

# NASOMI'S QUEST

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LEGENDS OF AO #1

ENOCK I. SIMBAYA

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# Contents

CHAPTER 1 Lord Tambo.....	9
CHAPTER 2 The Walk.....	16
CHAPTER 3 The Kiss.....	25
CHAPTER 4 The Confrontation.....	31
CHAPTER 5 Tambo's Choice.....	37
CHAPTER 6 Because of the Dreams.....	47
CHAPTER 7 Retribution.....	56
CHAPTER 8 The Girl in the Dream.....	64
CHAPTER 9 A Life Lived Well.....	72
CHAPTER 10 The Kwindi Affair.....	79
CHAPTER 11 Two Kinds of Magic.....	85
CHAPTER 12 Lost Trails.....	94
CHAPTER 13 The Sorcerer Kings.....	101
CHAPTER 14 The Meaning of Dreams.....	108
CHAPTER 15 The Bride's Return.....	119
CHAPTER 16 Of Magic and New Dreams.....	127
CHAPTER 17 A Quest Begins.....	134
CHAPTER 18 A Friend from God's Teeth.....	143
CHAPTER 19 The Redland.....	153
CHAPTER 20 The Madness.....	161
CHAPTER 21 The Seer.....	170
CHAPTER 22 The Conspirators.....	179
CHAPTER 23 The Heart of Mohale.....	189
CHAPTER 24 Big Story, Small Story.....	196

CHAPTER 25 In the Kingdom of Bones.....	202
CHAPTER 26 Dreamwalking.....	210
CHAPTER 27 Tambo's Heart.....	217
CHAPTER 28 Into Tunkambe.....	227
CHAPTER 29 Shapes in the Dark.....	236
CHAPTER 30 The Secrets of Beauty and Love.....	246
CHAPTER 31 The Mfunda.....	254
CHAPTER 32 Unbridled Tellings.....	266
CHAPTER 33 The Drumbeat of the Gods.....	273
CHAPTER 34 All Has Been Repaid.....	280
CHAPTER 35 Walker of the Spirit World.....	288

For my lovely wife, Bumbe.

There's greatness in you.



*However long the night, the dawn will break.*

—AFRICAN PROVERB





# CHAPTER 1

## LORD TAMBO

Nasomi uncovered the basket to admire her work. She inhaled the aroma that wafted from it, reveled in Father's yet-to-be-given compliments. "This is wonderful, my daughter," he would say, his mouth full. She'd prepared his favorite: pumpkin leaves mixed with powdered peanuts and dried chili; she'd included a piece of hard bread.

"Nice!" she said out loud, proud of the extra attention she'd put into her work.

"I'm sure it is," someone behind her said.

She started. "I'm sorry, I didn't notice you were behind me," she told the man.

He was dressed in a rich brown sleeveless tunic adorned with patterns of red and green, and baggy breeches fastened at his shins. His sandaled feet were dustless, like he'd walked on the air. All his fingers had rings of copper, all studded with various gems, marking him as a tribal lord. He had searching, teasing eyes and a long handsome face. He had much hair on his head, and although it was unkempt, it suited him well.

Nasomi performed her act of courtesy: she touched her chest, curtsied. "My Chief. Please pardon me."

"That is good smelling food there." He returned the greeting by touching his chest and dipping his head. He gave her a sweet smile.

"It's for my father. I am sorry I blocked your way, My Chief."

ENOCK I. SIMBAYA

The path at that point was too narrow to let him pass by her. It wound through tall grasses and bushes. She covered the basket and walked on. She couldn't seem to walk fast enough. His strides were long and he was but a pace behind her.

After a while, he said, "I think the path is now wide enough for us to walk abreast."

They had gone past the thicker section, and the grass and wild flowers in the sides were easy to tramp upon if more walking space was to be required. She ignored him and tried to walk faster.

"I mean you no harm," he said.

"Isn't that what a robber or rapist would say?"

He gave a short laugh. "You're right. I am sorry. I think I am lost," he said. "Someone pointed the way, but there are too many forks, I misremember."

She paused to let him catch up. They were now by the first field and a number of people were in sight. She felt safe enough. "You are a tribal lord," she said, "but where are your attendants?"

"I didn't need my own today. I am in my father's company."

She didn't pry. "Where is the lost lord going?"

"To a field."

"That's not saying much."

"All I know is my father will be there, to attend to some dispute."

"The fields begin here, My Chief. You can go along this path until you come to the one you are looking for."

He gestured for her to continue walking. "What is your name?" he asked.

She could lie, but she wasn't a good liar and it was just her name. "Nasomi."

"Nasomi," he said, stressing the 'o' in a thick accent that revealed he was of the Somebo tribe. "Lovely name. Mine is Tambo Mwanakepe Go."

"So you belong to the Kepe clan. It must be nice being the son of a Chieftain."

## *Nasomi's Quest*

"It has its good days... Ah, I see you don't believe me because I travel alone. Why would someone impersonate a tribal lord?"

"I'd expect a palanquin and at least half a dozen attendants, maybe a singer or two to sing your praise as you move to the admiration of the people."

"I like walking around alone. Helps me see things I would otherwise miss. Like finding a woman in the bushes talking to herself. Look, my breeches have pockets. Sometimes I put my hands in them to not be too conspicuous." He demonstrated, grinning as well.

"Your clothes, though. They scream rich and lordly."

He shrugged. "Not as much as the rings."

They walked on for a moment in silence. "Some people I know talk to themselves," she said defensively. "You crept up on me."

"I didn't. You were minding what was in the basket to hear me come. I only wanted to ask for directions."

"But you're not a rapist?"

He laughed, and so did she. She found herself mimicking his laughter.

"I hate such people," he said, with all seriousness. "You'll forgive me for saying this, but if I were a spirit, I would haunt them at night and rip out their innards and let their bodies rot in the streets."

"So would I."

There were a dozen more people than she expected on her father's field. Even the lowest among the strangers looked richly dressed in the manner Tambo was. Her father looked drab against all that finesse, as he argued with another elderly man who was obviously Tambo's father.

"It seems we were coming to the same place," Tambo said to her.

She rushed to her father's side.

ENOCK I. SIMBAYA

“You keep disputing the deed,” Chieftain Go said, waving a parchment in Nasomi’s father’s face. “Would you like me to read it again?”

“I have a deed also,” Father said. He leaned on his hoe and looked eager to get back to the digging. “It has the monograph of the king himself and his scorched symbol. And it says my land extends four gardens, from there to there”—he indicated with a shaking finger—“and five the other way. I’ve had it for five years, My Chief. Five years. Ask Chishala, my neighbor, there. There are beacons set. I was there when they were being laid by the architects themselves.”

“You haven’t shown it to me. My deed here reads that—”

“Yes, yes, you repeat yourself. Your deed describes your land being seven gardens long. A good part of that lies in the farms of Chisala and the other idiot over there. I do not see you harassing them to hand over the land. Why only me? Because I am a poor farmer who has nothing but a few grains to plant?”

“Harassing you? I am here only to claim what is mine.”

Father touched Nasomi’s hand. “Quick, my daughter, rush to the house. Get the deed to this land. It will be folded neatly in the small chest beside my pallet.”

“I am not leaving you alone,” she said.

“I need the deed, Somi. My Chief here seems to think this is his land.” He looked the chieftain straight in the eye.

“Are you saying I am trying to steal from you?” The chieftain was breathing hard, near wheezing.

“Father,” Tambo said, so coolly like tempers were not flared. He knelt before the chieftain.

“Son. Did you get lost like I knew you would?” the chieftain asked as though only just noticing that Tambo was there.

“No. I took a different route.”

“Stand, my son. Now, I want these people arrested and tried.”

## *Nasomi's Quest*

"May I propose another way to solve this, Father?"

Chieftain Go sat on the seat of his palanquin. "I'm impatient, boy. What other way is there? This is our land here."

"Hear my proposal. Let us invite these people to our table and we can examine both parchments, and we can call experts to help us. Perhaps there has been a mix-up, but a good-natured discussion over a meal can set things right."

The chieftain grunted. "Now they must eat my food as well? A good few days in a dungeon will bring senses to this man." He pointed at Nasomi's father, who scowled at the insult.

"I am not an interpreter of the law, and neither are you, Father," Tambo said. "We need someone to examine both documents. If it turns out we are right, this man here would have no objections about it. And we might even employ him to look after the farm."

"Or have him imprisoned."

"And if it turns out we are wrong," Tambo continued, "we would have not condemned an innocent man. And people will still say good things about us in either case."

"Good things. Good things! *Pa!*" the chieftain said bitterly, shaking his head. "I should have come with one of your brothers instead. They know how to act quickly. You talk too much."

"But you must admit I have talked well."

His father gave him a long look. "Perhaps you have. Have it your way, for now. Take charge of this dinner yourself, and see that this is brought to a quick end. The sun is hot on me, I would go home now."

The attendants immediately took their places around the palanquin and hoisted it to their shoulders in a well-rehearsed synchrony. A poet strummed his string instrument, prepared his voice as the palanquin began to move. Tambo gave a small wave to Nasomi and

ENOCK I. SIMBAYA

mouthed something she couldn't make out, then followed after the chieftain.

Nasomi and Father went home without working on the field. When he spoke, it was to mumble about how greedy some people in the world were, how unfair life was, and how this was the work of the *Tumina*, the spirits beneath the ground. Nasomi had seen him bitter, but this was deep, this was fury. He kicked the dirt and picked stones to throw at trees. He dropped the hoe and Nasomi had to carry it.

At home, he refused to eat, refused to wash, no matter how many times Nasomi pleaded. He muttered to himself when he thought he was alone, and complained to Nasomi and her cousin, Naena, when they were anywhere close to him.

"We've lost everything," he said. "Everything! All because of some greedy man. He has more than generations after him will need. Why does he want to also get my crumbs?" He coughed so terribly Nasomi thought he'd cough himself to death.

"I can start selling things at the market," she said. "We can sustain ourselves."

"What things, if we will have nothing to reap? And what will I do? Sit on my rump all my days till I die?"

"Father, you're being so anxious. What would Mother say?"

"Don't bring her up to try to control me." He coughed. "You know how hard she and I worked to get that piece of land."

Nasomi looked to Naena for help, but her cousin, who usually knew what to say, was quiet.

"We mustn't lose hope, Father. I think things will go well. The young lord will make things well for us."

He sucked through his teeth, and went to his room, muttering to himself.

"Young lord?" Naena said. "You must tell me about him."

"Now you have found your mouth?"

*Nasomi's Quest*

“What did you want me to say, Somi? You’ve seen the mood he is in. Just tell me about this young lord.”

ENOCK I. SIMBAYA

## CHAPTER 2

### THE WALK

Nasomi and Naena were scouring pots the next morning when Tambo appeared at the gateway. Naena was the one who saw him and she nudged Nasomi. They both stood and wiped their hands on their wrapping cloths as he entered. He was smiling.

“I found the place,” he said, looking quite pleased with himself.

“My Chief,” Nasomi and Naena said together, curtsying.

“You came here, My Chief?” Nasomi asked. She became conscious of her and Naena’s appearance: unoiled skins, undone hair, wrapping cloths with sodden patches. And also the small drab house, the unremarkable yard with a falling fence around it. Two hens chased another right past Tambo’s feet, clucking too loudly.

He returned the compliment. “Ladies.” He didn’t seem bothered by the poor surroundings. “I asked around for a farmer with a daughter called Nasomi. I got lost through some of the ways, but I persisted.”

“You have to forgive us, we didn’t expect this,” Nasomi said. “We were going to come to your home this evening for the meeting.”

“I told you I’d come to find you. There’s no need for the meeting now. I have set things right.”

“You mean the farm? It is ours?”

“Yes. Entirely. I convinced my father to let the matter go. We have more than enough land, and it was a matter of inquiring about the deed. Is your father home?”



## *Nasomi's Quest*

"Let me get him. He will be glad of this." She rushed into the house and found Father dozing on a stool next to his pallet. He had said he needed to pray. It seemed he needed sleep more.

She knelt before him. "Father?"

He lifted his head to look at her like he'd been expecting to see her there. "Mhmm?"

"Father, Lord Tambo is here. He has some news about our land."

He opened his mouth and paused, as if not comprehending. "Lord Tambo? Who is...? He's come here? He's outside our house?"

"Come, Father." She took him by the hand and led him outside.

"My Chief," Father said, touching his heart and dipping his head.

"The *Mara* bless you," Lord Tambo said, gesturing for the man to be at ease.

"When my daughter told me there was a lord at the door, I thought it was your father. Where are your attendants, My Chief?"

Tambo stole a glance at Nasomi, gave a dismissive laugh. "I sent them on an errand. I thought to personally bring this news to you. The land..."

"Yes?" Father shuddered.

"It turned out our deed was old and invalid. We didn't realize my great-grandmother had gifted the land to the king and somebody forgot to get rid of the deed. When Father stumbled upon it... Well, he thought we had land no one had reminded him of. But it is all yours now."

Father did a stiff dance of wiggling his shoulders and pumping his fists. "Ahhhh! This is so wonderful! I don't know how I can thank you, My Chief."

"No need," Tambo said. "My father was quick to understand and leave the land in the hands of a hardworking citizen like you. I have also provided you with two workers to help you with the season's growing."

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