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Opening extract from

# The Door of No Return

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# The Lost Prince

I knew something was wrong the minute I shut the door of number 13, Arrowsmith House, Tuffley. I'd lived there as long as I could remember. What I didn't know was I'd just closed the door on that part of my life.

We were late. Pops had insisted on wearing his Kente cloth. He didn't really know how to tie it, and he had to get his coat over the top of the whole thing, so we'd been fussing in the front hall for ten minutes. It was cold outside, bitterly cold, and with only two days to go, I was hoping for a white Christmas.

I think it was because I was inspecting the patch of grass at the front, to see if it was snow or frost, that I noticed the footsteps. Someone had been standing there for a while. The frozen grass was broken and crushed; there were patterns of pale steps pacing along the front of the flat, up and down.

For some reason I felt a flash of anger. Someone was taking liberties. I scanned the parking lot and thought

I saw a shape, a woman – sort of ageless with a blank grey face.

'We'll dazzle them tonight eh, Zac?' said Pops.

I didn't reassure him. That woman's grey look had unsettled me. Instead I took his arm and glanced the length of the housing estate. It looked safe. Fairy lights twinkled in windows – but people get angry at Christmas. Angry for all the things they want and can't have. So I wasn't taking any chances.

'When I get to the part about the Lost Prince, you show them your back.'

My back is stunningly fit like the rest of me, but that was not why Pops wanted to show it off. A cat ran out from under a car and I jumped.

Pops chuckled; I was not in a mood to humour him. 'It's cold,' I said, 'I don't really want to.' To tell you the truth, I didn't want to go at all.

The Cormantin Club was Grandpa's baby. He was the founding member, Big Chief, the soul of the whole thing. That's Pops for you. Really the Cormantin Club was just a bunch of old black folks harking back to the days of slavery and drinking. After a few glasses they tried to outdo each other with wild tales. Pops were always the wildest.

'They can't disprove me today, cos I got the diaries.' He clutched the plastic bag up to his chest.

I remember that bag.

'I'm going to read them the dying words of King Baktu.' Pops stopped and flung out his hand. Funny the things you remember. His outstretched arm, the plastic bag, and that feeling that something was wrong.

'Until my son, the Lost Prince – get it, that's you – comes back through the Door of No Return and claims his ransom, my soul will never rest in the land of my ancestors. That'll shut the old buggers up.'

'But Pops, *you* wrote that bit in *your* diary.'

'But that's what he said, son, so it doesn't matter which diary it's wrote in.'

I'd got him a briefcase for Christmas. I figured he needed it!

That's when I noticed the two shadows up ahead. I shivered. A cloud passed over the moon like a hand across a face. The pavements darkened. Only the orange glare of the streetlights glittered on the frost.

'Then when they see the tribal marks . . .'

'Let's cross over.'

It was always the same old story. Pops told it over and over, as if nobody had heard it before. That him and me were the last descendants of King Baktu, that his only son, our great-times-whatever-grandfather, had been stolen away as a child by slavers, that a king's ransom had been raised, but the treasure and the child

were lost. It was true that we did have scar marks on our backs. But I know for certain that mine had been put there by Pops.

I suppose he was trying to feel important about something. Living on a Gloucester housing estate needed bigging up a bit.

The two shadows waited, half hidden behind some large waste bins. As we crossed over, they came forward. I can't remember much about either of them, other than a glimpse of royal-blue tracksuit with white stripes. What I do remember was that woman's blank face flashing into my brain. I began to feel very edgy. Despite the cold I broke out in a slight sweat. I moved Pops to the inside so I was between him and the street. I tightened my features into a really mean screwface. I thought I was tough. What was I thinking? Why couldn't I have done more?

It happened very fast. Suddenly one of the shadows came running straight at me, yelling something about a stabbing, about needing help. The other one staggered into the street, screaming. I looked at one, then the other. My jaw dropped. I should never have hesitated. The next thing I knew, I was flat on my back with my head exploding. I heard Pops scream. I saw the other shadow sprint forward and grab the plastic bag. I heard the dull *thwack* of Pops's

skull hitting the pavement. Then they were gone.

I can't remember reaching Pops; I thought stupidly that he must have arranged it all as a bit of drama. My head hurt so much I couldn't think straight. I think I was bleeding.

Pops looked so small lying there – crumpled, like a bundle of discarded rags. In his hand was part of a diary and shreds of bag. He wasn't moving.

Everything was going to be OK. I shook him a little and then remembered not to. I pulled out my mobile. Funny how I'd always wanted to dial 999.

'Pops, it's going to be OK.'

'No,' he said, 'it's not.'

He was speaking – so of course it was going to be OK.

'They've got the diaries, but they haven't got the map.'

'Just hold on, the police are coming.'

'Look in my pocket.' His hand fluttered. I tore aside the kente. I looked in the breast pocket of his overcoat and pulled out one slim volume.

'That's the one they wanted.' His voice was so old and tired. An ache started somewhere in the back of my throat. I looked helplessly around.

That was when I saw the woman with the blank grey face again; she was right behind us. Far too close.

'Don't let them get it,' he said and pressed the last diary towards me.

I took off my jacket and covered him. I sat down and cradled his head. I thought, if that woman comes any closer I'll smack her so hard she'll be the one who needs the ambulance. Somebody leant out of an upstairs window and started shouting something.

'You've got to promise me, Zac, to go back and get the treasure.'

My heart was thudding. My head hurt. The tightness in my throat was choking me. But I didn't want the woman to see the diary, so I let go of Pops's hand and stuffed it inside my hoody. She was weird. She just stood there, not offering to help; not doing anything! Just standing there pushing back the cuticles of her left hand with that blank grey face.

'They haven't got the map,' said Pops again. 'It never was in the diaries.'

I didn't want her to hear what he was saying either.

'The map is the secret, see.'

'Try to stay quiet.'

'They haven't got it.'

The woman moved closer. Pops's hand clutched at mine. 'Zac, promise . . .'

I played along. 'Who's got it then?'

'You have.'

# The Police Station

The ambulance came. I wanted to help, but they looked at my head and made me sit down while they made Pops comfy. Then the older guy came over to check me. The other put a silver blanket on Pops and went back to the cab for something. I saw the woman move towards Pops and I shouted. The older guy calmed me. I gripped his arm and told him that the woman was nothing to do with us.

'She's a witness though, mate,' he said.

Then more people and the police arrived, and it all got mad. They wouldn't let me go to the hospital. They wouldn't let me give Pops the funky we-can-beat-this handshake. I ended up at the station making statements, seeing social workers, I don't know.

At first I didn't think it was odd that the woman ended up in the police station as well. I supposed the ambulance guy was right and she was simply making a statement too. I was worried about Pops. I was

wondering what he meant about the map. I was angry with myself. I was thinking about how I was going to find those brothers and pulp them. But still, she gave me the creeps and instinctively I checked that the diary was safe.

At some point a lady came in. She said, 'Sit down, Zac. This is going to be hard for you.'

I was already sitting.

'You have to be very brave.'

I waited. It's funny how some minutes seem long.

'We've just got word from the hospital. Is there anyone we can phone for you?'

I shook my head. It had always been just me and Pops.

'Your grandfather was declared dead on arrival. I'm sorry.'

I remember thinking – strange – we certainly are going to show the 'old buggers' now.

I think I smiled. Then felt that I shouldn't smile. It wasn't true anyway. It was all a mistake. He'd been talking to me before the ambulance came.

'I'm sorry,' she said again.

'You're lying,' I said. 'I want to see him.'

'We don't want you to go home alone. If there's no one we can call, I'd like you to stay here until we can fix something up.'

'Where's Pops?' I said.

'He's dead, Zac. You've got to be very strong.'

I made for the door. The lady said, 'You'll need a few minutes alone. I'll make you some tea. Do you take sugar?'

I waited until she'd left, then I left too. I was going to the hospital, even if I had to walk. I took the stairs to the ground floor and I was just about to go out when I saw that grey-faced woman again. She was standing inside the main door making a phone call: '. . . Stage one, objective one . . . It can't be helped at present . . . Objective two in progress . . . Objective three completed . . . The boy has it . . . Another objective three? . . . Well, he's already in the system. You'll have to pull strings your end . . . Yes . . . Yes . . .'

*Click.*

I belted back up the stairs. I asked for the toilet. I bolted myself in a cubicle and sat on the loo seat shivering. '. . . *Objective three completed . . . The boy has it . . . Another objective three? . . . Well, he's already in the system . . .*' Didn't sound like a call you'd make when you've just witnessed a mugging. I don't know what it sounded like, but the words '*the boy has it*' were pretty clear. There was only one boy around and there was only one thing he'd got. And right now I was pulling it out of my hoody and opening it up.

Pops's last diary, the one he'd said *they* wanted, was written in a foreign language.

Unreadable.

I didn't know what to do, but I couldn't stay in the toilet for ever, so I went back to the interviewing room.

Ms Shaw, the lady with the tea, was there. She puckered up her lips in that I-feel-sorry-for-you way that adults do, then she said, 'Did your grandfather give you anything before he died that might be a clue as to why he was attacked?'

I thought that was a very odd question. It made me feel very suspicious. Ms Shaw was nodding away, as if to reassure me, but I could tell she was looking at someone else. I glanced round. I'll give you one guess who was standing in the corridor outside. Yep, through the glass door behind me was that woman again. She was just standing there with her blank face looking in on us – just like she'd done on the street.

'Who's she?' I said.

'I don't know, Zac,' said Ms Shaw. 'She's – I really can't . . . They don't tell me anything.' She smiled as if she'd like to be more cooperative.

I hate tea, but I drank that one. My brain had just added up 2+2. I'm not stupid.

They made 4.

'She wants to help with the attack,' continued Ms Shaw.

I spluttered the tea. She helped all right, I thought. She really helped a lot.

It was a good job I did not find out the truth about that woman then. I might have given up. I might just have walked out, handed her the diary and said, 'I'm ready for my objective three. Please make it as painless as possible.'

Pops used to say, '*Ignorance is bliss.*' That might be an exaggeration, but right then it probably saved my life.

# December 23rd

I stayed in the police station that night. Oh they tried to get me into emergency care, but it was the night before Christmas Eve. People were wrapping presents, eating mince pies. Ms Shaw had her own family to get back to. I don't want to talk about it.

I didn't sleep. I sat on the corner of the bed and watched the door. Every hour or so a guard strolled by. I didn't see the woman though. I gave up biting my nails when I was ten, but that night I cheated.

I thought about Pops. I thought about the mugging. I thought about that woman. Who was she? Why had she been watching our flat? Was she connected to the muggers? And what was she up to in the police station?

My head hurt and I had a pain deep in my chest that hadn't been there before. The words: '*declared dead on arrival*' kept swimming up into my ears. Pops couldn't be dead. He was too colourful to die. He couldn't be dead: it was Christmas. I didn't care if he never used the

briefcase; I would even carry his plastic bag for him. I'd show his old blokes at the club my back. I'd believe in his stories. Yes, we'd go to Africa. We'd rest beneath rustling palms and hunt for his treasure . . . Look, I'd even turn my music down. What was going to happen to me? Where had they put him? I was all alone now in a big unfriendly world.

The next morning, they brought me beans on toast for breakfast, but I wasn't hungry. One of the policemen was reading the newspaper. It was the Christmas Eve edition. He showed it to me. I think that was when I really believed. I kept it. Here it is. I'll stick it in.

**OLD GOLD-COASTER DIES IN BRUTAL MUGGING**

Popular pensioner, Samuel Baxter, died late last night as another victim of street crime in Gloucester. He was attacked by two assailants outside his home in Tuffley. They only got away with some personal papers, but left their victim dying. Mr Baxter, 85, was well known in the area for founding the Cormantin Club. He was actively involved in seeking sponsors to fund his Return to Africa venture. Mr Baxter believed that he

was the inheritor of a vast fortune in gold dust raised by one of his distant ancestors. He had traced his history and said he knew where the treasure was buried. In a recent interview with The Daily Echo one month ago, Mr Baxter said, 'I have tangible evidence of where the treasure is. In 1701, my ancestor was sold as a slave from Cape Coast. All I want is for members of the black community to come forward and sponsor my club to mount an expedition to retrieve the gold. Until the West pays the descendants of slavery due compensation, our community needs every penny it can get.'

Mr Baxter leaves behind a teenage grandson. The police are now treating the assault as a murder inquiry.

'It *was* murder!' I told the policeman. 'He was alive and somebody killed him in the ambulance.' Then I paused. I'd remembered something. When I'd been sitting on the kerb, when that woman had gone over to Pops, in that split second when the ambulance guy had spoken, I'd heard a second dull *thwack*. A second crunch of bone hitting paving stone. Or had I?

'That woman did it,' I said. 'She killed him.'

'You've been through a lot, kid,' said the policeman.

'I've remembered something,' I said. 'I want to change my statement.'

'Sometimes it's like that,' he said. 'Stress.'

I think I made a bit of a fuss, but they wouldn't allow me to change anything. I demanded to know who the woman was. 'I want her name – the one who made the witness statement.'

Eventually a policeman went to check. He came back shaking his head. 'No witnesses,' he said. 'Only you.'

I stopped making a fuss. I went cold all over.

Even though I don't have asthma, I couldn't breathe. In my mind I saw her crouching over Pops, whispering, 'Are you OK?' Then dragging his poor, old, beloved head up with her cuticled nails and slamming it back down on the pavement.

Writing that makes me very, very scared. I may never prove it and I may never get even, but, like King Baktu, my soul will never rest until I do.

Bernard says justice is the best revenge. He likes to quote. He says, '*The wheels of justice grind slow, but they grind exceedingly fine.*' I'm sure hoping they are going to grind right over her. Bernard says it's best to record everything. He says my 'insights are important'. He says to attach all the documents I've collected, so that the

barrister can create a case out of it. I'll take the stand as well if necessary. I was scared once, but I'm not any more. You see this is all part of the justice, part of the revenge and part of my pledge to Pops. He wanted a court case and he'll get it. I'll make sure he does, if that's the last thing I do.

Talking of diaries, I did ask my social worker, Ms Shaw, if I could have the pages that Pops had held on to.

'As soon as the inquest is over, I promise you.'

I asked her if I could go home now. I wanted to be alone in the flat. I don't know, but I still felt ill. I wanted to curl up in Pops's bed, like when I was small. I wanted to look at his picture, because for some silly reason I couldn't remember what he looked like.

'Sit down, Zac,' she said. 'There's something I need to tell you. Try to be strong.'

I sat down.

'Last night your home was broken into. It seems with all the upheaval going on, we forgot to send an officer to check on your flat.'

?

'Za-ac?'

'What did they take?'

'Well it's quite extraordinary: everything except the carpets is gone.'

I looked at her. Boy, she had to be making that up.

'We are not connecting it to the attack at the moment, but it does seem strange . . .'

Strange? My CDs, my clothes, Pops's papers, my sound system, his drums, his bed with the quilted cover. I think at that point I put my head down on the table.

'We know your grandfather was involved in a bid to return to Africa . . . Had he collected any sponsorship money? Did he keep it in the flat?'

'No. That buried gold was just an old story – nobody believed it.' Even I didn't. But you know how it is – it kept him going somehow; it was his dream. Everyone needs a dream. And it was kind of fun to help him make his plans.

'We'll need you to make an inventory of the flat – but not now, not until you're ready. Do you know if your grandfather had any insurance?'

I shook my head.

'I've arranged for you to go to a foster home. They're nice people. They know all about what's happened. Try to be strong.'

When I look back now, I can see how un-strong I was. Boy, I didn't have a clue. I was adding 2+2 and getting 4. Duh! I didn't imagine anyone could take Pops seriously. What – seriously enough to kill him?

Did I say I was all alone in a big unfriendly world? I was about to find out just how unfriendly it could get.