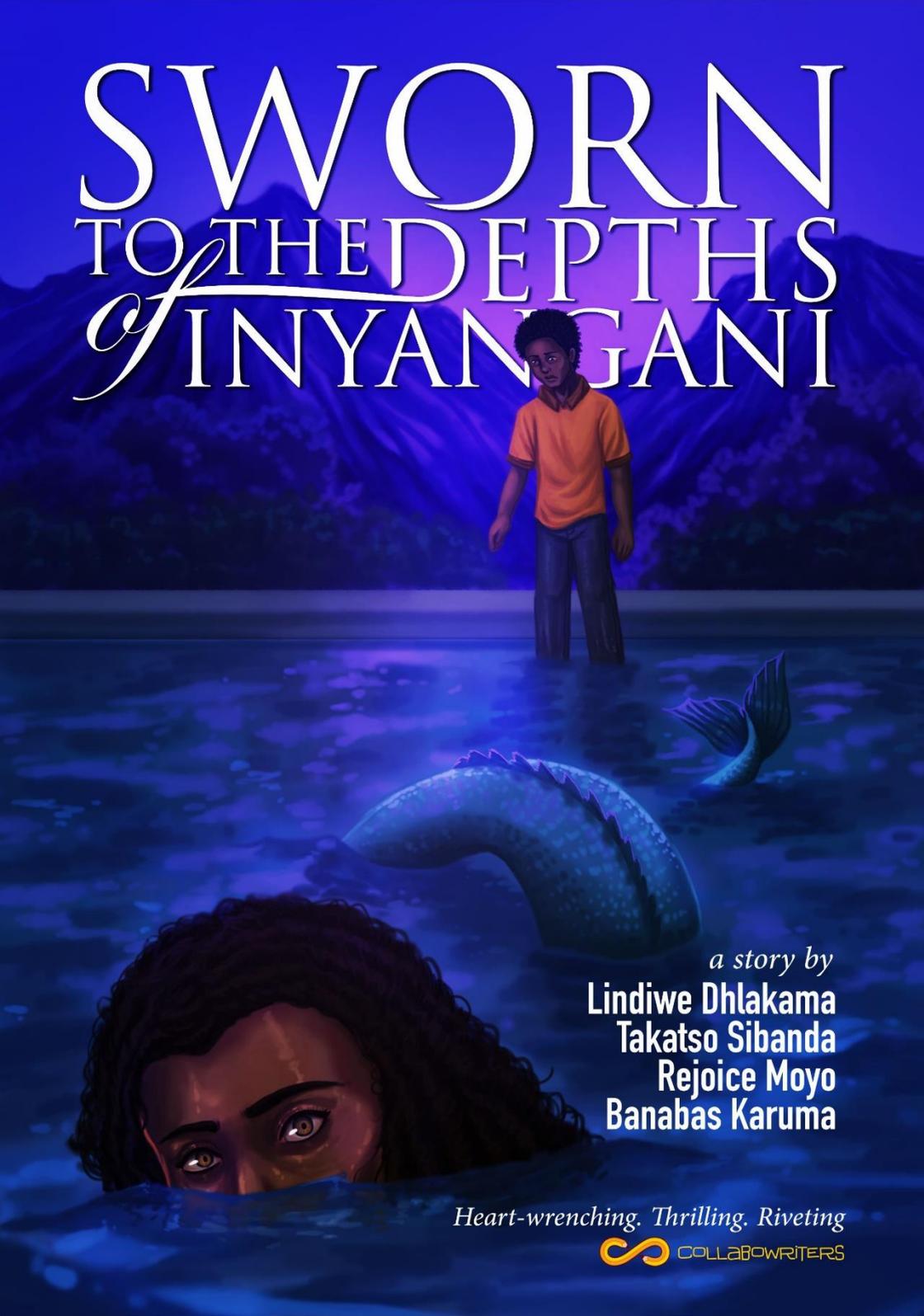


SWORN TO THE DEPTHS *of* INYANGANI

The book cover features a dark, atmospheric scene. In the upper half, a young boy with dark skin and curly hair, wearing an orange polo shirt and dark pants, stands on a sandy beach looking out at the ocean. The background shows a dark, silhouetted mountain range under a deep blue, twilight sky. In the lower half, the water is a deep, shimmering blue. A mermaid with long, dark, curly hair is partially submerged, her face and eyes looking directly at the viewer. The mermaid's body is a vibrant, glowing blue with a lighter, scaly texture. Her tail is visible, curving upwards. The overall mood is mysterious and suspenseful.

a story by
Lindiwe Dhlakama
Takatso Sibanda
Rejoice Moyo
Banabas Karuma

Heart-wrenching. Thrilling. Riveting

 COLLABOWRITERS

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Sworn to the depths of Inyangani

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www.collabowriters.org

contact: write@collabowriters.org

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Chapter 1

Elisha felt as if his chest would cave in. He struggled to catch his breath. Lodging his right leg onto a boulder, he used his hands to pull the rest of his body up.

I need to start exercising, he thought to himself, whilst looking down at his small arms.

For limbs so thin, he was amazed they had not given out on him. He had not known why he was climbing Mount Inyangani, only that he must do so urgently. He had never been one for adventure but it was like an ethereal force was pushing him onward. As he continued to climb, his heart pounded with anticipation...

A boulder crumbled underfoot and he almost swore, scrambling with his hands to steady himself. He wiped the sweat from his forehead whilst thinking about how he had nearly caused his own demise. He cursed the mountain. His alarm turned to shame for believing in what his parents referred to as 'African Traditional mumbo-jumbo'. Despite his own devotion to the Catholic faith, he believed deep down that the media reports about the disappearances on Mount Inyangani were real. He did not want to tempt fate.

Exasperated, he directed his gaze to the zenith and hesitated when he saw a golden light emanating from the rocks above. But he was not afraid, only curious.

Something awaited him at the peak of the mountain and he had to find out what it was. With what seemed like his final ounce of energy, Elisha hauled himself up to the top of the mountain. He remained on his hands and knees, wheezing to catch his breath. As he got to his feet, the earth and rocks

were glowing all around him. Dazed and light headed, he looked up and froze. In front of him was a magnificent silhouette.

"Mbuya?" Elisha stammered with his eyes adjusting to the light which exposed the magnificent looking entity in front of him. He did not know how he knew that this magnificent woman in front of him was his grandmother. He just knew.

Juxtaposed with the huddled form of her grandson, MaNcube's apparition stood tall and straight. Her melanin-rich skin must have been the cause of the golden glow all around her. Her dainty, salt and pepper dreadlocks cascaded in curls down to her brown leather waist band fastening her woven, canary-yellow robe in place. Her bare feet appeared to float a couple of centimetres off the ground.

"It falls upon you Elisha, son of my daughter. It falls upon you."

The strong, harmonious voice seemed to reverberate from within her. Though her lips were parted, they did not move. Her strong arm reached into the folds of her robe. She pulled out a leather-bound folder.

"Is that... is that for me MaNcube?"

She did not answer. Instead, the leather folder grew in her hands until it was so big that it created a barrier between them. Cautiously, he approached the giant folder, looking up at her face as she nodded reassuringly. Although his instincts were screaming: 'Flee!', curiosity got the better of him. Upon reaching the giant folder, which now completely blocked his view of his grandmother, he tugged one end of the leather knot until it came undone. He pulled

back the cover and the sky darkened, all traces of the golden glow vanished. Before he could open it, the large cover snapped open releasing a gust so powerful it nearly knocked him off his feet. He staggered backwards for balance and stood out of its way. Now he was afraid. He trembled at the thought of giant folder knocking him down the mountain.

Pages, with spidery words and rough diagrams, stared back at him. They seemed to come alive, spiralling upwards. He watched, mesmerized, as the pages twirled and as though in a whirlwind, higher and higher into the sky. But then they began to descend, toward him, and he had to escape. He turned on his heels to run, and then what had been a careful ascent up the mountain became a deadly roll down its rocky slope. He closed his eyes and braced himself for what would be an excruciating ordeal.

He should have crashed onto the rocks face-first, yet somehow he seemed to float. The tornado of paper swallowed him, and from within its calm eye, he heard a thousand raspy voices speaking as one. He could not make out the words of the unfamiliar language. But he knew that it was no longer the sturdy yet soothing voice of MaNcube.

Elisha woke with a start but kept still whilst his heartbeat steadied. He blinked several times before forlornly fixing his gaze at a spot on the wall, trying hard to remember the dream he had just had. He seldom remembered his dreams, or even that he had dreamt at all. But lately, he knew he did and it irked him, not least because after each dream, he would wake up tense and sweaty. As he got up to get ready for college, he made a mental note to talk to Father Methuselah about his recurring dream after Sunday Mass.

In his Politics 305 lecture he scribbled the name of the prescribed text books on his note pad as all around him his peers mumbled about how expensive textbooks were and how they would probably only use one chapter from each. Elisha was not too worried. He knew that the best thing to do was search his mother's library to see if her years of law-school and practice as an advocate and later judge could possibly yield him any of the requisite literature.

Later that day as dusk fell; he closed his laptop while the end credits of *How to Get Away with Murder* rolled down his television screen. He got up, studied himself in the mirror that hung on the wall at the foot of his bed. His friend Takudzwa had invited him to the gym after their lectures but as usual he had opted out. He just did not see the point of cultivating one's outside instead of the inside.

He scoffed at himself as a wave of guilt from the afternoon spent watching series instead of doing any sort of cultivation washed over him. He stared at his thin, shy lips still scrunched to the side. His father was forever telling him to moisturise them. He looked at his small eyes and remembered being teased in primary school about how his eyes always looked half closed. Even his complexion betrayed him. He did not have the melanin rich cocoa coloured skin that the rest of his family sported. He was light, but even then, not the sort of light skinned that Western media seemed to favour, but the type of light that was perhaps due to a lack of sunshine.

My brain is what is important, he thought to himself as he made his way to his mother's study.

After a while of searching, Elisha was losing patience. He had combed through each bookshelf twice, looking for anything that could help him with his courses.

Exasperated, he went into the storeroom where his mother kept more of her old books and rummaged through three boxes only to find five thin textbooks, and none directly related to the courses he was concerned with. Texts were bound to have changed in the thirty or so years since his mother had begun her studies. But he had hope that he would find something.

Dejected, weary and now sneezing from the dusty books, he looked at the last box. As he pulled the heavy box by its side flap, the old cardboard ripped right to the bottom on one side. He cursed under his breath. In a thoroughly foul mood, he began to gather the spilled books and paper, putting them back in the box. He hurled the books into the flimsy box.

And then he saw the book resting under a shelf. He picked up the leather-bound folder and dusted it off. He stared at the folder, feeling as though he was experiencing déjà vu. Where had he seen this folder before? His hands trembled as he pulled at the knot that bound the folder.

Even before the knot was completely undone, the top cover popped open because of the pressure from the stacks of old and crumpled sheets of paper that were jam-packed inside. Now with the folder fully-open, and his hands still trembling, the pieces of paper began to cascade from the covers onto his lap and the floor around where he now knelt. As the scribbled pages tumbled out, recollections of the dreams entered his mind vividly the same way the sun rises and shreds darkness.

“It falls upon you, Elisha,” he heard his grandmother’s words clearly, as if she were in that dusty storeroom with him.

His hands lost their tremble and he felt certainty flow into him. He gathered up the pages carefully and with some effort managed to enclose them in the leather folder once more. With the folder clutched to his chest and in a bit of a daze, he made his way to the living room to confront his parents. He had questions...

"What do you mean? Why didn't we tell you what?" his father retorted.

His mother sighed and attempted to give a more patient response. "Eli, you know your grandparents were into that African traditional mumbo-jumbo; a lot of the older generation and those who did not move to the towns still are. We, the blessed and chosen ones, found Christ and..."

"But surely this all means something?" Elisha interjected.

"That's what I am trying to tell you, my child," Mother sighed before continuing, "My mother, your gran and the author of this gibberish, she went senile in her later years. Especially towards the end. And that was before she disappeared."

"Why waste time explaining the past, Elisha? Throw that old thing away and remember to say your prayers before you sleep to cleanse you of whatever it is that has gotten into your head!"

Elisha left the room as his father continued his rant about how universities were not giving children enough work to keep them busy and out of trouble.

Chapter 2

A week after Elisha found the leather-bound folder, he thought of little else and barely slept, reading it from cover to cover. He google-searched and read as much as he could find about Mount Inyangani. He even went through the History and Archaeology Media Department archives and the Resource Centre, on campus.

His findings were mostly innocuous—Mount Inyangani is the highest mountain in Zimbabwe and a renowned tourist destination, situated in the Nyanga National Park in the Eastern Highlands, North West of Mutare. Its misty peak, picture perfect streams and lush greenery are ethereal in beauty. It is famous for its wild flowers, which are perennially in bloom and its unpredictable weather. In a matter of minutes, a sunny day can turn overcast with mighty gusts of wind accompanied by thunderstorms.

Some sources left out the next part, which he could not help but read over again...

This beauty is marred. It is shrouded in a veil of mystery and paranormal incidence. According to numerous accounts, the mountain is as notorious as the Bermuda Triangle. Locals and tourists have been disappearing there without a trace over the years. From as early as the eighties, people have just vanished from the mountain. The most recent disappearance happened just a year ago, bringing the count to eleven people; two teenage girls, a little boy, a couple, three young women and three men...

A heavy dread fell over him. He looked at the sketches of two girls and a little boy from the folder. The sketches were inscribed with the years 1981 and 1984, which coincided with the years in which they were said to have vanished.

According to the notes in the folder, up to 27 people had mysteriously disappeared in on Mount Inyangani.

What does all this mean? The dreams? The folder? The disappearing people? What my parents said? What if...

He had to tell someone about this.

Normally, he would have gone straight to his parents and they would encourage him to conduct research. They had always pushed him to be curious, yet, in this instance, they wanted him to just take their word for it and believe that the folder was full of crazy mumbo-jumbo? Why? Could they be hiding something from him? What could it possibly be? It just made no sense. The dreams didn't make it easier.

For the first time in his life, he dreaded going home after class. The tension was unbearable. A few days before, his mother had yelled at him when he asked about Mbuya MaNcube and if she had any photos. Then of course, there was his dad overreacting when he forgot to take out the garbage. They just seemed on edge, even pissed at him as if he had, and committed every cardinal sin. So he just kept his head down and stayed out of their way.

He wished he could tell Takudzwa but honestly, the entire guy seemed to obsess over was gym, sport, cars and girls. He could just imagine how the conversation would go. Awfully. Bad idea. That only left Father Methuselah. Elisha had no idea how the priest would react. He tended to be unpredictable. But there was no other option. He had to see him after Mass the next day. Father Methuselah had been a family friend for years. A sharp, witty and boisterous gorilla of a man, his open-mindedness had made Elisha and his parents very fond of him.

“Ah, yes. Eli! You look like you are carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders, what’s the Matter?” He shook Elisha’s shoulders gently and wrapped him in a big hug as he spoke.

“It’s nothing Father M.”

“Ah, come now, you know better than that. Out with it.”

“I don’t even know where to start. Ok, just promise not to laugh... I’ve been having strange recurring dreams about climbing Mount Inyangani. Then recently I started reading about it and it really freaked me out.”

“Ah yes, Mount Inyangani. The *Manyika* believe it is sacred and inhabited by powerful ancestral spirits. Have you climbed it before?”
He chuckled.

“Never. I don’t understand why I’ve even been dreaming about it.”

“Maybe it is a sign that you will become a mountain climber one day.

“Tell me about the dream.”

“You are full of jokes today Father M.”

It put Elisha at ease. As he described the dream; he felt an icy chill slither down his spine. Like a premonition.

He somehow felt that he should not have told Father Methuselah. To his relief, Father Methuselah finally responded.

“Mmm, interesting. You know; the last I heard about this mountain was in the nineties. It was a Reader’s Digest story by a Berlin writer. She was doing research for a book and lived in Nyanga for a year or so. I was stationed at St Jude’s Mission for some years so I’m familiar with the area. The cathedral is in the vicinity of the national park and within walking-distance to KwaGuvheya, close to where your mother grew up incidentally.

"Can you believe she actually went missing for days on the mountain but reappeared mysteriously, disorientated and babbling? Apparently she had been meditating and taking pictures on the mountain, which evoked the anger of the spirits. Fortunately; about a day after she went missing, the park officials convened the elders and ritual was performed which is said to have facilitated her safe return. For years, the harrowing tale of how she had been taken by *njuzu*, half-human and half-fish creatures was whispered by the locals. According to her, she had only been gone a few hours but in reality she had been missing for 7 days. The story also mentioned a local woman from KwaGuvheya who had a similar experience. She also vanished on the mountain and reappeared a few days later. However, she claimed this had happened to her countless times and believed she had special healing powers."

A few hours later, Elisha crawled into bed, exhausted and deeply troubled. He could not believe what he had unfolded.

Chapter 3

Elisha was startled from his deep sleep by a small voice beckoning him to wake up. He jumped from his bed and crouched on the cold floor. His eyes struggled to adjust to the light emanating from the far corner of his bedroom. As the glow faded, a ghostly figure took shape standing at the corner of the room. His eyes locked onto its hollow and lifeless eyes. He shivered violently.

“Ambuya MaNcube?” he gasped

Tears trickled down her face. She was bent over, hanging, as if for dear life; onto her staff with skeletal hands, her appearance now markedly different from the vibrant figure he had initially encountered when the dreams started. He was overwhelmed by a dark foreboding as if feeling the deep pain gnawing at his grandmother’s heart.

Her greyish, seamless robe seemed to be smouldering. The room was filled with a foul smell as if something had died ages ago. He sensed that something was wrong.

“There is no time Elisha. It falls on you and it ends with you.” Gogo maNcube spoke in a sickly small voice, her pained stare not leaving Elisha.

“I don’t know what to do,” said Elisha.

She was fading, and would take the answers with her.

“Look within and beyond, more will be lost until it is done, we wronged them and there is only one way out.”

The apparition suddenly vanished in a grey fog.

Darkness hugged Elisha and bringing with it a cold drift that sent shivers down his spine.

Was he losing his mind?

With each visitation, it seemed as if life was being sucked out of her. He remained crouched and trembling at the thought of Ambuya's ghost.

What did she mean it ends with me and what is the only way out? How am I linked to all this when I was not even born when it all started?

His usually orderly life had been thrown into disarray, his interest in political-science displaced by in his obsession with Mount Inyangani—the mountain that swallows people. And now, his grandmother was regularly 'visiting'.

Elisha could not understand how he was linked to Inyangani and how with all its majestic splendour it was also a source of sorrow.

Where are the people taken?

Why all the secrecy and the strange reaction from my parents?

Who or what is causing the disappearances up the mountain?

Elisha decided to go through the folder once again.

The old lady did say to look within and beyond. The answers could be in there.

Elisha got up from the floor and switched on the light. He froze at the sight of the rugged, old folder lying open at the edge of the bed. He distinctly remembered closing and

placing it neatly back on his mother's bookshelf. He cautiously picked up the folder and was soon transported into another world.

The night was still and hot. The moon hung full and luminous. On any other night, the village would have been awake and immersed in the happy chatter and giggling of playing children. Grand parents would be dramatising folktales to the goggle-eyed toddlers. In the children's eyes they were demigods.

The men would be in their circles enjoying *umqombothi* and the women exchanging banter, doing dishes and preparing their households for the night.

Not that night.

There were no playing and singing children; and not even the sound of chirping crickets was heard. The village of Nyangombe had been thrown into a sorrowful dread. The children had been locked within their huts and everyone else was safely inside their homes. Only the village elders and the chosen group of men were gathered under the huge *marula* tree.

Eerie shadows of leafless branches were cast across the compound and owls hooted from a distance. The elders were murmuring among themselves. Elisha's input had been neglected and he sat watching them as they planned the greatest mistake of their lives. The group of men chosen by the elders, was getting ready to leave.

For so many years, there had been a long standing feud with the mountain spirit and the villagers had been

performing annual rituals to appease it and maintain the peace.

But the spirits had taken the chief's beloved daughter and the villagers had decided to fight instead of perform the ritual.

Elisha was being blamed for not fore-telling the disappearance of the Chief's *ntandokazi* through his bones and visions. He was being blamed for the loss of the traditional shrine at the top of the mountain and the healing water springs that were claimed by the spirit.

There was a pact once, and the people did not meet their end of the bargain yet they feel cheated and wanted to fight. But how do mere mortals fight the gods?

Elisha's bedroom door was flung wide open jolting him from his concentration. His screaming instinct to hide the folder came too late.

"I see you are still reading that old thing," she said with a frown.

She glared at the folder, before softening to meet his eyes.

"Anyway, get dressed and follow me. There are things you have to know."

She walked out, gently closing the door behind her.

Instead of being scared into abandoning his search, Elisha's appetite had been whetted. He was more determined to uncover the secrets and "end it", whatever that meant.

Sitting in the rickety, old bus, on his way to see Chief Hekima of Nyangombe, Elisha felt a strange calm. He was doing the right thing.

Father Methuselah would have freaked out if he knew what I had decided, he thought as he pulled the small bag containing the old folder closer to his chest.

He looked at his friend Takudzwa, who had dozed off the minute the bus left Mbare bus terminus and is grateful for the companionship.

Takudzwa had agreed to throw all caution to the wind and accompany him on such short notice.

"Of course I will go with you *sha*; it will give me a chance to explore the mystical Nyanga, not to mention, some time off from that short tempered crone I still owe assignments." Takudzwa had jokingly said during their brief 3 a.m. phone conversation which now seemed like it had been years ago.

The old bus thundered and roared along the long ribbon of highway as lush green trees whizzed past. Then he saw it. Though far, the blue mountain came closer, revealing its entire splendour. The top seemed to reach the heavens, obscured by the clouds.

This is it.

He turned to wake up his friend.

Chapter 4

“She was supposed to protect us,” Chief Hekima spat.

His face pinched and twisted in revulsion.

For a man who should have been in his late-sixties, he was already a ghost of a figure. His skin desperately clung to his face like ice-cream melting off a popsicle stick. Even on the sofa, he had to steady himself with his chiefly cane.

“That’s why the *njuzu* spared her life all those years ago, or so she always said. The custodian of the mountain, she proclaimed herself.”

He looked at his wife, who meekly glanced back, with sadness in her eyes.

“Where was she when my Nothando was taken?”

Elisha looked at the bag on his lap and toyed with its buckle, but there was no time to rummage through the folder.

“According to the note she left me, she was there.” he began cautiously.

Hekima did not seem like the type who appreciated dissent.

“Of course she was. She, along with the rest of our local *n’angas*, was too cowardly to face our scourge. I had to get the powerful Hukuru from Chipinge.”

A charlatan in traditional garb, MaNcube had referred to him in her notes.

Hekima's gaze drifted to the floor.

"Hukuru assured me he could draw the spirit out of the pool and bring back our children. Then our men would destroy the creature for good."

Elisha could not forget the two girls and the boy his grandmother sketched—all taken from Nyangombe Village. First, were the brother and sister in 1981, aged seven and fourteen respectively, who went missing on a routine errand to fetch water. The poor boy had only tagged along. Then, in 1984, the Chief's thirteen year old daughter disappeared.

"It was such a beautiful day." He was quiet for a moment, stuck in recollection. When he looked up at Elisha, the fire was gone, his eyes cold and dead.

"The drums were beating, the beer was brewing, Hukuru was chanting, and the corpses floated."

His wife's eyes were glassy with tears.

"First was my beautiful Nothando, my only girl—then the Takura children. As their bodies drifted, their blood seeping into the water, it was like watching them die, slowly, painfully. There is no greater alliance of helplessness and pain. Their bodies were still warm when they reached the shore."

He drew a breath as if he meant to empty the room of air. His vice grip on the cane tightened until his knuckles threatened to split the skin.

“She still haunts me within these walls, taunting me for not saving her. If I had explosives, god help me, I would have blown up that pool—left only the crater as a reminder that it had ever existed.”

The fire returned. His wife gently cupped his hand in hers.

“MaNcube blankly looked on—just staring like she had paid for a show. The shame of her continuous failures finally made her a recluse, whenever she wasn’t a whispering hag.”

Her failures?

“Why couldn’t you just have listened to her?” the words passed through gritted teeth to muffle Elisha’s simmering anger. “She was the custodian, after all.”

Hekima grimaced like his entire lineage had just been insulted.

“She had the feeble heart of any other woman—grown lax in her married life. I was tired of her cautions and *wisdom*. She wanted us to appease a creature that had declared war on all of us.”

His body shivered as if struck by a cold, wobbling his cane.

“And in the end, even the little she did, she stopped—she abandoned her people.”

“Is there anyone we could speak with about her final days?” asked Takudzwa before Elisha could say something he would regret. Takudzwa patted his knee. He knew his friend too well.

“She has family KwaGuvheya, the neighbouring village.”
the wife answered.

“We are not from around here,” Takudzwa continued in his overly polite tone.

“Is there someone who can give us directions?”

“I’ll get someone for you,” Hekima forced the words out.

“That pompous misogynist!” Elisha barked.

Takudzwa glanced at the boy, who pretended he had not heard anything. Elisha did not care if Tonde was related to the old toad. He would be glad if the boy reported him. That chief needed to hear the truth for once.

“He’s so blinded by his ego that he won’t even see that he killed those children.”

Why did I even think he would give me answers about my grandmother? He’s still as arrogant as he was all those years ago.

The question was rhetorical. Those sketches had haunted Elisha like they must have haunted his grandmother. He needed to find out the truth and would clutch at any straw.

Takudzwa looked back; no doubt, to ensure they were out of earshot.

“Maybe he’s just not over his daughter.” he offered.

Clearly.

“If anyone should be guilty, it’s him. Did you hear how he spoke about my grandmother?”

His grandmother, who desperately needed his help.

She was likely taken in an attempt to make things right – to stop the disappearances for good. And she was running out of time.

Then Hekima painted her a whispering hag! Elisha dug his fingernails into his palms. If he was back in that living room, he would have pummelled the remaining years out of that miserable prune.

“I just saw an old man filled with regret.”

Elisha glared at his friend.

Why are you defending him?

“He should keep his regrets to himself.”

The silence was thickened by the arctic like temperature that developed between them.

“He could never have any more children.” Tino said in a mousey voice, like anything louder would have caused an avalanche down Mount Nyangani.

He was a slender youth of probably fifteen. From the moment he was introduced to them, he acted only as a guide purposed to serve them.

“According to rumours, the *ngozi* of his daughter haunts their family.”

He meant he was literally haunted by her?

What kind of world had Elisha been sucked into—a reality where dark creatures of the deep lurked and abducted children – a world in which vengeful spirits tormented the living?

“Shame.” Takudzwa managed.

Shame? Did he not bring it onto his own head?

“Is any of it true though?” asked Takudzwa.

“Njuzu, ngozi, tokoloshi?”

When Elisha had asked his friend to accompany him, he only said he was digging into his grandmother’s past. How could he explain the dreams and the weird sense of purpose?

When they were in boarding school together, they casually talked about witches, goblins and cash-vomiting pythons. They were always abstract concepts—nothing they had ever experienced or really believed to be true. It was acceptable talk between classes, as long as everyone knew they were being ridiculous.

“It’s very true.” Tino told him.

“People have been disappearing on that mountain for decades, even tourists. White tourists.” The last part seemed very necessary to the boy. “Bodies, with their throats slit, have even been found floating in the pools... or so I’ve heard.” Tonde continued.

“Yeah, the chief told us. Shame though.”

As Takudzwa and Tonde exchanged pity for Hekima, Elisha was drawn to mount Inyangani. It loomed in the foreground like a giant ready to squash them. But it did not squash for it never moved its foot; it swallowed.

Was she still trapped up there? How could he save her? If he went after her, would he come back? Everything around him advised caution. Even a stroll up the mountain was dangerous. And he had to face some malicious creature, to boot.

Traditional huts appeared ahead, Tonde and Takudzwa fell silent.

“Is that the village?” asked Elisha.

“Yes.” Tonde answered.

They soon reached it, noting, as they walked through the village, it was no different from Nyangombe. It was peppered with traditional style huts and granaries erupting from the soil of every residence. Smoke emanating from their apex was the indicator that particular huts were kitchens, and that most of the properties were not abandoned.

A few, scrawny mongrels barked their protest as the three walked through the village. They must have had the most thrilling lives. Life must have been so slow there; it might as well have been in suspension.

Elisha knew little of village life. Most of his rural experiences had been at his paternal grandfather’s farm in Marondera, which he bought in the sixties. The last time he had been to Nyangombe and KwaGuvheya, he was a

teenager riding in his father's car, and they were burying his maternal grandfather.

He did not even know which distant relative lived in Nyangombe. His mother chose to forget her old life and her only brother lived in the UK.

Soon enough they approached a cream house. He remembered the dainty old house with the well-trimmed lawn and flower beds—he saw it after his grandfather's funeral. It was an anomaly, the brick and mortar home, in the midst of clay rondavels. He thought Gogo Chioko was pretty cool for an old lady.

After thanking Tonde for his help, Elisha and Takudzwa went through the gate and knocked on the door. Thankfully, there was no mutt to bare its teeth at them; just the glance of a smug-looking, large, ginger cat took rest under the small mango tree planted next to the house. It whipped its sausage of a tail as if that was all the attention hounding it could manage.

Gogo did once say something about a cat's utility in keeping rats away.

A rather tall and hefty woman opened the door. After popping her eyes back into their sockets and lifting her jaw from the floor, she engulfed Elisha's slender body in hers. She hugged a wide-eyed Elisha for quite some time.

"You've grown!" she almost shouted, beaming at him.

How is it that old people recognise me so well?

"Elisha, what is your mother feeding you?"

“A giraffe, like this!”, she exclaimed whilst prodding his elbow.

“How many years has it been, six, seven?”

Then she seemed to notice Takudzwa.

“Who’s your friend?”

“This is Takudzwa. We’re at university together.”

“Hmm . . . university?” she said looking impressed.

She shook Takudzwa’s hand.

“Come in, come in!” she said opening her door.

They sat on one of the sofas.

“You must be thirsty after your walk. Let me get you something to drink.”

She disappeared in the corridor for a few minutes, before coming back balancing a tray with two steel mugs of *mahewu*. She dragged a small coffee table closer to the boys before placing her tray on top of the table. She then sat on the adjacent sofa.

“How is everyone at home?”

Her beaming smile refused to leave her face.

“They are all fine. Lloyd is at varsity now. We see him on his semester breaks.”

“Oh, that’s good. I see you two are as smart as your *gogo*.”

She grinned, clearly impressed with herself.

Takudzwa nudged him as he tepidly sipped his mug of mahewu. Elisha slightly shook his head. There would be another time for him to drink the traditional brew.

“What brings you to our little village, and without those busy parents of yours?”

Elisha forced a smile.

“We’re just coming from a meeting with...Chief Hekima.”

His name was still like poison on his tongue.

“I came to ask about grandmother, MaNcube.”

“Oh, my famous sister.” she said casually.

“Yes,” Elisha muttered. I found a leather-bound folder full of her notes.”

He unbuckled his bag to take it out.

“You don’t have to show me,” said Gogo Chioko who was Gogo MaNcube’s sister stopped him.

“I was there when she wrote them. I even helped her. I was the more artistically inclined after all.” she added with a sad smile.

“Those sketches of the children...” he almost whispered

And of the creature.

“So it’s all true; that she was taken by the *njuzu* and returned?”

He took the Reader’s Digest he was given by his mother out of his bag—the thing that had been a stain in his mother’s life. She had hidden it all these years in her library, thinking she could bury the past. She almost succeeded, until her son dredged up all the forgotten memories.

He offered the magazine to Gogo, who reluctantly accepted it.

“Yes, the article.” she said, peering at the book as if it was laced with anthrax.

“My sister was interviewed as the only known survivor of the *njuzu* abductions.”

“But Anna paints MaNcube as a victim of post-traumatic psychosis,” said Elisha.

Gogo threw the magazine on the table.

“If you were a ‘sophisticated’ westerner, a German journalist and I told you about being abducted by a half human, half aquatic creature; what would be your conclusion?”

She left the question hanging in the air like cheap perfume.

That you have gone insane.

“She was taken in the mid-sixties; she was in her early twenties at the time. She hadn’t married your grand father and moved to Nyangombe yet. Anyone who talked to her

after she descended that mountain will tell you she had communed with the spirits. She had changed, almost like a part of her had been replaced by something deeper. She had this ancient knowledge about our place in this world. She came back a powerful healer of both the body and the spirit. I believed her when she said her new purpose was making peace with that mountain.”

“If it was so clear, why didn’t they listen to her in Nyangombe after those children were taken?”

“I thought you said you met Hekima?” she said with a scowl as if a foul odour had just wafted into the room.

“He was glad to only preach about following the rules when other people’s children were being taken.”

“Mhiko.” Elisha whispered. *The sacred rules for the sacred place.*

“Seeing the dead children’s bodies unravelled her. She partly blamed herself and became more obsessive. I was even called to stay with her for a few months after the episode. I left my husband and children to be with her, to bring her back to this world.”

Would Elisha do the same for his brother, or his brother for him? He had not really known Lloyd ever since he went to study Civil and Water Engineering. Even when he came back home, he was mostly busy with his designs and his drawing software. Then again, growing up, he was the annoying, bullying, older brother. If he continued down the rabbit hole to insanity, would Lloyd be there for him?

“That’s when she decided to draft the notes.” Gogo Chioko continued.

“She would leave her knowledge behind, stop anything like that from ever happening again.”

But it would be in vain. When MaNcube told Elisha’s mother about taking over the important work, she only had dreams of escaping that village and escaping that life. And so she erased her mother’s memory, even kept it from her own children. She only told Elisha after he refused to let the issue go.

“She would go out to places she never told anyone. One day, she didn’t come back.”

“You must have been close.” Elisha fished.

The deeper he dug, the greater the connection he felt with MaNcube.

Gogo Chioko smiled.

“She was always the smart one. She would be 73 now, six years my senior. When we were younger, I was envious, especially after she had become the special one. But I always loved my sister. Every day after her disappearance, I prayed for her return. Like before—she would go for up to a week but always came back.”

Why didn't she come back? What happened?

“The disappearances seem to have worsened. What is causing them? Is there any way to stop them?”

She half smiled, but with sad eyes.

“There’s a story my father loved telling us when we were children. First, there was the Creator of Men—*Musikavanhu*.

He created men, and those in between. They were the bridge between the Creator and men. They also policed men. They raised sacred places to teach us the right way. Inyangani Mountains is a remnant of this ancient time when spells and dark magic reigned. The rules of that place must be followed. They have deeper meanings of respect, tolerance and love – they teach us how to be good.”

“How can there be love in such evil?” Elisha countered. “Abductions? Killings?”

She smiled again.

“Follow the rules – something simple isn’t it? Just comply and no harm shall come to you. But, somehow, men think the best accomplishments arise after hours of sweat and violence. They also made the place a tourist destination. What did they expect? Now so many decades have passed without a proper guardian? It’s all ruined such that the *rules* you hear of now are mere mockery.”

“I will save her.” Elisha declared. “I will bring MaNcube back.”

Gogo Chioko’s smirk could have taunted a hyena away from its fresh kill. But then she narrowed her eyes and came in closer, her face turned serious.

“My advice to you? Run child. Run and never come back. That place has claimed enough lives.”

Chapter 5

The pool gleamed mythically in the daylight. Its surface was still as death. Families sat further away with mothers grasping their squirming children. Behind them, the gorgeous, green terrain rolled all the way to the horizon. The day could not have been more pleasant.

Without warning, the water gently rippled, the waves spreading like an insidious virus. Chirikutsi slowly rose from the pool, her ravishing, hazel eyes already casting spells. When she had emerged, she loomed over them—taller than the trees around the clearing.

Her shimmering skin was only outshone by the sun above them. Her jet-black, silken hair lapped back as her eel-like tail flexed, glinting like polished platinum. She stared at the mere mortals before her; her resplendence having hypnotised them.

“Chief Nyanga, come forth.” an old man announced.

His head dress of animal skins and bird feathers lengthened his already long face. Around his waist was a ridiculous skirt of dried animal tails. It danced in the breeze, threatening to expose him.

Nyanga obeyed and moved toward Chirikutsi. He glanced at his family, who followed just behind him—his wife and two children; his frightened little girl wrapped onto his wife’s bare leg.

When he stepped into the pool, the water rushed from his foot. Step after step, and the water pushed forward, until it towered over them, becoming a second giant beside

Chirikutsi. The wall of water spiralled. It formed an arch – a doorway.

Nyanga lifted his hand to touch the water, allowing the spirals to lightly brush his fingers. He looked back at his family for the last time in their familiar world. With his hand as a guide, he plunged through the doorway. The water enveloped him, throwing his arm to the side.

“Hey!”

Elisha opened his eyes to the light streaming through the thin curtains.

“You slapped me!” Takudzwa grouched.

“Almost took out my teeth. Remind me never to share a bed with you again.”

“I saw it.”

“Saw what?” Takudzwa grumbled, still massaging his cheek.

“It was in my dream.”

Elisha jumped out of bed and went to the wardrobe. He grabbed his bag and took out the leather folder. After flipping through the pages, he found it, and offered it to his friend. Takudzwa stared at him suspiciously, still rubbing his jaw. “Jesus, get over it. I’m sure I hardly grazed you.”

When Gogo Chioko showed them into their bedroom for the night, he too was not thrilled at the sight of the solitary double-bed. Then again, he did tell his parents he was crashing in Takudzwa’s dorm room for them to complete

an urgent assignment. He must have condemned himself with his words.

“It’s not every day I’m woken up by a tooth fracturing back hand.”

“Fine, I’m sorry.”

“Now look...” he said, shaking the paper in his friend’s face. Takudzwa finally took it. He stared at it for a while.

“Is that it? It looks rather gaunt.”

More like stunning.

“Skin as pale as milk,” he read.

“Smooth, straight hair, black as charcoal,” he continued in his incredulous tone.

“As tall as the tallest tree.”

Takudzwa looked up at him.

“This is what you saw? What was happening exactly?”

“I was being taken, no, volunteering to go with the *njuzu*.”

When he thought back to the moment, all he felt was contentment.

“Yes, it felt like it was my decision.”

He looked at his friend.

“Except, it wasn’t me. It was... Nyanga.”

That doesn't make sense. Nyanga is a place, not a person.

"Chief Nyanga," he said after it jumped back into his head.

Takudzwa was already on his phone.

"I'm sorry to bore you." Elisha told him, as he rubbed the last of the sleep out of his eyes.

"Chill, Slapping Beauty. I'm doing some research."
He scrolled on his phone for a while.

"Here we go," he talked to himself.

"Interesting."

"What's interesting?" Elisha asked desperately.

"Nyanga travelled from Malawi hundreds of years ago and established his chiefdom in present day Nyanga. This whole place is named after him."

"This is where it gets really interesting," he said with eyes still glued to his phone. "Apparently, he was friends with a mermaid called Chirikutsi."

"Wait, what?"

Why is that name so familiar? Am I going crazy?

"The mermaid is said to have taken Nyanga's family at some point, to join her under the water."

The truth of the dream slapped Elisha in the face.

“Where are you getting this stuff?”

He grabbed the phone from Takudzwa’s hand.

zimmystery.com.

“Apparently, the writer got the information from local chiefs and shamans.” said Takudzwa.

“It can’t be.” Elisha muttered.

“It was a memory?”

No. I must have read this article and forgotten the details . . . only to be reminded in a dream. Why else would I dream about an ancient chief?

But his throbbing heart would not let up. There was something deeper at play. It had felt too real, like he was remembering something.

“If you asked my dad, he would say there’s a connection between the two of you. But then again, my dad’s crazy.” Takudzwa chuckled.

“He would probably say he’s your ancestor, maybe through the male line. Imagine that, you, royalty.” This time, his laughter filled the room like a jeering echo.

Ass.

Was it such a crazy idea? Why else did his grandmother choose him? What else would have made him special?

“Maybe it is true.”

“Wait. That was a joke. There’s no boy alive who hasn’t dreamt about being extraordinary. Let’s rein it in.”

“Takudzwa, that place is calling me. There must be a reason.”

“Calling you? If this was a horror movie, I’d strongly advise against facing off with the *njuzu*. That’s how the main character dies. And just to be clear, I won’t be your sidekick in this showdown.”

This is all an unfunny joke, isn’t it?

“I’m serious. I must go up that mountain.”

“Look, man, I’m with your gogo on this one. Whatever is taking those people is dangerous. It wouldn’t be smart to go after it.”

Smart? Who cares about what’s smart? What is right?

“And my grandmother, I’m just supposed to give up on her?”

Takudzwa sighed. “It’s been twenty years she’s been missing.”

Meaning she’s probably dead?

Even the thought felt impermissible.

“I don’t care about that. She was gone for a week, but she came back alive, maybe even better. I won’t give up.”

Takudzwa fell silent as Elisha returned the notes in the folder and then the bag.

Then it hit Elisha.

“Maybe if I talk to your dad, he may have answers?”

He may confirm my connection with Chief Nyanga.

Takudzwa allowed his gaping mouth to answer to the madness. Elisha regretted saying it. “I told you that man is nuts. He quite literally believes in this African Traditional Religion stuff—hyena riding witches dining on human flesh and all. I won’t even begin on how many times he’s seen a shaman for one thing or another.”

“Dude, your dad’s an accountant at CABS. He’s not crazy.”

Just humour me.

“With what you’ve seen so far, don’t you believe in this stuff too?” Elisha asked desperately.

“I haven’t actually seen anything. All we have is word of mouth.”

But from how many people? One person is an unlikely coincidence, but five accounts equal a trend.

“Man, we’re here in this beautiful place. Let’s just explore Nyanga, have a good holiday, then get back to our real lives.”

You can enjoy the scenery. I was always meant to do this alone anyway.

Chapter 6

Elisha sat by gogo Chioko's veranda which was strategically built to face the mountainous horizon. Though the mountain range was five kilometres away from the homestead, the beauty and vastness of its evergreen forest was enchanting. He could also see the white smoke emanating from the cascading waterfall. The huge mountains seemed to spread as far as the eye could see and the tops were lost in the heavens.

Gogo Chioko's husband was also seated nearby, swaying back and forth in tune with music only he could hear. The old man had a terrible accident years ago while hunting and was now confined to a wheelchair. When he did not come back from his hunting trip, people had suspected that he had been "swallowed by the mountain". He was discovered at the bottom of the mountain; disoriented and unable to speak or walk two weeks after his disappearance. Gogo Chioko had thanked the ancient fathers with a sacrifice and a feast for his safe return. He regained his speech a month later though he spoke little of what he encountered during those two weeks he had been missing. However, he never walked again.

Efforts to help him gain his ability to walk were fruitless. Prophets, traditional healers and medical practitioners had all found nothing wrong with his legs. The traditional healers had suspected that the mischievous mountain spirits were behind the strange disability and had implored Sekuru to reveal what he had done to bring such misfortune upon himself.

"He knows what he did or saw up that mountain, but he won't confess. How we can even help him?" said Gogo Chioko. "I was glad he came back, but he came back a

changed man. He was a bubbly, energetic man and so full of life. Now he has this blank stare with outbursts here and there. Most of the times he is silent and just sways back and forth and he keeps mostly to himself." She had pitifully added during breakfast.

"I will be back soon; my *vazukuru* will help if he needs anything." Gogo had announced rushing to the village women's weekly meetings after finishing her breakfast.

As soon as Gogo Chioko left, everyone else abandoned him and *sekuru*. Takuzwa had decided that, after his near-death slapping experience the previous night he needed to get away from Elisha and enjoy more of the scenic views surrounding Mount Inyangani. He jumped at the opportunity to go fishing with Gogo's *vazukuru*. They packed their fishing nets and bamboo rods and gleefully left. Their cheerful chatter had left with them, now Elisha was just sat with Sekuru in deafening silence. The old man kept swaying back and forth and staring at him.

Finally he spoke, startling his companion. "You keep looking at the mountain, my boy, intrigued much?"

"Oh yes Sekuru, I am just amazed that such a Godly wonder could be associated with such darkness."

"Yes it so unfortunate," said Sekuru as he stares at his defunct legs.

"It all started with Chief Nyanga years back and now generations have to suffer for the sins of one man." added Sekuru then fell silent again chewing an imaginary tobacco stick and resuming his swaying.

"Wh... what did he do? I read somewhere that he was friends with a Chirikutsi and that his family had even visited her in the underworld. But people suspect that this is the same being responsible for so many disappearances up the mountain and surrounding villages...is... is that true?," stutters Elisha not sure of the old man's reaction.

"The Chief's relocation to Zimbabwe was shrouded in secrecy. He had entered the country in the company of his sister. With only the clothes they were wearing and a small bag containing herbs, the two looked like people who were running away from something and had suddenly left their abode with what they had at the time.

"They refused to divulge any information on why they came into the country and where they had originated from save for the fact that they came from Nyasaland, what we now call Malawi. The then Chief Nyangombe took them in. Soon after settling in, Nyanga's sister disappeared never to be seen again. A lot of speculation and rumour made rounds in the community. Some people suspected that she had been married off and had moved to KwaGhuvuya, but the villagers there had no knowledge of her ever staying there.

The rumour that had spread like a veld fire was that she had been sacrificed by Nyanga in order to gain more spiritual powers and favours in the spiritual world. Nyanga maintained that she had gone back to Malawi as she had failed to get accustomed to the new environment. Soon after her disappearance it started.

"Members of the chief's family began disappearing mysteriously until at last the chief passed on, leaving Nyanga as the sole custodian of the household and the chieftainship. By virtue of him being from the chief's

homestead and there being no other living heir, Nyanga was crowned the new Chief Nyangombe much to the murmured disapproval of many villagers.

He had blinded the community with magic powers and spiritual abilities no men has ever seen. No one dared question him back then as he had so much influence and power over everything in the community. Also, his sphere of influence and reputation had spread over other villages as well. You see Nyanga had the ability to speak with spirits and communicate with those of the underworld and questioning him would have brought wrath on you and your family.

"You are his descendant my boy, Chief Nyanga is your great grandfather", ended the old man to Elisha his eyes starting to water.

Elisha was perplexed by at the revelation.

Sekuru wheeled himself back into the house escaping the cold breeze that had started. Elisha thinks as he watched Sekuru disappear into the house, without giving him a chance to ask anything. But what was there to ask in that fog of shock?

Now I know why I felt such a strong connection to Chief Nyanga, He is my ancestor!

Suddenly he felt cold skeletal claws on his shoulders instantly making his skin crawl. He jumped from where he sat whirled around and was... nothing. But he knew it was real, corporeal, there was something... He looked around, if he hadn't been looking something he wouldn't have noticed it: a ghostly figure standing at the entrance of the homestead about 50metres away, watching him.

A cold sweat broke on his forehead. His heart started beating fast, and pumping him full of blinding fear. The figure lifted its skeletal hand and beckoned him. All around him the weather was becoming chaotic, strong winds blowing all rounds and crowding him with a thousand voices lamenting in the midst of the chaos. His body was compelled to move forward, towards the figure as if with a mind its own on. Reluctantly he moved to the frightful incarnation, against his will.

He soon found out, with doubled horror, that just as he was unable to resist, he could not shout for help; the thing had seized his voice. He just stared in panic and kept moving forward towards the strange figure, which in turn slithered away from the homestead. By the time he moved past the entrance of the homestead, his vision was getting blurred. Finally he blacked out.

“Elisha, Elisha!!”

Elisha came to as a result of the urgent panic filled shouts of his friend and Gogo’s *vazukuru*. Dazed, Elisha realised he was lying on the ground near the river.

“I never knew when you initially invited me to come here that you were going to put me through this dude!”
Takudzwa says looking pitifully at his friend.

“What.....what... happened?”

“You tell us dude, you got everyone worried and when you left, you didn’t even tell Sekuru where were going?”

Elisha began to see that there were a lot of unfamiliar faces staring at him. He spotted Gogo Chioko in the crowd being held by some other village woman as if consoling

her. She was weeping softly as his bewildered friend helped him up bombarding him with a million questions.

“Tell us what happened, because you have been missing for two days now and no one knew where you were. People have been searching high and low for you, and I almost spilled the beans to your parents. If it wasn’t for Gogo Chioko my guy...!”

Two days?!!!!

“No need for that now, Takudzwa, we need to go home,” said Gogo moving from the crowd towards Elisha.

When they got to Gogo Chioko’s homestead, there was a crowd of village women and men milling about. The group parted like the Red Sea allowing them room to go into their house. People began to leave the living room and Elisha remained with Takudzwa and Gogo Chioko.

“Elisha, I now know exactly what happened to you”, she begins. “There is no running away now. You are the chosen one and need to be protected at all times from henceforth; some spirits are not happy and will try by all means to put an end to you. MaNcube said it those years back...I never believed her. You have a huge task ahead of you...It falls on you...”

Chapter 7

He had been kneeling in the foggy darkness for what felt like hours. Its tail was wrapped around his right ankle and his hands were shaking, barely able to hold the gourd. When he finished drinking, it pulled him to his feet and encircled him, icy claws sliding along his shoulders then down his bare back, then his exposed chest and arms.

Seemingly satisfied, it led him towards the fire and pushed him till he was completely engulfed by the smoke. A fit of coughing rattled him, his eyes watered as he took in the bluish smoke. The pungent smell was nauseating and he immediately started gagging. His chest felt like it was on fire but hard as he tried to break free, its tight grip kept him in place. Rivulets of sweat poured out of him as he coughed, sneezed and vomited. He eventually toppled to the floor and felt himself sinking, as if in a maelstrom, into a deep, deep sleep. He tried to fight it but it only drew him in deeper.

Hours later, he awakened feeling fresh and alert. He had never felt better in his life. It was as if he were a brand new man. He was on the floor in his room at Gogo Chioko's. But how did I get here? He asked himself. This had been its second nocturnal visit after the two-day encounter. He had no recollection of what had transpired during that episode and that terrified him.

What if it was so terrible that his mind had just blocked it off? Like the last time, it had not spoken or looked him in the eye but he understood that it was preparing him for something. He knew he could not share this experience with anyone and he felt partly exhilarated and mostly mortified. The first time it had only been an hour or so.

Now, the watch on the wall said it was just past 4pm; which meant that this time it had taken him for close to 3 hours. He was too wound up to sleep.

What should I do? I need to clear my head and figure things out. What does this njuzu intend to do with me? She wants something, right? Is she preparing me for slaughter with all this cleansing? He sighs. Maybe a walk will do the trick. It's so peaceful around this time.

Just before he reached the homestead gate, he saw headlights approaching. His parents had arrived.

They parked inside the yard and approached him slowly. He stood rooted to the spot, unsure whether to run to them or to just remain standing where he was. While he was still thinking, he found them standing right in front of him.

"I'm sorry I lied, I can explain..." He could not look them in the eye.

"We need to talk." said his father with a grave look.

"Come with us," softly said his mother as she lead the way out of the homestead, switching on a torch. She was carrying a small backpack.

"When you did not pop in for free lunch at my office two days in a row, it was obvious that something was up. We were quite upset that you just took off. Your behaviour was very irresponsible and immature. We expected better of you. But in any case, we owe you an apology my boy, is that not so?"

"Yes, daddy," his mother nodded vigorously.

"We should have been upfront with you from the start. You know how skeptical I am when it comes to anything to do with African 'science', mystical things and what not? Well I have my reasons Eli. My uncle, your Sekuru's only brother was the wealthiest in our family. But he lost all his herds and money. They were squandered by witchdoctors who hoodwinked him into believing that there was an angry ancestral spirit who would not rest until appeased. So beast after beast was slaughtered and others handed over as payment for cleansing rituals until he had nothing. Your *sekuru* tried to intervene and help him see reason but he would not listen. Babamunini actually cut your Sekuru off and even went as far as accusing him of witchcraft. He would no longer talk to him or let his family interact with us at all."

"All his cattle were gone yet the witch doctors were adamant that this poverty was punishment from the angry spirit. His family was starving and his children could no longer go to school. The last straw was when he gave away his children to appease the so-called spirit. They were just little girls, identical twins. The witch doctor claimed that if they were pledged as sacrifices to the angry ancestor all his fortunes would be restored. They were wailing when they were taken away. I felt guilty that I did nothing to help them. I just stood there crying, I was 12 years old. I knew that it was all hogwash, that dirty old man just wanted to use them as his slaves. I shudder when I imagine the suffering they went through and I still have nightmares about it.

"After the girls were taken away, Babamunini's wife left him. He lost his mind and eventually committed suicide. My father bought the farm in Marondera and we left and never returned. I can't fathom how people who claim to be healers, protectors and helpers just ruin people's lives and

bring nothing but pain, destruction and death. It's not just my uncle; many people I know are manipulated under the pretext of being helped. It just makes me so angry Eli."

"Dad, I don't know what to say. I never imagined..." trailed off Elisha.

"Nevertheless, it was unfair of me to force you to abandon your quest. I should have been open-minded and supportive."

"I feel the same way too, Eli," emphasized his mother. "It's time you knew everything."

We are of Chief Nyanga's lineage. I'm not sure how exactly but my grandmother always tried to explain it to us. As I told you before, my mother was chosen to be the custodian of the sacred springs as well as Mount Inyangani itself. Not only were the springs a beautiful sight, but they were also said to possess healing powers. People came from all over the world to get healing there. Bed ridden people would come alive after being cleansed there. The *njuzu* appeared in her dreams and revealed that she had been chosen to bring healing to those who came to the sacred springs. She disappeared for months and came back... different."

She stopped and took a deep breath.

"But things were done a certain way. People had to go through the right channels. The chief, custodian and elders were part of the council that oversaw the ceremonies. Unfortunately, in my mother's time there was a lot of infighting over the chieftaincy. The chief at that time was a good man. Chief Mbada. After his death, those who claimed that he had been an illegitimate chief overthrew

his heir and crowned Chief Hekima who they claimed was the rightful chief. Hekima was a weak, foolish and greedy man. He started secretly demanding payment to those seeking healing. He also started siphoning water from the scared pool to give to his witch-doctor to create potent *muti* to make him powerful. The *njuzu* were angered by the chief's actions and wanted the desecration to be stopped. That's when people started disappearing. Hekima's good friend Hukuru from Chipinge was implicated in the mutilation of people's body parts for juju. And there were whispers that he had a hand in the disappearances on the mountain, especially when corpses with slit throats were discovered. Your grandmother tried to advise Hekima to distance himself from Hukuru but to no avail. Her advice fell on deaf ears. He only started paying attention when his only child was taken in 1984."

Elisha was shocked to learn that like him, his mother had experienced strange recurring dreams. She knew that she was to be the next custodian and had been warned that she could not escape her destiny. But seeing how her own mother had suffered and even had her life threatened on numerous occasions, she had decided to run away. She had tried to erase the memory of her mother and her past. For a long time it had seemed to work, until Elisha found the folder.

He started to ask a question but his mother held up her hand to stop him.

"Let me finish. I was terrified that I would be taken away by the *njuzu* and never see you and your father again. That's why I wanted you to just drop this whole thing. I prayed for years asking God to protect me and begged that this yoke could be taken off me. But I knew I could not run forever and so it has finally caught up with me. I have no

choice but to face my demons and deal with this. I don't want to hide anymore. The *njuzu* has come to me in my dreams. It wants..." she started sobbing uncontrollably.

As he consoled her, his father continued. "We have made a decision my son. We have been cowards before but now we are ready to face this. We will do this together, as a family. Don't worry, everything will be okay."

Meanwhile, in Nyangombe; Chief Hekima was jolted out of a nightmare. As his breath steadied, he began to shake uncontrollably and sweat profusely. He knew from the moment he laid eyes on the boy that trouble was brewing. There was no other way; he had to call Hukuru's son immediately and put an end to it. From the start, he had warned Hukuru that MaNcube was a force to be reckoned with and would never give up but the old fool had been arrogant, believing that he was more powerful and could easily be rid of her and her meddling. Hukuru died years ago and he, Hekima had to sort this mess out on his own.

As the sun rose, Elisha and his parents silently headed towards the sacred springs; each engrossed in their own thoughts, yet united in their determination. The howling wind and grey skies gave their canary-yellow traditional garb an otherworldly glow.

They did not know what awaited them ahead.

Chapter 8

On a cold misty morning when the hard, red ground was dry from the harsh winter but tiny droplets of dew clung to the air and sparse vegetation, two human forms materialized from nothing. A young man red as the earth, and a woman the colour of clouds stumbled forward toward the area called Nyangombe. "Why, why do we need to do this?" the young man asked without moving his lips.

"Because," she answered, "Man is fickle and they need saving. Remember the lore brother. The gods have chosen us to strengthen man."

The two forms continued until they stumbled upon the first cluster of houses. Concerned villagers came and caught them as they fell to the ground in exhaustion.

As the man came to he noticed that he lay beside his sister who now talked to the gathered crowd with her human voice. "We come from Malawi," she lied in answer to their questions, "We are just passing through." But they were not just passing through. They stayed on and observed man, and man observed them, and grew to love them. The man, they looked at with amusement and awe at his strength and daring, but the woman they adored and doted on. They taught her how to care for her pale skin so that it did not burn in the sun, and some of the mischievous teenagers dyed her dull yellow hair dark with henna. Decades passed and the two became one with the people so much that Inyangani, as they had come to call him, became chief when he was of a ripe age.

With his sister now named Chirikutsi, beside him as his most trusted advisor, Inyangani tried his best to rule the people fairly and with patience but the darkness that curls its long fingers around the hearts of man seemed to spread more and more.

“But it is not their fault that they are consumed by darkness. It is just their nature.” Chief Inyangani said to Chirikutsi one day.

“That is why we were sent to heal them of their darkness.” his sister responded.

“I do not want you to go. Do not leave me here with their sickness.”

“I must brother. But take heart; there are always a few good persons. And you will join me soon.” That very night Chief Inyangani took his sister to the base of the beloved mountain that shared his name. He went with her right to the base of the crystalline pools that children loved to swim in. As Chirikutsi waded boldly into the water she turned towards her brother, “Tell everyone. Tell everyone near and far that it is here that they can come and discover themselves. That they can free themselves of the constraints of mind and soul. It is here where I will watch over and work to heal them- to fight the darkness.”

“How will you breathe in the water, Sister?” Inyangani, who had subconsciously absorbed some of the fickleness of man’s mind over the years, asked his sister in concern.

“We are not men, Brother. We are not flesh.” Chirikutsi chuckled as she fondly dipped her head into the water that she had always enjoyed playing in. When she emerged her hair had sleeked out under the weight of the water that

clung to her as if for dear life. She flashed her teeth at her brother who in turn gave a lopsided smile as he watched his sister dive into the pool's depths. He knew that he would never see her as she was then again, that saving man would take its toll on her form.

"Even when I was very young I knew that my mother, your grandmother- MaNcube, was different from all my friends' mothers, and from everyone else for that matter. Whilst all the other mothers kept their children on a short leash my mother seemed always preoccupied with her inward thoughts and her many escapades. I remember times when I wouldn't see her for several days and I suppose that those are the times when she is said to have disappeared. My father tended more to the logistics of raising me, taking me to school, making sure I was fed and the likes. Don't misinterpret me though, in retrospect, MaNcube loved me the best way she knew. Often she allowed me to follow her on her escapades across the country even and her hikes up the mountain. This is probably why I was always so athletic in school sports. I do not regret delving more into her mind like she invited me to do as I grew older though. I regret running away sometimes.

"I sort of thought she had some sort of magical powers and that scared me a little bit. I suppose I was cowardly. Instead of getting to know what she was about as a teenager, I believed the isolating lies of those in power and I bothered her too because she was different. Only years later did I realize that her difference was helping protect the human race. That her gifts, or should I say her willingness -like yours- to step out of her comfort zone for the greater good, was what was protecting us.

"Gogo Chioko thinks that on her last disappearance she could not come back from her negotiations or lessons because she really was the last of such a person. It is heavy work for just one individual, this fighting the darkness that surrounds man. After MaNcube did not return Gogo Chioko mailed me her folder and things, thinking that as her daughter I would take up the cross, so to speak, but I was always too afraid of things I could not easily understand."

Elisha looked at his mother as she finished recounting her memories of her mother. He still had so many questions to ask and things to figure out and he was still not entirely sure that he wasn't dreaming.

"You feel like your world has been flipped upside down in the space of a few days don't you, Son?" Father asked and Elisha nodded. "Really this is all very bizarre. If it were solely up to us we would shield you from this and have you live out a normal life, but apparently a man cannot run from his fate, and that is what you are now, my child."

Mai Elisha chimed in, "We said we would go through this together son but the truth is there are some journeys, usually those that lead us into ourselves, that can only be travelled alone."

"But we are here to support you. We don't have all the answers but we are right behind you." Elisha's father said. They arrived to where the crowd had gathered and as they walked forward the crowd parted to let them through. As he passed by his friend Elisha patted Takudzwa's shoulder. Takudzwa was wide eyed and in a daze of disbelief. Elisha's parents had promised to take him home and help him through his shock regardless of the outcome of Elisha's journey.

“You can’t go any further with him, *grandchildren*.” Gogo Chioko told Elisha’s parents giving him a reassuring pat on the back as Elisha walked forward, leaving his family behind him. As nerves got the better of him he turned back and embraced his mother.

“You’ll be alright if MaNcube has anything to do with it.” Elisha’s mother reassured her son like she used to all those years ago when he was just a toddler afraid of the dark.

Elisha moved to his father. Firmly they shook hands. “Son...” was all his father managed to say in farewell. Nothing else came.

“I will be back soon. Right?” Elisha asked his family around him but all they could do is smile reassuringly at him. Elisha tried as best he could to take a mental photograph of his loved ones before he turned away and walked slowly towards the edge of what was once the healing pool.

Elisha stood at the healing pool’s edge and looked into the clear turquoise water. He tried to see his reflection but his eyes pierced the water’s surface right to the bottom of the pool where rocks lay. He felt wholesome and content, as if he were wrapped up in a warm, invisible blanket in the safety of his bedroom. But fact was he was far from his bedroom, he was far from home and everything that was familiar to him. He forced his vision back up to the surface of the water where he saw himself staring back up at him and the comfort he had felt suddenly turned cold.

Looking at himself he saw just a small boy and the voices that had previously been causing turmoil in his mind came back. The voices reminded him how insignificant he was, how this was all in vain and asked him why he, of all

people, would be chosen to complete one of the most outlandish tasks ever known to twenty-first century man. What was the significance of all this? The uncertainty and doubt was accompanied by fear. Would he ever return to his comfortable and familiar life after this? Would he see his loved ones again? Would he graduate and get the chance to make a difference in his country?

Suddenly the familiar voices in his mind disappeared and were instead replaced by what seemed to be a thousand raspy voices speaking as one. Briefly, Elisha thought about the serpent that had tempted Eve that Father Methuselah had touched on the previous Sunday and thought that if snakes could still talk they would sound like this. He felt guilty and conflicted as he thought about his faith and the journey he now embarked on. Then suddenly, the voice jolted him back to itself and he found that he could converse with it. "Is this even real?" he asked it in his mind, "Why am I here? Why me?"

The voices hissed in unison, "Man has the ability to rule the universe and make it a good world, but because of the rot that devastated the earth at its birth, man has had to suffer much turmoil. The most powerful are often the biggest targets. For many years, man called out and the gods finally heard. The gods sent small comforts to man, to remind man that he was protected always. They sent wisdom, they sent perseverance, and they sent healing for the physical and spiritual afflictions that the rot that came into the world plagued man with."

Here, the voice paused for so long that Elisha was unsure of how to proceed. "So... ah... ah... what went wrong?" he ventured, trying his best to sound as mature and mystical as the voice.

“Is it not obvious, Inyangani?” Elisha wondered at the name the voice called him but did not interrupt. “Man is inherently selfish and your chief Hekima is only but a metaphor of the state that has since corrupted the hearts of man.” Elisha grew angry and impatient. He felt as though these entities that were causing the recent events were treating him and his family like pawns, as if they had nothing better to do with their time. The owner of the voice sensed this and responded.

“What you are feeling now Inyangani is an example of the darkness that man in his conceitedness has adopted. You think you are above that which you do not understand, that which is greater than you. You think that those whose beliefs you do not share are small. Like Hekima you are greedy for your own comforts and luxuries, only thinking about what advances you in life, like in the olden days, worrying about others and the earth you inhabit. Hekima, who even now is plotting to stop you, knew that the healing pools were beneficial to man at large but he grew greedy, like many mortals, and tried to take ownership of the goodness that was meant to be for all for himself by charging people who needed healing and keeping the wealth a secret.”

Elisha had always been an empathetic person. Though he had felt red hot anger at Hekima for belittling his grandmother he still did not think that he deserved the punishment of his offspring disappearing and then finding them gruesomely murdered. He thought about Lloyd and how even though they did not always get along. He would be devastated to lose him, especially in such a gruesome manner. “How, how dare you?” Elisha managed to stammer out of rage and with hot tears threatening to spill.

“You punish him to such extremities by killing off his innocent children? And, and the couple that disappeared whilst climbing the mountain? *The other young children? My grandmother? Who were you trying to punish for that?* What had they done that was so heinous that you needed to take many innocent lives?”

“Inyangani, you are chosen not because you have done nothing wrong. You are chosen because you are one of few remaining true believers,” the voice sounded angry now and maybe even a little bit impatient.

“You do not sound it now, but yours is a mind that is wise enough to be confronted with difference, which is able to tolerate change, which is able to see the bigger picture of an individual life.”

In desperate confusion Elisha staggered knee deep into the water to where he imagined the many voices came from.

“I don’t want this anymore.”

“There are laws,” the water seemed to whisper. “That cannot be changed which the gods must keep sovereign. There are consequences to the action of man; his selfishness and greed which further feed the darkness that creeps to swallow the earth. You must come and relearn the laws of the land that were set by the gods so long ago. Relearn the laws and lore, and guide man back to wisdom and sincerity.” The water dances around his knees with every syllable spoken.

“How do I know that this is not some evil plan? That this is not how the others ended up taken?” But no answer came. As Elisha looked around for any possible source from where the voice might emanate from he noticed, only a

couple of meters in front of him in the pool, a pale face with brown eyes that filled half of its face and sleek black hair that seemed to continuously flow from its scalp. The eyes stared into his and though he did not break eye contact he saw, when it flicked its tongue, that its tongue was forked, just like in the sketches in MaNcube's folder. A soft hiss filled the atmosphere.

"Sometimes one must take an unfamiliar road in order to see with the eyes of the immortal, and many of those times the roads are best travelled alone."

This time the voices came from the agape mouth of the face and as it spoke, the face rose out of the water to reveal more of the pale body which ended in the slimy tale of a fish.

"Njuzu," Elisha said to himself. He felt like running but willed himself not to, he was now determined in his destiny. He could not peel his eyes away though he wanted to as the white of the mermaid's skin became more and more hideous and its swimming hair caused the hair on his own body to rise. Where he stood the water began to flee his bare legs as if in disgust, leaving no droplet behind. It was as if a strong wind blew yet the air was as still as if it was being hunted. The water continued to peel away from him and as it did it formed a tall tower next to Chirikutsi the *njuzu* who now levitated above the pool and appeared to grow larger before his very eyes.

From all around him the voices spoke in unison: "It is only a few women and men who are selfless enough to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. The greater good. The greater good. Greater good. Good..." And whilst the voices continued to rasp in his ear Chirikutsi flicked her forked tongue and the tower of water beside her came crashing

down on Elisha, knocking the air out of his lungs and submerging him.

Elisha had never been more scared in his life. He held his breath and looked up for a guiding light that would show him where the surface of the water was. In a panic he kicked his legs viciously, swimming upwards and yet he did not break the surface. Because he had no other choice he let some air out of his mouth and looked below him. The blue of the water seemed to darken beneath him and in its depths; he could make out Chirikutsi, now roughly the same size as himself. The *njuzu* frightened him and any resolve he had previously held to right wrongs, that he did not consider his, now left him and he thrashed around with his arms and legs in the heavy water that fought him and held him. *This is it. This is how the others drowned*, he thought, trying to make peace with his end. His lungs cried out desperately for air and he knew that he would have to inhale the water and die. He hoped that at least, on the other side, he would get to meet his grandmother- the most incredible person he knew yet, knew.

Finally, Elisha's body forced him to inhale and to his greatest surprise he found that he could breathe. Elisha looked down at the *njuzu* and found that she was swimming downward into the dark blue depths, and some invisible cord seemed to drag him down with her.

Above the healing pool mist rose from the surface as the water settled into a mirror once again. From some safe distance the people looked on, unsure of what to do. Elisha's mother consoled her husband who was quietly weeping and clutching his worn-out rosary on his knees beside her. Suddenly from behind the crowd came a disturbance and all turned to see Chief Hekima scuttle to the front followed by his attendance and a witch doctor

dressed all in furs and feathers. "You are too late, "Gogo Chioko said with a smirk.

Chief Hekima ignored her, "Do it, do it!" he said instead to his *n'anga* and the witch doctor, wincing away from Hekima's forcefulness, began to chant inaudibly in the direction of the water's edge. Like a ripple the crowd began all to gasp softly one by one and as they looked at the healing pool. The mist above the surface began to take shape. First it formed the shape of little children laughing as they chased one another in mirth. The children jumped around and their faint squeals of glee floated across the water to the crowd.

Two misty figures turned and waved in Chief Hekima's direction and he stood still and stared in disbelief at the unmistakable forms of his children. The spectres returned to their game and as they did their misty forms seemed to evaporate upward towards the sky aided by the gentlest of breezes. As the figures ascended two more figures formed on the water's surface to take their place. The new figures were those of a mist man and woman, the couple in MaNcube's sketches. They too ascended in the gentle breeze yet they did not break their embrace.

There was no dry eye as form after form the disappeared people formed on the water's surface, in mist, and ascended in a soft and comforting breeze. Finally, the mist formed one more figure. It was a familiar figure of a woman who stood tall and straight, dreadlocks cascading down to her waist.

"Amai!" Elisha's mother called out softly to the misty figure of maNcube. As the people watched MaNcube seemed to look down at them and smile. The dusk's sun seemed to cause her misty form to glow golden and her

goldenness lighted the water all around her and all was warm and yellow. The misty figure turned to face its daughter and gave her a reassuring nod. Mai Elisha smiled back contently as the gentle breeze blew MaNcube upwards.

MaNcube's strong harmonious voice floated down to the crowd on the wind, "There is always someone - for the greater good- someone." With that all the mist cleared.

About the writers

Lindiwe Dhlakama, Harare

As a writer I am aware of the misrepresentation that African nations, brown-skinned people and women have because too many of our stories are not narrated by us. My goal is to authentically and sincerely tell our stories and those of people who cannot tell their own. I believe that everyone has a backstory that we can learn from, and when we begin to do this we can all begin to live peacefully in this global village of ours.

Takatso Sibanda, Bulawayo

I am a junkie for good stories. Be it, a good film, book, play or song, nothing beats the high that comes from experiencing a masterpiece. Writing challenges me to look at the world and think about things from different perspectives, pushing boundaries and questioning the status-quo.

Rejoice Moyo, Bulawayo

I am a mother who is an avid reader, loves writing poetry and short stories, jewellery making, traveling and cooking. I studied Mass Communication and have contributed articles to many local publications. I am currently working on my short stories compilation book for those who love mystery and are not afraid of monsters.

Banabas Karuma, Harare

I trained and worked in engineering for nine years, before pursuing my passion for writing. I was drawn to writing by the need to create, inspire, entertain and educate. My goal is to move readers, in any way, with my work. I now spend most of my time writing, though I occasionally escape my cocoon to meet with friends.

About Collabowriters

Collabowriters is an innovative project that connects writers of different background to collaborate in writing creative fiction one chapter at a time. Writer A does first chapter, writer B reads the first chapter and composes chapter 2, Writer C reads A and B and builds Chapter 3 and so on. The exciting challenge the authors have, is to develop a story in the absence of set structure.

Collabowriters promotes artistic collaboration, creative expression and cultural dialogue using literary arts. The aim is to create synergies between young artists of different backgrounds to work together on a fiction novel which will be published digitally and in print format.

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Multimedia Box is a creative arts organisation which initiates, facilitates and implement the production of multimedia art which fosters positive, cultural, socio-economic transformation. They empower young and emerging artists with skills development opportunities in digital media content, illustration, photography, graphics, animation and film.

Zimbabwe German Society:

The **Zimbabwe German Society/ Goethe Zentrum Harare (ZGS/GZH)** is a locally registered Trust, an organization that promotes the development and enrichment of contemporary culture between Zimbabwe and Germany, furthering its interest in educational programs related with culture. The ZGS/GZH was started in 1983, the cooperation partnership with the Goethe Institut a few years later in 1996. ZGS/GZH is a cultural institution and language centre that works within the cultural sector in Zimbabwe across genres and partners on various projects inclusive of projects that foster cultural exchange. It offers German, English, Shona and Ndebele as language courses throughout the year. Over the years we have developed local and international partnerships based on the annual programming we undertake.

SWORN TO THE DEPTHS *of* INYANGANI



a story by
Lindiwe Dhlakama
Takatso Sibanda
Rejoice Moyo
Banabas Karuma

Heart-wrenching. Thrilling. Riveting

 **COLLABOWRITERS**