Island of Sheqer

Ariel Childs

Published by Ariel Childs, 2025.

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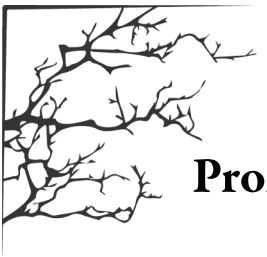


Prologue: The Day the Dead Stood

A huge crowd stood before the Great and Mighty Ones. But they weren't exactly people anymore. They had all died—and now, they had come back to life. The world of humans was gone. Some had died in wars. Others from sickness. Some were old, some young. But now, none of that mattered. Every eye stared at the books—books that held the truth about what came next. Their bodies were strong and new, and they remembered everything about their lives on Earth. Even Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel—the very first people—were there, alive again, waiting.

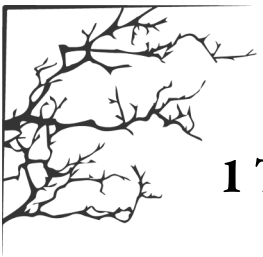
The crowd was split into two groups. One group trembled. Thunder shook the sky. Lightning flashed around the throne. They couldn't look up. Their sins had marked them—like spots on a leopard—and they couldn't hide. But the other group stood in peace. They felt no fear, only love. They had followed Jesus during their lives, and now they stood strong. Their mistakes had been forgiven. The Judge saw the blood of Jesus on their hearts, and that made them clean.

They wore bright white robes that shone—not because of their own light, but because they reflected God's glory. Among them were three children from the family of Ham. They came from a small island called Sheqer. But long before the children of Sheqer stood among the righteous, two of them began their journey far from heaven—in the heart of a city called Gatam, where streetlights flickered over cracked sidewalks and hope had to stretch to survive. The third child's journey began miles away, in a quiet village no one remembered. Yet God re-

membered. And that's where everything began to change. By the world's standards, they were poor and forgotten. But God chose them.

As Scripture puts it: 'God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose 'the things of this world that are common and looked down on.... so no one can boast to God.'[1]

So how did these children make it here? It all began with a storm.



1 The Three Hamite Children

The short, strong woman grabbed the drying paper cups from the dish rack.

"We'll need these for the trip," she said, stacking them neatly. She stuffed them with paper and pushed them into her orchid printed handbag. The bag bulged.

"Grandma Mae, can I have a snack?"

"You just ate five minutes ago."

"I know, but I'm still hungry."

"Can't wait till you get a job and help out with these here groceries. Make yourself a sammich."

"Thanks."

Kenji bounced to the refrigerator as Esther Mae paused, her brows furrowing.

"Oh!" she said suddenly and hurried into the living room.

The carpet was old but spotless, with neat vacuum lines. The couch—burgundy and beige with flower patterns—was wrapped in clear plastic. She opened a creaky closet and reached for a small glass bottle, no taller than her hand.

"We'll definitely need this," she said, tightening the cap on the slippery oil. She placed it gently in her bag.

"What else?" She pressed her lips together, thinking. "Ah—the windows. I can't forget the windows."

She touched the wooden frame with her rough, worn fingers and looked outside. Kids and adults stood around—smoking, drinking, shouting foul words.

Kenji, already finished with his sandwich, came into the living room.

"What you lookin' at?"

"Things ain't what they used to be," Esther Mae muttered, slamming the window shut. "This ain't no place to be raising no children.

"This is not the Gatam I grew up in. Life was hard back then, but people stuck together. By the time I was born, Gatam had become a place known for its art, music, and Black-owned shops. But things changed. Banks failed. The community slid into a depression.

"Then came the drugs. Men were locked away. Fathers vanished from homes. Families broke apart. Young people joined gangs just to survive. I wish things would get better again. It's just so much to carry."

A loud, bouncing sound pulled her back to the present. Bop! Bop! Bop!

"Kenji!" Esther Mae called. "Were you even listenin'?"

"I was."

"I hope you finished packin' and not just sittin' there playin'."

"Almost," Kenji said, stuffing the ball in his pocket.

"'Almost,'" she repeated, arms crossed. "You had all day."

"Okay, okay," he mumbled.

"What was that?"

"Nothin'. I'm goin' now."

"Hurry up. The bus'll be here any minute."

She made another round through the house. Kenji came running in, dragging his suitcase. A strong scent pushed out as he whipped past her.

"Boy! Didn't I tell you about deodorant? You smell musky!"

"I did put some on!"

"You couldn't have. When?"

"Earlier."

"Earlier when?"

He paused. "I don't remember. This mornin'?"

"Now I know you lyin'. You can't smell like that if you just put it on."

"...Maybe it was yesterday."

"Boy, go wash under them arms and do it right."

Kenji grabbed a flowery washcloth from the sink, dunked it in soapy water, and scrubbed under his arms. Then he used deodorant and came back.

"You'd think a boy your age would know better," she said, shaking her head. "Some folks can't afford deodorant. You got it and don't even use it. You oughta be ashamed."

But Kenji wasn't. And Esther Mae knew she'd be repeating herself for the rest of the trip—and maybe for the rest of his life.

Esther Mae—who the twins called Grandma Mae—was strong, loud, and honest. Sometimes too honest. But she had a big heart and always made room for kids. Funny thing was, Kenji and Tisa weren't even her grandkids. She'd met them one night after hearing crying through the apartment wall.

Is that those babies? she thought. Their mom worked nights. *Surely she left someone to watch them...*

But the crying didn't stop. Finally, she couldn't take it. She knocked on their door, then called the building's maintenance guy to unlock it. Two toddlers sat on the kitchen floor, crying. Alone.

She knelt beside them. "What's wrong, babies?" she said gently.

They didn't answer.

"You hungry? Eat?"

"Eat," one whispered.

She opened the fridge. Only ketchup. Shaking her head, she took their hands and brought them to her place. Fed them. Held them.

When they were full and quiet, she tucked them into their own beds and waited for their mother to get home.

She never judged the mom. Times were tough. The mom cleaned houses by day, nannied at night, and had no help since the dad ran off. She was exhausted, barely hanging on. So Grandma Mae offered to watch the kids. The mom said thank you. But when the mom left for good, Grandma Mae stayed. She loved those kids like they were her own.

"Now where's Tisa?" she asked. "Ti—ah! Girl, don't sneak up on me like that! You just made my blood pressure spike."

Tisa didn't say anything. Her head hung low, a book in hand.

"What you reading, Tisa? I told you about reading those dark books."

"This isn't dark, Grandma Mae."

"*Coraline* by Neil Gaiman sure looks dark to me," Grandma Mae said, eyeing the cover.

"I'll read the back cover on the train. Come on. Let's get outta here 'fore we miss that bus."

They followed her out the apartment door and into the dim hallway. Roaches scattered underfoot. The air smelled like old liquor. Voices echoed down the hall from the line at the one bathroom shared by six families.

Carefully, they made their way down the stoop. Broken glass glittered on the steps like dangerous confetti. They were headed to the bus stop, then the train station.

On the train, Grandma Mae handed out foil-wrapped fried chicken. The smell filled the car. Heads turned. Noses twitched. The chicken was cold now, but still tasty.

Grandma Mae was about to take a bite when she looked over.

"Kenji! You couldn't have eaten that chicken that fast!" she laughed.

She loved how much he enjoyed her cooking. And it showed—Kenji was all strong arms and broad shoulders, 160 pounds of sports-loving, joke-cracking, eleven-year-old boy.

The ten-hour ride to Dagon was long. When they arrived, they grabbed their bags and followed a paper map to the home of one of Grandma Mae's oldest friends: Ida Wells, who was very sick.

Grandma Mae carried her big-print Bible in a soft cloth case. The case was pretty, but the Bible was old and beat up. The cover was held together with duct tape. The pages were full of highlights, notes, and stains from years of prayer and tears.

That Bible was her treasure. She kept it close, tucked safe in her bag. As Kenji juggled the suitcases, Grandma Mae pulled out her Bible on the trolley ride.

"This is what Ida needs," she said softly, running her fingers over the cloth cover. "Prayer. And a little hope."

Tisa peeked up from *Coraline* and stared at the Bible in Grandma Mae's hand—just curious, but not interested enough to read it herself.

When they stepped off, the quiet neighborhood felt like another world. No sirens, no shouting. Just breeze and birdsong. Leaves shimmered on the mulberry trees.

Tisa hung back a little, hugging her satchel of books. She glanced around, wide-eyed. It was the kind of quiet she liked—no noise, no pressure to talk. She didn't like the sound of her voice anymore. It was rough and low, not like it used to be. It happened when she was younger, and it never went back to normal. She hated having to say things twice. Teachers would squint or lean in, like she was too quiet on purpose. That always made her stomach twist. She didn't mean to sound that way.

Beside her, Grandma Mae took a deep breath. "Mmm," she said. "Now *this* is peaceful. I wonder if this is one of those senior neighborhoods—no loud music, no kids runnin' 'round."

Kenji kicked a pebble down the sidewalk. "This place feels weird."

"Not to me." Tisa let her fingers brush the leaves of a low branch as they walked. She didn't say much, but she was taking it all in—like a story unfolding in real time.

"It's too borin'," Kenji said shaking his head.

Grandma Mae smiled as they reached the house. It was raised off the ground like most homes in Dagon—safe from floods. Smooth stucco walls. Strong enough for hurricane winds.

"My, oh my," she said, tapping the front window. "High-impact glass, I bet. Real grass too—look at that lawn! Must cost a fortune to keep up." She touched the white fence. "Beautiful."

Just then, the door opened. A young woman with a bright smile stood there.

"Hi! Can I help you?" she asked politely.

"Hey, young lady," said Grandma Mae. "Does Ida Wells live here?"

"She does," the young woman replied, looking curious.

"I'm an old friend of hers. Name's Esther Mae."

"Oh! I'm her nurse, Jessica. Ida's in her bedroom, in the back. Can I get you or the kids anything?"

"Yes!" said Kenji. "Anythin'. I ain't picky.

Grandma Mae gave Kenji a look. Then she turned to Jessica. "Maybe a little later, thank you."

Jessica smiled. "I'll take you to her. I'm sure she'll be glad to see you."

When they entered the bedroom, Grandma Mae's heart sank. Ida lay still and quiet, so weak. She walked slowly to the bedside. "I should've come when she first called. I didn't know it was this bad."

Tisa hung back near the door, clutching her book tight against her chest. She didn't like seeing people like this. It made her feel helpless—and angry at the same time.

Kenji stood beside her in the doorway, shifting his weight as he looked around the room, then at the machines humming faintly beside

the bed. "She don't even look like she's breathin' right," he said under his breath.

"Ida," she said gently. "It's me. Grandma Mae."

Ida moaned softly.

"How long she been like this?" Grandma Mae asked.

Jessica's face dimmed. "She started getting worse a couple weeks ago. But we're still hopeful."

Ida moaned again.

"She keeps moanin' like that," Grandma Mae said. "Can't y'all give her somethin' for the pain?"

"I know it sounds bad," Jessica said, "but she's not in pain. That's how she tries to talk. She's trying to say something to you."

Grandma Mae leaned closer. "Ida, blink twice if you're in pain."

Ida didn't blink, but her eyes filled with tears.

Tisa stood quietly at the foot of the bed, her book still tucked under her arm. She didn't speak, but her gaze was steady, focused on Ida's eyes—searching, as if trying to understand what words couldn't say.

"She's feeling the side effects of the medicine," Jessica explained. "And she's just... really tired."

"What's wrong with her, exactly?" Grandma Mae asked.

"She has an infection—fever, chills. Her body's worn down."

"Poor Ida." Grandma Mae reached into her bag. "Ida, I brought my Bible." She smiled, pulling it out. "No matter what we're going through, God's Word brings comfort."

Jessica looked at the book in Grandma Mae's hand.

"What a beautiful cover. Is it handmade?"

"Yep," Grandma Mae nodded. "This is the second case I've made for this Bible."

Jessica leaned in slightly. "That's a Bible?"

"You okay? You look pale."

"I'm fine." Jessica laughed nervously. "Just wondering—are you studying religion or something?"

"No, sugar. I'm reading the Bible 'cause I'm saved."

"You're a Christian?"

"Yes, ma'am. Been walkin' with the Lord a long time now."

Jessica smiled, a little sheepish. "I'll leave you with your friend."

"Okay, thank you."

Jessica turned back as she reached the door. "How long will you be in Dagon?"

"A couple weeks," Grandma Mae answered.

Jessica nodded. "So you'll be with us for Hurricane Orion?"

"Yes. Thank the Lord we don't get hit that bad where I'm from."

"Neither do we," said Jessica, "but those poor villagers that live on the coast."

"I know, baby. Just breaks your heart, don't it?"

Jessica stood in silence for a moment, then looked up. "Nice meeting you. If you need anything, just holler. I'm here until six. Then the night nurse comes."

"Night nurse?" Grandma Mae asked.

"Yes, ma'am. It's not safe for her to be this sick and alone."

"If she's this bad, shouldn't she be in a hospital?"

Jessica gave a gentle smile. "In Dagon, we treat people at home when we can. It helps them heal—being around familiar things."

"Well, now, I hear that. Where I come from, folks avoid the hospital 'cause it costs too much."

"That's really sad. It's not like that here. No one gets turned away because of money. Dagon does things differently. Where are you from, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Gatam."

"Oh, I know folks from Gatam! They say they love it."

Grandma Mae chuckled. "Baby, that depends on which side of the tracks you live on."

Jessica looked embarrassed. "You're right. The ones I know are from the fancy side." She wiped her hands on her apron. "Well, I'm off to finish the dishes, Ms. Esther Mae."

"Okay, dear."

Once she was gone, the room felt quieter again. Too quiet.

"My, my... Ida," Grandma Mae whispered, gently touching her friend's hand. She opened the Bible and flipped through worn pages. "Psalm 23:4," she read softly. "'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid....'"

Tisa stood by the window, staring out at the street. She didn't cry, but she felt heat rising behind her eyes. She hated this. The weakness. The waiting.

Kenji leaned over and whispered, "You can tell they were close. Her house smells just like ours—bleach and mothballs."

Tisa shrugged, still watching the wind stir the leaves outside.

Grandma looked up from the Bible. "Let's go to our rooms and unpack. Ida needs her rest."

She called out, "Ms. Jessica! Ms. Jessica!"

Jessica reappeared, wiping her hands on a towel. "Yes?"

"When Ida and I talked, we planned for the kids and me to stay here."

"Oh yes, that's fine. Let me show you to the rooms."

The rooms weren't big, but they were clean and cozy. The walls were painted soft yellow, and the beds had patchwork quilts.

"This one's yours, sweet girl," Jessica said, pointing to the room with a low bookshelf and a wide window.

Tisa didn't say thank you out loud, but she gave a small nod and immediately started putting her books on the shelf in order—oldest stories on the left, thickest books in the middle. Her hands moved fast, almost like she was trying to outrun the tightness in her chest.

Across the hall, Kenji tossed his bag onto his bed and bounced on the mattress. "Soft," he said. "Finally, a bed that doesn't squeak."

Jessica laughed. "I'll let you all get settled. Dinner's at six. You're welcome to join."

"Thank you, baby," Grandma Mae said.

As the nurse walked away, Kenji leaned into Tisa's room.

"You okay?"

Tisa didn't look up. She stared out the window. "Yeah. I'm just... watching. That's all."

Kenji shrugged and wandered off to unpack. Tisa sat down on the bed, pulled a book from her pile, and cracked it open. But she didn't read the words. Not really.

Afterward, Tisa crept down the hall and peeped inside her grandmother's room, leaning against the doorframe.

"This room's got Ida written all over it," Grandma Mae said, smiling softly at the pictures of jazz musicians on the wall. Coltrane. Billie. Ella. All of them watching from old black-and-white frames.

Tisa stepped inside, eyes wide. "Did she really play with them?"

"Baby, they were dead long before Ida's time." She sure dreamed of it though," Grandma said. She ran her hand across an old record player. "She had her own band. Used to travel all over the island, singin' in smoke-filled clubs. We grew up on the same street, but Ida always had stars in her eyes."

Kenji wandered in, tossing the ball lightly in one hand. "So what happened?" he asked, catching the last part of the conversation as he stepped inside.

"She kept movin'. I stayed in Gatam—cleaned houses, raised foster children. Life took us different ways. Then one summer, Ida started visitin' again. We went to a revival one night, and Lord have mercy..." She paused, picking up a dusty photo of Ida on stage, eyes closed mid-note. "That was the night she gave her life to the Lord. Things started changin' after that. Six months later, she got sick."

Tisa crossed the room and knelt by a small stack of sheet music near the dresser. She picked up a page. The notes looked like a different language, full of swoops and dots.

"She wrote music?" she asked.

"Every chance she got," Grandma Mae said. "Sometimes I think she was more honest in music than in conversation."

Kenji glanced at the photo in Grandma Mae's hand. "Why does everyone who gets saved always get sick after?"

Grandma Mae gave him a look. "Now what kind of question is that, baby?"

Kenji shrugged. "Just seems like it happens a lot."

"Life ain't about timing that makes sense," she said. "It's about what you do with the time you get."

She placed the photo back on the dresser and sat on the edge of the bed, her smile fading.

"I remember her face that night—how tight her arms were folded during the singing. Then the tears came. Then the shoutin'. Lord, she danced like she was floatin'."

Tisa sat cross-legged on the floor now, thumbing through the pages of a worn hymnbook she'd found under the bed.

"Do you think she's gonna die?" she asked quietly.

The room stilled.

Grandma Mae looked at Tisa, then Kenji, then back at the photo of Ida.

"I don't know," she said honestly. "But somethin' ain't right."

She stood, walked slowly to the side of the bed, and knelt. Kenji stopped bouncing his ball. Tisa froze, hymnbook in her lap.

"Lord," Grandma Mae whispered, her voice low but steady, "You see Ida. You know what's going on in her body. But something deeper's not sittin' right in my spirit. I need You to show me. Speak to me."

Kenji looked at Tisa. "What do you think she means?"

Tisa shook her head. "I don't know. But maybe He'll answer."

They didn't say anything else. Just stood there, watching their grandmother pray.

CLOUDS DRIFTED LIKE a veil over the village of Zuzi. The air felt thick and heavy. Normally, the village buzzed with laughter and chatter, but today, all you could hear was the crunch of coral rock and shell beneath worn boots, and the scrape of shovels digging into the shallow earth.

In a small house, a boy named Akwasi was helping his father prepare for the storm. Akwasi's arms ached as he dug through the thin, rocky soil—shifting chunks of shell, coral rock, and stubborn roots tangled in the limestone.

"How's it going?" his father asked, sorting the limestone chunks by size. Nearby, the kiln they'd built from coral rock and tin sheets sat cold for now, waiting to be lit. It would take hours of steady heat to turn the stone into quicklime—just the first step in making the plaster they needed to seal the house.

"It's okay," Akwasi said quietly.

"This plaster might hold off the winds," his father said, wiping sweat from his face.

Akwasi kicked at a shell in the dirt. "It won't hold up against the wind or the flood. You know that."

"Don't be so negative, Akwasi. Let's wait and see."

"I'm not trying to be negative," Akwasi said, frustrated. "But every year it's the same. We lose everything."

His dad gave a small laugh. "Son, we already don't have much. What else can the storm take?"

Akwasi frowned.

His father softened. "Just a little joke, son. God has always provided. Year after year."

God? What God? This is a waste of time.

His father noticed his mood. "Take a break. I'll finish up here."

Akwasi dropped his shovel and walked off. He glanced back at their small stucco home. Soon they'd coat it again with the limestone mixture—but the storms always wore it down, washing away their hard work.

Why do we keep doing this? There has to be more to life than this.

He kicked at the crushed shell lining the edge of the humid road as he walked. People smiled at him as he passed. In Zuzi, Akwasi was kind of a hero.

And for good reason. Zuzi didn't have clean water. The pipes from the main water system didn't reach them. People from the nearby village of Oroboja sold water from trucks, but their prices were too high. Some villagers even got sick from drinking bad water.

When Akwasi was ten, he decided to change that. He went to the one person he thought might help—Mr. Probey. A strange old man who collected books, gadgets, and all kinds of junk.

Akwasi asked for books about water filters. Mr. Probey gave him a few—and two more: *Using Energy* and a science journal titled *Wind Energy Source.*

That's when Akwasi had an idea. If he could build a wind turbine, he could power a small water filter himself.

He read everything he could and started building using parts from Mr. Probey's yard—an old tractor fan, bike parts, and plastic pipes.

When the turbine was finished, Akwasi connected it to a simple system he built out of soda bottles and tubing. The wind turned the blades, which made electricity. That electricity powered a filter he'd designed to clean salty ocean water—separating the salt so people could drink it.

It wasn't perfect—just a basic reverse osmosis setup he'd learned about in a science journal—but it worked well enough. For the first time, Zuzi had clean water. Soon, the whole village joined in to build more.

Akwasi stood beneath the 16-foot wind turbine that helped power their systems. It hummed softly in the breeze, its blades creaking with each slow turn. The tower rose from the edge of Mr. Probey's land like a flag of hope.

"Hello, Akwasi," Mr. Probey called, waving from behind a crooked fence. "I've got something you might like."

He led Akwasi toward the junk pile. The ground crunched under their feet—broken glass, coral chips, and dried leaves. Rusty coils, cracked helmets, dented pots, and tangled wires were stacked high like a forgotten sculpture. The whole yard smelled of warm metal and engine oil, with a faint trace of old rain and banana peels baking in the sun.

"This thing keeps growing," Mr. Probey muttered, pushing aside a busted fan. "Every time I guide the missionaries around the island, I see something lying around and think, 'Our village could use that.'"

Flies buzzed near a moldy car seat. Akwasi squinted as sunlight bounced off a cracked mirror leaning against a tire. He stepped over a pile of wires and a shattered clock radio that still blinked 12:00.

Mr. Probey grunted as he dug deeper into the heap, sending up a puff of dust that made Akwasi sneeze.

"Here it is!" the old man said at last, pulling out a greasy old car battery with a faded sticker and corroded terminals.

Akwasi's face lit up.

"You think we could use this?" Mr. Probey asked, wiping his hand on his faded cargo pants.

"Definitely," he said stepping forward. "Might be some life in it yet."

"I'll keep an eye out for books about battery power," Mr. Probey said. "After the storm, we'll see what we can build."

Akwasi smiled, but it faded almost immediately as thunder rumbled in the distance. The sunlight had dulled, the sky darkened just a little more.

"We pray some things are spared," Mr. Probey said quietly. "But even if they're not, we've got you. Our hero."

"Me?" Akwasi asked, staring at the battery in his hands. It felt heavier than it should have. *What good is a hero if he can't stop a storm?*

"You've been tinkering since you were this high," Mr. Probey said, holding a hand near his knee. "I saw the gift in you early."

Akwasi looked up at the wind turbine. "I couldn't have done it without you."

Mr. Probey shook his head. "I just gave you the pieces."

"You gave me more than that," Akwasi said quietly. "You showed me a better way."

Mr. Probey smiled deeply.

Akwasi handed the battery back. "I think I'll keep walking," he said, returning the smile before heading down the road.

Mr. Probey is the only one who understands. I'm not trying to judge anyone, but superstition and tradition won't protect us. We have to find our own way. Why doesn't anyone else try to learn something new? They settle for fishing and praying, trapped in the same cycle—catching fish, saying prayers, and staying stuck." Sometimes, I wonder if it's even worth it—building things, thinking big. Maybe I'm the one who's wrong.

He kicked at another shell as he walked. *But I remember being thirsty. I remember watching people get sick from bad water. I can't forget that. I can't stop.*

Ahead, a group of village boys played soccer with a ball made of rags and plastic. Their buckets lay forgotten on the hard-packed dirt. They laughed loudly, kicking up bits of shell and dust with their bare feet.

For a second, Akwasi wished he could join them. *I don't think I've ever had that—real fun. Real friends.*

He kept walking, thinking about the long walk ahead. When the storms got bad, the people of Zuzi had to travel three days to reach the village of Oroboja. The houses there were built on stilts, raised high above the ground. Engineers had designed them to survive the floods. In Zuzi, the houses were built by hand, right on the earth.

Later that day, Akwasi helped finish preparing their home, even though he knew it wouldn't survive the storm. That night, he sat in his quiet room beside his homemade mattress. *I get why people believe in a god. It gives them hope—something bigger to hold onto. But sometimes, it also holds them back. It keeps their minds from imagining something better.*

BIRDSONG FILLED THE air. In Zuzi, that meant one thing: time to go. People grabbed their bags and rushed into the street. Akwasi joined them, carrying a sack on his back and a homemade shoulder bag. Inside was his most valuable thing—a worn-out science journal.

He looked up at the birds. Soon they'd stop singing and fly to the coast, far from the storm. The wind shook the mango trees. The hot sun was gone, hidden behind heavy clouds.

Villagers from Oroboja stood outside, waving and smiling.

"My brothers!" called a friendly voice. A man with dark hands hugged Akwasi and his father.

"Uncle!" his father said, smiling. "How have you been?"

"When we have food and family, we have everything we need," Uncle replied.

Akwasi looked away.

"And most of all," Uncle added, clapping Akwasi on the back, "we have life."

His smile was full of joy. Akwasi tried to smile back, but it didn't feel real. Uncle wasn't really their uncle—just a distant relative of Akwasi's late mother. He was nearly seventy, but strong and alert. His skin was smooth from years under the sun.

Even after losing his wife to sickness, he was kind to everyone. His house was open to anyone who needed help. After Akwasi's mother died giving birth to him, he and his father lived with Uncle and his late wife. Later, they moved back to Zuzi.

"Come with me," Uncle said warmly.

Akwasi followed while his father and Uncle joked and laughed. At the house, Akwasi sat under the tall wooden stilts, quiet and thoughtful.

This would be a great place to build. If only I had tools and supplies.

A breeze swept through. Akwasi looked up. The sky sagged under a blanket of dark clouds, heavy and ready to split open. He stepped to the edge and held out his hand. A few raindrops landed on his skin—then more, and more.

He climbed up into the house. His eyes widened at the carved wood and stone inside. Uncle's artwork covered the walls. *I almost forgot about this. It's too bad Uncle spent his life in the sun working when he could've been making this. Now... maybe it's too late.*

Voices drifted from the next room. Uncle and his father sat at a limestone table.

"It's really coming down," Uncle said.

Akwasi nodded and took out his science journal. He flipped through the pages, pretending not to be afraid. After a while, he rolled it up and tucked it behind his back.

The sky grew darker. It was hard to tell if it was night or day. They pulled out thin mattresses and laid them on the living room floor. Ak-

wasi lay next to his father, half-asleep. Outside, the rain turned wild. Wind howled. Water slammed into the house, shaking it.

His eyes snapped open. The house swayed. He squeezed his eyes shut. The darkness felt like when he was small—alone and scared of the night. His father had always tried to comfort him. But deep down, Akwasi had wished for more.

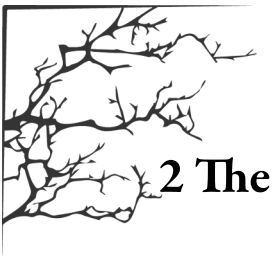
A mother's arms. A mother's song. A place where he felt truly safe. At midnight, the storm tide hit. The water began to rise—six feet high, then higher. By 4 a.m., it had climbed over ten feet.

Akwasi sat up, wide awake. He was done pretending. *Is this how it ends? What was it all for? No one will remember me. There's no life after this. I haven't done anything important.*

But the scariest part wasn't the storm. It was not knowing what would happen next.

"It'll be okay. We're going to make it," his father said, now awake, placing a steady hand on Akwasi's shoulder.

Thunder cracked through the sky, shaking the house. Bright flashes of lightning lit the sky like fire.



2 The Land of the Dragon

When the sun finally rose, the thunder stopped. The crashing waves faded into a soft, distant sound. Akwasi, his father, and Uncle peered out through the doorway. Their mouths fell open.

"I've never seen anything like this," Uncle said, his voice low.

Floodwater stretched to the horizon. Trash, broken wood, and twisted metal floated on the surface.

"We made it," Akwasi's father said. "See? I told you we would."

But Akwasi didn't feel safe. *If we don't get out of here soon, we're going to starve. Where is God now?*

The rest of the day passed in a strange haze. They didn't do much—just sat around, telling stories from their childhood.

Uncle and Akwasi's father took turns, each trying to outdo the other with silly memories. They laughed. They smiled. Sometimes, they paused to pray. It was always the same words:

"Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored. May your kingdom come. May what you want to happen be done on earth as it is done in heaven..."[2]

THE NEXT MORNING STARTED quiet—until a loud, fast chopping sound filled the air.

"What's that?" Akwasi asked, eyes darting.

"Sounds like a helicopter," his father said. "See, son? There's always hope."

Akwasi's heart jumped. *Maybe I was wrong. Maybe help is really out there...*

They rushed outside. Above them, a rescue helicopter hovered. A voice boomed from a loudspeaker.

"I'm with the Dagon Rescue Center! I'm here to help! Is anyone else in the house? Put your arms up for yes, arms out for no."

They all stretched their arms to the side.

"Just three of you? Arms up for yes, arms out for no."

They raised their hands.

The helicopter lowered. A rescuer leaned out and shouted, "Children first!"

He reached for Akwasi.

"Go," his father said. Uncle nodded.

"No, Dad. I'm not leaving you."

"I'll be right behind you," his father said.

"Then I'll wait."

"No, son. You have to go."

Akwasi climbed in, eyes locked on his father until he disappeared into the distance—a small, dark figure far below. The fear returned. It was worse than before.

THEY FLEW TO A SAFER part of the island—high ground, strong buildings, farms, and scientists. Inside a large building, everything was loud and confusing. Volunteers moved quickly. Children cried.

Akwasi didn't sleep. He waited—but his father never came. The sadness was too heavy to name. Days passed. Some kids found their parents. Not Akwasi.

Is he still alive? Did he find food? Did they leave him behind?

Weeks went by. Then one day, rescue workers made an announcement: The children still waiting would be sent to orphanages across Dagon.

THE ORPHANAGE BELL rang—thirty minutes until dinner. Everyone rushed outside to play. Akwasi sat alone on a squeaky bench, watching. They were kicking a real soccer ball. A real ball. Not made of rags.

He leaned forward. *Rubber? Maybe...*

A big kid appeared, tall and broad like a moving wall. He leaned against the fence.

"Hey! Open the gate!" he shouted.

"It's locked, man! No key!" someone replied. "You'll have to hop over!"

The big kid frowned.

Akwasi looked at the size of the kid. *No way he's jumping that.*

He stood up and walked over. "I could open it... if I had tools."

"We got a toolbox at my place," the big kid said. "What you need?"

"You have a real toolbox?" Akwasi asked, eyes wide.

"Yeah. Want the whole thang?"

"Yes. Definitely!"

Ten minutes later, the kid returned and hoisted the toolbox over the fence.

"Here you go."

Akwasi opened it slowly. His eyes lit up—real tools, all shiny and new. "This one'll work," he said, grabbing a screwdriver.

Click. The gate opened.

"Thanks, man! You gonna play?" the big kid asked.

"Maybe next game."

"All right!"

Like a rhino, the kid charged into the field—taller, faster, stronger than the rest.

Almost unfair. But it's not his fault he's built like that.

After the game, the kid came over, drenched in sweat. A breeze blew past—and the smell hit Akwasi like a truck. Whoa. *That's strong.* He rubbed his nose.

"Hey," the kid said, wiping his face. "You goin' to the fair this weekend?"

> "I heard some kids talking about it," Akwasi said. "But I don't know if we're allowed out. I've been kinda keeping to myself."

"Pretty sure that red-haired kid dips out on Saturdays. John or somethin'?"

"I wouldn't know. Haven't met many people."

"For real? How long you been here?"

"A month."

"Aight, cool. I'll come back Saturday—we'll go to the fair."

"I'm really not—"

"Later!" the kid called, cutting him off. "Gotta get home 'fore the streetlights come on!"

He vanished down the road. Akwasi watched him go.

Maybe he wasn't serious... or maybe he'll forget.

AKWASI STARED AT THE clock. Tick. Tick. Tick. Each second dragged. He got up, took it off the wall, and opened the back. Tiny wires. Little parts. He poked around until he understood it—then

closed it and checked the big wall clock in the hallway. 4:00 PM. He adjusted his own clock to match and hung it back up with a sigh. His eyes wandered around the room. A radio. A flashlight. An old TV. He'd taken each one apart before, just to see how it worked.

Akwasi opened a drawer and pulled out his science journal. He didn't read it much, but having it nearby felt like carrying a little piece of hope. Sitting on the edge of his bed, the journal in his lap, his thoughts drifted to his dad. He missed him. He used to wish his dad had a different job—something that could change their village. A teacher. A doctor. An engineer. But his dad was a fisherman. Just like his father. Like most men in Zuzi.

Akwasi once thought his dad had settled for a life of poverty. But now... he wasn't so sure. He remembered early mornings. His dad's steady hands tying lines. Teaching him to read the waves. His dad didn't talk about dreams. He just worked. Every day. No complaints.

Maybe he didn't settle. Maybe he chose what would take care of us. Maybe that's enough.

A knock pulled him from his thoughts. The door opened. A boy stepped inside.

"Hey," he said. "You know Kenji?"

"No," Akwasi replied.

"Well, he told me to find a tall, skinny kid who never talks and say he's waiting outside to go to the fair. You kinda fit that."

"Oh... yeah, I know who he is." *Never talks? We only spoke once. And not even for ten minutes.*

As the boy turned to go, Akwasi called out, "What's your name?"

He turned back, brushing messy red hair from his face. "John. Yours?"

"Akwasi. Do we have to ask permission to leave?"

"They just want you to sign out. There's a sheet at the front. Be back before six or the gates will be locked."

"Okay, thanks."

Outside, Kenji was waiting at the gate, grinning.

"You're Kenji?"

"Yeah," he said.

"I'm Akwasi. Where's the fair?"

"Up the road. Not far." Kenji shrugged. "I was gonna take my sister, but she don't like crowds. She's kinda quiet like that."

"You have a sister?"

"Yeah. We're twins. Moved here with our grandma three months ago."

"Where are your parents?"

"They're away on business." Kenji shrugged again. "So Grandma Mae's in charge now."

"How long will they be gone?"

"Don't know. Hopefully not too long. We can't leave anyway—Grandma Mae's sick. But she'll get better soon." He kicked a rock. "Honestly, I kinda like it here better than where we were."

"Where's that?"

"Big city—Gatam. We had a three-bedroom house. And a dog."

"Where's the dog?"

"Had to give him away. Chewed up everythin'—shoes, the couch, even homework. What about you? Where you from?"

"A small village. Zuzi."

"Oh yeah? What's it like?"

"Like a hamster wheel. You run and run but don't get anywhere."

They kept walking. Music floated on the air. A man on stilts called, "Come see the littlest horse in the world! Only fifty cents!"

"I kinda want to see that," said Kenji.

"I don't have any money. Do you?"

"Nope. Looks like everything costs money," said Akwasi. "Maybe we're in the wrong place."

They laughed.

"But I am curious about that littlest horse," said Akwasi.

"Me too." Kenji grinned. "I think I can get us some money."

Kenji started asking for spare change. In a few minutes, he had enough.

They paid and went inside, sitting near the front. A clown with face paint and a tall hat stepped out.

"Are you ready, kids, to see the littlest horse in the world?" he shouted.

"Yes!" the crowd cheered.

Kenji glanced around. "Why is everyone in here, like... two years old?"

"I was wondering the same thing," Akwasi said, raising his voice over the noise.

"Here comes Daisy—the littlest horse in the world!" the clown yelled.

A tiny horse trotted into the spotlight.

Kenji groaned. "Man, that ain't nothin' but a pony. Coulda seen one for free down the road."

"Yeah," Akwasi nodded. "What a waste of money."

"Good thing it wasn't ours," Kenji grinned.

"Littlest horse in the world," Akwasi muttered, shaking his head.

Kenji stood up. "Hey, there's a pickup game at the park. You in?"

"I better head back," said Akwasi.

"Okay. I'll stop by tomorrow."

Akwasi watched him go, unsure if he meant it. But for once, he hoped he did.