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Living Legends

by Catherine Martella

PROMPT: You started listening to a podcast about strange creatures in myths and legends. Jokingly, you start to put out offerings of bread and such, asking permission to cross bridges and fields. When one day you hear a small voice in your ear: “No one has given me an offering in centuries.”

The sun was streaming in through the old glass windows, scorching Bongani and making his arm stick to the desk as he tried to fight the nap that seemed to be curling itself up inside his head. Why, he wondered for the millionth time, did they design the windows to be more like cages—metal grid more concerned with trapping students than airflow. Stop, stop—focus, Bongani chastised himself as he shifted more upright trying to wake up. Even the fly on the desk, Bongani noted, took no notice of his movement. It too was under the spell of the high, lolling afternoon sun. As though sensing the fading attention of the class his teacher began turning on the sound system. Bongani tried to focus on what he was saying. It was not that his was a boring class; in fact, for an English class it was quite interesting with a focus on magic realism instead of the typical high school fare. He had no idea, however, what the audio that Mr. Pugh was about to play was related to. Bongani shrugged, it didn’t matter he was glad; the discussion of myths and legends was more interesting than the metaphor analysis of Marquez. As the podcast went on Bongani began to feel an increasing familiarity with the creatures and legends being discussed. Sitting in the sweltering sun that actually seemed to have its own pulse Bongani began to cool, a slight tingle running down his neck as he closed his eyes.

As Bongani closed his eyes he could hear the legend, but the voice narrating it was no longer dry digital young woman. He could hear the words clearly and see the old man sitting by the fire, elbows gently rested on his knees, eyes lost in the flames as he spoke of the old legends in the manner of one remembering their past. Bongani felt such comfort in the story, the memory. Bongani found himself settling into that night and the illicit freedom he felt in its memory when the bell rang. His eyes shot open and the previously sedated class leapt up like sprinters coming out of their chinks.

The day was then like any other day, as Bongani shuffled from class to class forgetting all about his drifting off to past memories. That night though, as he was walking back to his dorm from

the dining hall, he was on the path that curved under the big eucalyptus when he stopped. Maybe it was the smell of the eucalyptus, or the bright orange streaks dying across the evening sky, but Bongani found himself back at the fire with the old man and he could feel himself waiting—for a story. The wind picked up and the long eucalyptus leaves warbled, and Bongani found himself back on the path. He looked around, wanting to go back to the old man and the fire. As he began walking again Bongani found himself dawdling, not wanting to arrive at the bright lights of the dorm. As Bongani was about to crest the last rise in the path before the dorm he cut off the path and found a rock below one of the avocado trees and sat down. It was not fully dark yet, but the color had drained from the world and it was now just shadows. Even in the twilight, the heat still radiated from the ground and the breeze made it just shy of uncomfortable. As his eyes adjusted to the lack of light Bongani began to let his mind wander into the darkened landscape, turning it back to that night by the fire with the old man and his stories.

Bongani crept down the dormitory hallway to the small window that was hidden behind the bin of hockey sticks. He knew that the window latch was broken, and he thought he might be able to fit through it. He was not sure why he wanted to go out, or what he would do if he did, but he enjoyed the exhilaration of escape and adventure. He squeezed by the hockey sticks and slowly pushed the window, which to his amazement did not squeak. He emerged into the crisp night in his robe and slippers with a deliciously satisfied smile. As he walked around, he encountered the night watchman, who must have been amused at the mischief of young boys and invited Bongani to sit with him by the fire. There was something magical about that night, and Bongani did not know if it was boyish adventure or the mesmerizing flames that kept the chill at bay and his eyes entranced or if it was the old man and his stories. Bongani could still smell the warm, slightly acrid smell of the wood fire that seemed to comfort his soul even now. Slowly, he let himself fall back into the old man's stories of the ancestors and the way the man's yellow tinged eyes stared into the flames as he told of the spirit animals that the sangoma would talk to. The old man, his beard graying and wrinkles deeply etched in the center of his forehead had seemed so sure of those legends, like they were a sepia toned photograph conjuring fond memories of a world lost to the past.

As Bongani stared up at the glow radiating from his dorm over the hill he wished they were real, the legends and the creatures that spoke. He slowly walked to the dorm, his head filled with wood smoke and still tickled with flames. That night before he climbed into bed, Bongani put out a cup of water and slice of bread like he remembered the old man said the elders used to do.

As the days passed, Bongani continued to leave his nightly offerings and he began to talk to the animals in his head as he wandered across campus. One morning as Bongani dashed from the dorm to breakfast, he was silently asking the scattering birds to forgive him for his haste when he was stopped cold by a small voice that said, "No one has given me an offering in generations." Bongani whipped his head around searching for the source of the voice, but there was no one. He thought perhaps one of his friends had found out about his new nightly habit and was mocking him, but there was no one save a gardener way up the path. Still, Bongani did not move, and as his mind searched for a possible explanation the voice spoke again, "I am over here on the aloe." Bongani focused on the odd plant and on one of the lower leaves that curved down in a graceful arch was a small chameleon its eyes cocked askew. Bongani felt his head begin to spin to match the chameleon's eyes as he tried to shake his head and say "It's in my head," first in his head and then aloud. As Bongani gave way a few steps the voice responded, "Of course it is in your head; that is how you have been talking to me." To his astonishment, Bongani found himself apologizing and telling the voice that he was late and had to go. He walked off dazed, and the rest of the day became a blur as his mind tried to rationalize what had happened.

Bongani waited to leave dinner till after all his friends, saying he had to go by the library. As he walked down the path his mind raced to the crickets' roar and he was not even sure if he wanted to hear the voice again. "If you are not sure if you don't want to hear me, then you probably want to hear me," said the voice. This time Bongani wasn't scared, and he realized he found the voice calming. Bongani smiled and thought to himself, "So the old man's stories were true" as he realized that the past was not lost if it was remembered. The voice echoed "Of course my stories were true. Come and sit and we will walk through the legends of the past once again."