was Ndolo smiling broadly at him like a man basking in the euphoria of his honeymoon. Nihu returned smile then brought himself up on one arm. Ndolo scooted up to sit on his shoulder.

Nihu looked around the room and thought it looked very familiar. A small, barred window was cut into the stonewall on the other side of the room. A finely wrought table and chair stood under it. Beautiful artifacts, holy statues, prayer bowls, iconic figurines, as well as chests filled with jewels lay piled on the floor and on shelves along the walls. Nihu gasped.

“What is it, Nihu? What do you see?” asked Ndolo.

“I’ve been here before,” replied the young man. “So long ago, it must have been in another lifetime.” He looked down at his belt. The battle-axe that had been dark as the night was now crimson like red pork meat. He drew it and examined it properly. Ndolo watched him carefully. As he was looking at the axe, wondering what must have happened to it, Nihu remembered what the white dwarf of the Lonely Forest had told him when he first lay out his mission. His words filtered back—*the axe will work for you*.

At that moment, Nihu realized that he had accomplished what he set out to do so long ago. He turned to Ndolo, “What do we do now?”

“It is time we save our friends in the stone. You promised all of them you would return to set them free after you had destroyed Argon. It would do them good to know you are someone who keeps his word,” the little fire god sagely replied.

A smile as big as the sea spread over Nihu’s face and he wasted no time jumping to his feet. In a flash, he located the little stone obelisk in its place on top of the black box on the shelf. He drew the crimson battle-axe and in one swift stroke, cut through both the stone and the box. They split apart without any resistance and began to shake in a contorted dance on the shelf. A flood of sand poured out at Nihu’s feet and in seconds, four familiar heads appeared in front of him. Gagus, Dulo, Mogono and Suli looked very like that day when they had first been shown the stone, only this time the looks on every face was one of pure gratitude.

After glancing around the chamber in delighted surprise, Gagus was the first to speak, “Oh, Nihu, how good it is to see you again. Thank heavens you are all right. I can hardly believe you are standing here before us. Thank you for saving our lives. Is Argon truly dead?”

“Argon is destroyed,” answered Ndolo. “He has walked into silence before my very eyes.” Nihu nodded and smiled faintly.

The others returned smiles. “I am already dreaming of my forest home,” said Gagus. “We really must go. Nihu, will you join us?”

“I am ready to find the countryside,” Nihu replied. “The end of my sojourn is near at hand and I want to move out along the river.”

“We can not take that way. The Lonely Forest is home. We want to go find the rest of our clan and live out the rest of our lives there,” said Gagus.

“That means we must part ways,.” Nihu replied, “but I hope you will speak well of me when you meet your chief again.”

Gagus let a beat pass before clearing his throat. “Well said, Nihu. My kin owes you a great debt for all you have done. We will certainly tell the proper tale and when all is said and done, you will never have more to fear from the Agbere clan.”

He looked over at Dulo who gave him a single jerk of his head. He was ready to return with Gagus to the forest, which was awaiting them. “I will miss you, Nihu,” he said to the upright young man. “However, I will not allow you go empty handed. Take my mat. Whatever you want in this life, make a request and you will get it. Thanks to you, I have been restored to the dwarf I used to be.” He handed his mat to Nihu and hugged him in a bone-crushing grip. Gagus did the same as tears rolled freely down his hollow cheeks.

Nihu’s eyes were moist as he hugged each of the stolid bodies and bade them farewell and good luck. He could not help but notice the tears standing in the eyes of big Mogono and little Suli. Suli’s eyes were as bright as twin stars pulled from the blackness of a cold night. Sober reflection was evident on their faces.

The dwarfs hugged Mogono and Suli and gave Ndolo heartfelt thanks. They separated themselves from the party and shuffled out of the chamber. Mogono went up to Nihu, sinking a hearty kiss onto Nihu’s cheek like a true yoke fellow. Nihu patted the hairy shoulders of the beast with fondness and compassion. Mogono wiped his eyes, turned away, and raced to meet the dwarfs before they got too far ahead. As he came out of the chamber, he was surprised to hear his name called out in a deep friendly voice. Shoz came out from the mountain rubble and stood in his path. When he saw his old friend, he could barely restrain himself. The bosom buddies fell on each other joyfully. Rocking themselves so hard, they fell on the ground rolling happily. Nihu, Ndolo, and Suli observed the reunion from the doorway of Argon’s old treasure chamber. The view was infectious and they laughed aloud together.

Mogono and Shoz were soon up and on their way, still celebrating their freedom; Nihu, Suli and Ndolo watched them out of sight. Nihu turned to Suli. “What are you waiting for? Won’t you be on your way?”

“Let me come with you. I choose to be your servant. That is the only way I can pay you for saving my life from the cruel hands of certain death.” She began her speech in a beautiful melodious voice from bright green frog lips. As she spoke, a marvelous thing took place. The green frog skin faded to tawny mocha. The bulging eyes and snout pulled in and became the face of a human woman. At the same time, her body melded and soon it had converted itself to that of a beautiful woman on top with frog’s legs below. Nihu and Ndolo observed in speechless wonderment.

“I, too,” said Ndolo. “I would like to sojourn with you for a while, Nihu. I will not say for how long, but if you do not mind traveling companions, I would like to go with you.” Ndolo sat quietly in his perch on Nihu’s shoulder.

“Let’s go, then. I would be happy for the company as long as you wish.” Nihu stepped out of the chamber, stuffing Dulo’s mat into his old rucksack, the beautiful crimson axe hanging at his side. They had barely cleared the doorway when they heard noise behind them. They turned to look at the pile of sand that had emptied out of the old City of Forgotten Heroes. The armies of Uzalla and Azakunda were rising up again, intent on settling the age-old score. In an instant, the armies fell on themselves as blood flowed like rivers of fire hell-bent on continuing the chronicle of war. With the battle gathering intensity, Nihu signaled to his friends that it was time to leave. Without another glance, they headed down the broken mountain path, back to the forest to find the river that also led them back to the countryside.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE GIANT STRIDE

The trail through the forest was a beautiful habitation, sunlit, green rather than dark, but creepy like the Lonely Forest. Nihu and his fellows began to enjoy themselves on their trek through the woods. Joyful expectation of starting a better life in the countryside filled them with warmth and they cavorted and sang, happy to shed the long darkness of the past. They had no way of knowing that the river trail was watched over by another demon. It was the home of a giant troll whose belch would murder a dove. A Trojan might find himself in the next world if the devil even sniffs what he is riding.

At noon, when the sun has risen to its zenith, Suli turned to the others. “Nihu, I want to see what the path looks like ahead. I will be back in a jiffy.” The strange creature bounded off on her long frog legs, darting past dead woods, limbs, shrubs while Nihu and Ndolo continued

slowly after her.

Soon Suli rounded a bend in the trail that hung about eight feet over the river. From that vantage, she could see a vast land on the other side, an open field of meadow grass stretching as far as her eyes could see. She sighted along the path up ahead and almost collapsed in fear. A giant troll sat on a rock hanging over the water, making a meal of a ravaged bird. He felt her presence and looked directly at her. At the sight of the creature's devilish eyes, Suli's heart skipped a million beats. In a flash, the half frog-half human jumped high in the air and turned to flee into the forest to inform her yoke fellows of the evil ahead.

The young man and little fire god were paling around playing tag on the trail when Suli hurled past. Panting and pointing in the direction where she'd come, she managed to call out, "Run! Giant! Over there! Run!" as she raced away. Startled and confused, Nihu and Ndolo shot a quizzical look at each other. Suli, who was too frightened to give any more explanation, disappeared into the forest, leaving her friends to meet the new circumstance that threatened their lives.

Nihu drew his battle-axe while Ndolo hid in the pouch that had held the mysterious stone. Scooting off the path, Nihu took cover behind trees and brush. Thus, they went forward to meet with destiny. Nihu sidled up to the bend in the trail and observed the fierce looking troll stomping towards them, searching for the creature that had interrupted his meal and disturbed his peace.

Nihu struck out from behind a bush. The axe left an indelible mark on the left arm of the giant troll. The creature yelled in pain, angrily peering at Nihu who stepped before him on the path.

As Nihu stood firm and courageous, the troll uprooted a small tree and lashed out at him. Nihu saved himself by jumping to the left, but the beast threw another blow that caught Nihu in the side and pinned him to a tree. The troll came up to put the young warrior in a stranglehold, but Nihu rolled away and the troll roared in frustration.

The giant troll made another devilish move to end him but Nihu threw himself to his feet, and tossed his battle-axe at his tormentor. It flew past its target, flew into the trees behind, and like a boomerang, returned to Nihu's hand. He took hold of it just as the angry beast came once again to place a devastating blow. First, he threw his right hand at Nihu's head—Nihu leaped away before the blow came. Then he let go his left and missed again. In a rage, the troll pushed over a tree that fell on Nihu who was already considering retreat in the face of this adversary. Trapped, Nihu moaned in pain and grasped the top of his pouch. The huge troll came forward to land a final blow just as Ndolo hopped up from his place to let out a great fireball that hit the ugly creature in the face. He roared up to the high heavens like a blacksmith who had crushed his thumb on the anvil. He staggered backward, hands in front of

his face, and fell over a rock like a miserable dog. He was robbed of sight.

With superhuman effort, Nihu pushed away the tree that lay over him. He observed the troll roaring and rolling in the dirt. In less time than it took to throw a switch, Nihu flung the battle-axe once more with deadly accuracy at the neck of the troll. The blow severed the head and the axe returned to him. Panting heavily, Nihu cleaned the blade in the grasses and set the axe in his belt again. The body of the troll lay on the ground; the head had rolled away into the underbrush. Nihu and Ndolo looked at each other.

“Thank you for coming to my rescue.” Nihu offered his hand to the fire god who had alighted on the rock over which the troll had fallen.

“I would not have faced that monster without you,” Ndolo put his little hand over Nihu’s index finger. “Many are the trials I have faced with warriors ten times more experienced than you. Your courage outshines them all.” Ndolo hopped to the ground. “Now we must find our companion. Have you any idea where Suli could have gone to?”

Before Nihu could answer, the headless body of the troll popped up from the ground. The left arm grabbed hold of Nihu by the waist while the legs took off running up the trail to where the riverbank came close. Quick-thinking Ndolo grabbed hold of the edge of Nihu’s coat and was carried off with him as before. As the right hand of the troll rose up to crush Nihu into an early grave, Nihu, who had managed to get his battle-axe free, struck at the shoulder. The left hand flew open to grab at the new injury and dropped the two adventurers from the cliff into the river, axe and all. Splash! At last, the giant body sank into the dust, never again to molest another traveler. The headless troll rested on the huge shoulders of perpetual peace.

In the quiet of the battle aftermath, Suli got out of her hiding place and walked back along the path. When she got to the clearing above the river, she found the pieces of the giant troll lying on top of the Earth. Raising her head, she shielded her eyes to see if she could glimpse Nihu and Ndolo nearby. They were nowhere at sight and she feared her fellows, her protectors, had left her behind.

Casting her eyes over the edge of the cliff, she looked down and realized they must have perished in the river. Her countenance fell as tears begin to roll down her womanly cheeks. Thinking about how, in her terror, she had left her friends behind, running into hiding when her presence was needed most, she hung her head in shame. She turned back to face the forest where it seemed she would be alone forever without Ndolo and Nihu. Discouraged, she considered how her low life portended so many troubles. Frustration, disappointment, and sadness mixed on her face and she turned back once again to see if she could see her missing friends. Calling the names of Ndolo and Nihu, she raced to the cliff summit. When she got to the edge, she dove into the river.

Struggling in the cold water, she sank into the deep river as one who has finally bade

her own world farewell. A deep moan rose up from the center of the rippling waves that had parted to receive her tortured soul—a colossus dancing to the rhythm of the evening in an ugly wind. One would think Suli Dah Goulivan had gone to join her ancestors that are somewhere in the darkest part of the world. After some time, the sound went into silence as if the dancer had gone to bed leaving a sublime river to surrender her bosom to the sun.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NIHU AND GODDESS OF GOUDIBLE

Nihu and Ndolo had hit the water flowing below the cliff with a mighty splash. Together they sunk like a stone to the river bottom. Nihu inhaled a terrified breath expecting to choke but instead discovered something amazing—he could see and breathe under the water like any fish. Could this be a benefit of casting the mysterious stone into the pit of fire? Nihu tried to remember the words of the white dwarf. He had said something about being safe, but it had meant nothing to him at the time. Magonda had not been specific. Nihu sat on the river bottom, working his lungs as if he were hooked to an underwater breathing apparatus. Truly, this was a great gift and Nihu gave thanks to his ancestors many times over.

He felt something wriggling weakly in the collar of his coat. Ndolo, god of fire, was struggling to stay alive in the water. Fire and water do not mix and unless Ndolo could find his way to the surface, he would no longer be Nihu's companion. Nihu reached into the opening at his neck and pulled out the little creature. With his other hand, he covered Ndolo's face. As soon as he touched Ndolo's lips, a veil covered the god's face, making it impossible for him to take in water.

Nihu rose to his feet and looked around at the watery world. Darkness and light hung in solitary places. "Shall we go now?" he asked Ndolo, realizing yet another benefit of speaking and hearing perfectly in this new environment.

Ndolo clicked his fingers, widening his eyes in pleased surprise as the bright light stayed strong on his index finger. Just as they were about to move off, they became aware of a massive push of water that forced them off their feet. Ndolo raised the light up above his little head and noticed a shape dropping behind Nihu.

“Nihu, something has fallen behind you from above. I can’t tell what it could be.”

Nihu was able to right himself and turn around. He too, could make out a dark bundle a few feet away. Ndolo was already moving in that direction, and with true warrior’s caution, Nihu followed.

It was Suli, battling to stay alive after her impetuous plunge. Quickly, Nihu came up to her and put his hand over her face. Right away, their servant companion ceased her seizures and began to cough, vomiting the river water she had consumed. After a time, she quieted and looked about in wide-eyed amazement. Her rescuers put a hand on each of her shoulders and hugged her gently.

“You have saved my life again,” she told Nihu, with raw feeling.

Nihu grinned.

Suli briefly told them how she had come upon the disposed troll and in shame for having deserted them, had thrown herself over the cliff. Although totally immersed in water, tears tracked down her cheeks. When she had fully recovered, she thanked Nihu once again for saving her life and added, “Where do we go from here?”

“Anywhere that could lead to our safety. We ought to find our way out of here. It is a water world – a fearsome underworld indeed. We can not remain here all our lives.” Nihu turned to Ndolo, “Lead the way!”

“All right, but I’d like to guide you from your own body as we go.”

“From where precisely?” asked Nihu.

“Your palm. The right palm. Safety builds confidence. If I am there, I will glow with a lot of confidence.” Ndolo smiled as Nihu made him safe in his right palm and they continued their journey.

This was the world of Goudible; an unknown underwater kingdom that few land dwellers ever get to fully experience. As they traveled on, advancing into the dark with Ndolo’s light making the way good enough to tread, they were suddenly rounded up by the underwater creatures. The gods of Goudible paraded spears, swords, and other weapons of war. To the amazement of Nihu and his friends, the leader of the party was a huge cockerel, taller than any they had seen before.

Nihu drew his battle-axe from his side with his left hand to defend his team. His right hand glowed with the light of Ndolo. Apart from the cockerel that stood out from the multitude, the others had human forms and were so similar in appearance, that it was difficult to

differentiate them. He stood nervously awaiting their attack so that he could fight back as he had done so many times before.

As Nihu readied himself for the launch of their arsenal, Suli whispered, “Nihu, these people have no wish to fight. Their eyes are full of peace. They might show us the way to the land.”

“Is that what you see?” Nihu asked.

“Argon always preferred my company than that of his other servants,” replied Suli. “He knew I could always tell if a stranger was friend or foe. They will not do us any harm if we pose no threat to their lives.”

Nihu lowered his axe and returned it to his side. When the creatures realized they had nothing to fear, they cheered. The cockerel gave the foreigners a wink and signaled the group to turn, which all obeyed. They followed him into the dark depths, excitement glowing on their faces. Nihu and his friends fell in behind the group. Nihu whispered to Suli, “I have seen that cockerel before.”

“Really? Where?”

“In the countryside. When I was just a child, I remember vividly how I fled from his face that day.”

“Why did you run?”

“He spoke to me. That was the first time I had heard a cockerel talk.” After moving through the darkness for a while, they came upon a city fenced with an iron gate. An inscription on it read *the goddess of Goudible*. The city looked to be smartly built and fancy but they had nothing like the light in the world above. Although, one could see beyond his nose, everywhere was as dull as a world plagued with foul weather—a sleeping heaven. Sunlight that makes a day so bright was nowhere. Perhaps the reason they seemed so eager to bring Nihu and his friends in peace was that they had what was so badly needed. Ndolo’s light glowing in Nihu’s right hand was a beautiful thing in the watery gloom.

As they approached the city, the gate was thrown open by two fierce and hefty guards. They had no welcoming look on their faces. They stood as if they have been robbed of their smiles by a higher hand. Maybe they could be appreciated in the kingdom they were sworn to protect, but anyone who saw the pair would remember the devils in neighborhoods of hell when they cast a harmful look about. Any man who saw their axes would find his heart beating hard in his chest. Should they come for the neck, there would be little to stand in the way of the early grave.

Nihu and his friends followed the army through the gate that slammed shut behind them. The sound left no doubt that the gods here would do anything to get the light from Nihu even if it meant that heads would have to roll. Hospitality would be a negotiable commodity.

They continued walking towards the center of the city. More guards, fierce-looking armed cockerels, stood on either side of the road, as large as the one leading the pack. Nihu and his friends cast glances all around, looking to every side.

Ndolo whispered, "Nihu are you afraid?"

"No."

"What about you, Suli?" Ndolo asked.

"I don't know what I will do until the battle begins."

"You had better act with courage." Nihu cut in. "Either we will live together or we die together."

Suli held her head up. "My fear might not change the situation of things here, but valor would."

They pondered in silence. They had the only light in a kingdom that was as beautiful as a night of bliss with a sky as foul as the dark waters. Fire was all that was missing from this underworld kingdom to make it truly alive. The world had been created without it and no one had thought to question why. Yet an impossible mission had brought the greatest alliance of heroes together and created the strangest magic anyone had ever seen. What was once impossible was now possible.

At last, the group reached a magnificent palace at the center of the city. Two of the armed cockerels, who were as silent as ripples on the surface of a pond, opened a tall door made from a gopher wood. They filed in one after the other into a large hall where dullness hung everywhere. Some went to the right while others lined up on the left, leaving Nihu and his company to view the queen who was seated on her throne, wrapped in comfortable robes of river grass.

Ndolo still hung from Nihu's palm like a fruit bat that stays cool on the limb of an almond tree one lazy morning. It appeared as if Nihu was some sort of mysterious sorcerer since Ndolo, the true architect of the flame, could not be seen on the underside of Nihu's palm, which was as dark as the darkest night. When Nihu and Suli lifted their gaze to the creature seated in front of them, they saw two heads, one male one female, sitting regally on the neck of a crocodile. Suli gave a shriek and dropped to the ground, groveling in supplication. The goddess, however, smiled indulgently. Her name was Ijokpa, the owner of the shrine in Nihu's old countryside. Her eyes shone as she beheld what her soul had long been yearning—the ability to bring fire from land into the depths of her river home. She nodded significantly and her heads bobbed like ravenous wolves in search of a meal on a cold night.

"Welcome to my kingdom. We are happy to see you."

Nihu let a respectful beat pass before he answered. "We thank you for your hospitality. If I may ask, are you the goddess of my local district who keeps a shrine on the shore of

yonder river and also rears domestic animals?"

"I am."

"My father told me about you when I was a little boy. I met one of your cockerels a very long time ago."

The faces of the goddess shone and the heads nodded serenely. Her countenance was neither pleasant, nor unpleasant, neither good, nor evil. Suli, realizing that no thunderbolt was imminent, tilted her head to look up as Nihu continued, "You have a rich and beautiful kingdom. However, my servant and I must beg your pardon. We are on our way home and need your help to show us the way. Upon my return I will dedicate three hens and a goat to your shrine on the hill."

Ijokpa smiled with her female head, revealing a set of perfect teeth. "Everything you want has a price tag, Nihu. Yes, I know your name. You are Nihu. I have known you for many years. I was the cockerel that spoke to you the day you and your father passed by my shrine on the hill in your country. I see and hear everything both on land and in the water." The goddess folded her hands in her lap. "I will grant your request. But the price is higher than chickens and goats."

"What more do you require?" Nihu asked.

The goddess flashed her teeth again. "News travels fast, Nihu. You have accomplished what few brave men would ever attempt. Nay, even the forest god could not challenge the dreaded Argon. The task to calm the evil of the western mountain has long been a quest waiting for its hero. It had been foretold that a boy, having been cast aside into the wilderness, would one day be the one to bring down the terrible demon in his mountain home. Yet it was also known that this boy had to be without vice, and stout of heart even in the face of fear." Ijokpa rose from her seat and slowly stepped down the short staircase in front of her throne. She stood before the young man.

"When you visited my shrine that day, I thought you might be the one. You were so young and you ran away in fear, so I knew that you were not yet ready. The Lonely Forest got tired of waiting. The white dwarf, Magonda, became impatient and attempted to complete the mission himself, but he lost two of his relatives to Argon and barely escaped with his own life. Then, one day he saw you come to the rescue of a countryman, one whom you had just met and barely knew. He knew he had witnessed true valor. When he discovered you were serving a term of banishment, he knew that you could fulfill the mission. That is how you ended up with the mysterious stone." Ijokpa looked into Nihu's eyes and noticed tears standing in them at the mention of Old Phil.

"We can never know for sure what the future may bring, so no one could know if you would be successful. We can only play our given role in the story and behave true to nature

when our turn comes to us. I am rich and I am powerful. I command many creatures that will do my bidding when I am crossed. I am not good; I am not bad, only just. I was born unto the role.

“I can not draw my sword to war with you since you have done nothing to cross me. The giant troll whom you destroyed was nothing to me. Yet you do have something I want and I cannot let you go unless you give it to me. If you do, I will set you free. If you do not, I must throw you into a world where you will fight for the rest of your life.”

Nihu drew his battle-axe. “Do not threaten me like a foul toad. I have seen enough battles to last all the days of my youth.”

“It is not a threat. Battles are like the weather. Today, you win, next day; you are counting your losses. If you are going to conquer here, you must understand what you are up against before you can get through it. You shall know what I have to throw at you. Do you think you have what it takes to confront deadly reptiles?”

The goddess turned to Maolah, the chief cockerel who was the leader of her army. “Let him see what I am talking about.” Maolah and his guards surrounded Nihu and Suli and brought them to the dungeon full of fearsome crocodiles.

The dungeon is another world where only reptiles dwell. These terrifying creatures fed on enemies of the goddess of Goudible. They were always lying in wait for their prey. Their eyes glowed crimson red and could sink a man's courage with a single look. When they got into the dungeon, Maolah clicked his fingers. The devils roared and rushed to the gate to welcome their prey to the comfort of their bellies. When Nihu and Suli saw doom approaching, they squirmed in the grip of Maolah and the guards. They could not allow themselves to be cast into such a pot of misfortune.

Maolah laughed. “I see you are struggling to be freed. This is what she wanted you to see. You will have to comply with her desire, or you will be their meal for the night.” Before the hungry reptiles could push through the gate, the cockerel ordered everyone to leave the dungeon. They brought Nihu and Suli back to the great hall in the palace, the roar of the crocodiles echoing in their ears.

Nihu was arraigned again before the goddess. “Have you seen what I have under my roof?” she asked. “Do you want me to show you more of such devils? I have them everywhere, you know.” She smiled from both her heads.

“What do you want from me?” asked the warrior.

“Not too much, my young champion,” Ijokpa replied. She was very tall and towered over Nihu. “We do not have firelight in our kingdom as you have well observed. Fire and water have never mixed since the world began. Even I, who lives as easily on land as well as down here, have not been able to bring my subjects this marvelous gift. I want the brightness that lives in

your hand. You have found a way to deliver it here and I want it. If you can do that, Maolah, the leader of my army will lead you home. If you cannot, I doubt you will survive what I shall throw at you. So what do you say? Firelight for me, the way home for you. Do we have a deal?" Everyone fixed eyes on Nihu as Ijokpa returned to her throne.

Suli held Nihu close and whispered, "Do what she asks of you. Ten of you would not be able to defeat her."

"How can I give them light, when it is Ndolo who is the origin? I would have to turn him over into her hands." Nihu was almost beside himself with anxiety.

Ndolo shivered and whispered. "Nihu, please don't let her know I am hiding in your palm. If you do, she could make me her slave forever."

"What shall we do?" Nihu whispered back. "Will we have to go to the crocodiles? I can't believe our road will end here."

"I can give them light. We have to work together. Touch your index finger to whatever they set before you. I will take it from there."

"Will it be enough to brighten the whole kingdom?" Suli asked quietly as Ijokpa and all her subjects awaited Nihu's answer.

"Yes. Let her know you can do it, Nihu."

With a silent prayer to his ancestors, Nihu stepped forward. "I will give you your request, but you must promise to show me the way to the countryside."

"I am born to justice," said Ijokpa. "You will be shown the way home, I swear it."

"Where do I start?" Nihu asked.

The goddess turned to her people. "Prepare the stands everywhere and let's see what he can do."

Very shortly, the cockerel guards set posts and torches before the young man. As everyone in the court watched, Nihu went from one stand to the other, lighting everything that was put before him. As soon as he laid his right hand on the stakes, a flame of waterproof fire was kindled. As the fire kept burning, the entire hall was set alight. All were amazed. The people rushed home to collect more items for Nihu to light and soon the entire city was shining as brightly as a million stars sitting on the bare chest of the sky.

Ijokpa and her people were so happy that they began to dance around Nihu and Suli. Drums rolled and soon a huge celebration was underway in the kingdom. After they had been dancing for some time, Ijokpa waved her hands and brought the celebration to a halt. As the music and jubilation went to sleep, she walked up to Nihu, arms outstretched in thanks.

"Warrior, you have pleased my heart. You may go home." She waved to Maolah and the cockerel stepped forward. "Lead them to wherever they wish to go," the goddess directed.

The chief cockerel drew Nihu and Suli to him. His expression was almost kind. "You wish

to go to the countryside?" he asked.

"Yes," Nihu replied.

"Come with me. I will show you the way to your kingdom."

Maolah led them through the water to the opening of a cave. "Go straight through to the end," he said. "Soon you will find your land. Sincerely, I give you thanks for my relatives and me. You will never have anything more to fear from the goddess of Goudible." The big bird soon faded into the huge darkness behind them.

The three adventurers moved carefully through the blackness of the cave. Ndolo was happy to pop out and shine his light ahead so that the others could see where they were going. Soon they could see a brightness coming towards them as if sunlight was awaiting their return. As they came to the mouth of the cave, a force stirred up the water, like the roaring of the sea in a night of tempest. Nihu, Ndolo, and Suli were thrown from the midst of the troubled waters, which shot them onto dry ground like dead men.

Nihu was the first to rise and he threw himself on his feet. Suli did the same, but slowly. Before they were done, brushing themselves off, Ndolo opened his eyes and yawned as if he had just grabbed a catnap. He sat on the sand, smiling broadly. "Which is the way from here?"

"There." Nihu pointed towards a familiar hill that was the site of the shrine of Ijokpa. It was just a short distance away. He picked Ndolo up from the sand and slung him around in happiness before he tossed him onto his shoulder. "Suli, are you ready? Let's go home."

Ndolo sat comfortably on his left shoulder and Suli took her place at Nihu's right side. The countryside strolled into a new day. A gentle breeze, so alive in the early morning, forced the stream to dance slowly, reluctantly, as if it was under compulsion to thrill a crowd against its own wish. Human legs were still very scarce in their shoes and many were still battling to overcome the power of the bed. Like lovebirds in a game of love, Nihu led his friends to where his adventure had first begun.

EPILOGUE

When Nihu, Ndolo, and Suli arrived in the kingdom that had been Nihu's boyhood home, they discovered many changes had taken place. The robber who had murdered Nihu's Uncle Gubado had been caught a few years later after he committed another crime on the bush path. He confessed to the evil ruse he had done previously and had been put to death. Everyone in the kingdom, including Gubado's children, Nihu's cousins, realized that Nihu had been unfairly treated, and petitioned the king to reverse the charge and suspend Nihu's punishment. The king greatly regretted what he had done to Nihu and his family, and straightaway declared that Nihu was free to return home. Nihu's father, Goudonas, arranged a search party for his son and went into the Lonely Forest to look for him. The group traversed the forest many times, even discovering the abandoned hut that had been the home of Old Phil and Macquesemis, but there had been no sign of Nihu. Everyone assumed he had met his end in the hands of forest demons and they returned to their country homes with huge sadness. Goudonas had been given his family's share of Gubado's land and possessions, but without his eldest son, his life was empty as a dry riverbed. He died of grief shortly after.

At first, no one could recognize the fine young warrior in the animal skin coat with the red battle-axe who came out of the forest, a beautiful young woman at his side. She wore a long skirt and people could see she had a funny walk. She kept her eyes downcast and looked only at her escort. When Nihu began to inquire about Goudonas and his family, the people brought him to meet Nihu's old mother who was almost blind. She put her hands on his face, and despite the passage of years, and the growth of hair on Nihu's face, recognized the miracle of her son's return. She threw her wrapper over her face, and they began to laugh and cry together as she hugged her son tightly, clinging to him as if she would never let go.

The entire village gave a great shout and began a thankful celebration with music, dancing, and good food that lasted for three days. News of the festivities soon reached the ears of the King, who was now quite stricken with age. He sent for the young man, gave Nihu a heartfelt apology, and bade him tell the story of his adventures before the court. With Suli and Ndolo helpfully adding their parts to the tale, Nihu recounted the story.

The King and his people were amazed and glad that Nihu had not only survived the odds that the Lonely Forest usually threw at anyone who walked into that underworld, but also that the young man had made the Forest a safer place for all. The people clamored for the King to honor Nihu and make him the leader of the Army of the Countryside. The King did so immediately and gave an official decree that Ndolo and Suli were welcome in the kingdom as long as they wished.

Nihu returned home and set Dulo's marvelous mat out of sight. He had no desire to invite thieves and jealous evildoers to his house. Nevertheless, he made careful use of the mat on

occasion and his brothers, sisters, cousins, and later his own children, never had reason to want for anything. Soon they became the richest family in the kingdom and, along with Ndolo and Suli, lived in comfort and repose all the remaining days of their lives.