

# 1



SHAMISO'S HEART BROKE into a shudder of beats. She could hear the jazzy trails of the *mbira* spiralling in the air. Her father would have loved that sound. She glanced at her mother, who stood next to her, fanning her sweaty neck. She seemed preoccupied. The music played on, painful and familiar.

When Shamiso was eight, her father had insisted that she learn how to play. The metal pellets had bruised the tips of her fingers as she plunked on them. A series of confused notes bumping into a glorious discord. The frustration had been too much for an eight-year-old, made worse by the fact that none of the other kids at school understood quite what the instrument was.

Shamiso listened as the voice of the *mbira* rose

proudly. Whoever was playing knew what they were doing. She could hear the underlying tone of a hum that flowed well with the song. And in that magnificent noise floated all the memories and feelings she was trying to ignore.

Her mother hovered by her side, trying to figure out where they should go. Shamiso felt numb, staring down at her shiny new shoes and listening to the music that disturbed the air.

‘Shamiso . . .’ Her mother hesitated. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I told you before,’ Shamiso muttered, biting her breath, ‘I don’t want to be at boarding school. Especially here!’

She watched her mother wipe her damp neck as though she had not heard her. Her blouse clung to her skin, moist from the sweat.

‘There’s no time to cry,’ her mother said softly. ‘Wipe your tears, *mwanangu*. You’ll be fine.’ She nodded at the administration block in front of them.

Shamiso saw the exhaustion on her mother’s face as they picked up the luggage and headed for the

administration block. They sat in the waiting room and looked around. The young man behind the reception desk seemed caught up in a tsunami of phone calls. The walls were lined with pictures of alumni at different events across the years. Shamiso could hear snatches of conversation from two men standing by the door.

‘. . . yes, but by staying away . . . we . . . are only punishing the children,’ one of the men said rather slowly. Shamiso kept her head down, concentrating on the tracks of the *mbira*.


‘You are beginning to sound like that journalist . . .’ the other man commented.

Shamiso raised her head. She guessed the men were teachers, but she could barely hear what they were saying. She leaned in.

‘Of course . . . we . . . we have to be smart about this,’ the first man continued, his voice rising in volume.

A bubble of anger formed in Shamiso’s throat. She tried to keep calm. Her ears picked up the music, which was slowly forming into a song. She wondered whether she would ever have been able to play like that.


The notes poked at her brain. Her father had called



it the sound of home, the stolen guitar of nature. She closed her eyes. Memories sat vividly in her mind. His fingers dancing around on the little pellet strings, his lips pursed, the music swirling. She held her breath, scared that if she breathed out too soon she would lose him.

A sudden voice jolted her back to the present. ‘Aww, first day at school, is it?’

Shamiso opened her eyes and wiped them with the back of her hand. A girl stood in front of her, holding a pile of books. Her curly hair was tied back tightly into a bun. She seemed to be headed for the staffroom.



‘Newcomer or first form?’ the girl asked.

‘I’m new . . .’ Shamiso mumbled.

‘Would you look at that! We have ourselves a Brit,’ the girl declared.

Shamiso gritted her teeth. The door to the staffroom suddenly opened. The cartoon on the door warned her that it was out of bounds. A teacher stood in the entrance, blocking the view as though the staffroom was some sacred destination that students were not meant to see. All Shamiso could hear was laughter as

the teacher beckoned the girl inside.

‘Well, don’t worry, Your Majesty, it will definitely get worse. The queen doesn’t come here for tea, I’m afraid,’ the girl said in her best imitation of what she thought was an English accent before following the teacher inside.

Shamiso fought the urge to call after her. She had hardly been in this country long and she was already certain she did not like it at all.

# 2

SHAMISO STOOD BESIDE the plump principal. Her mother had left – not that Shamiso had wanted her to stay. The principal signalled for the class to sit down.

Shamiso fidgeted. Her armpits stung and fear jeered right in her face. The last time she had been in a new place, her father was there. Things had always fallen into place when her father was in charge. She pulled the cuffs of her cardigan into her palms and held them tight.

‘Good morning, class,’ the principal’s *hadedda* voice rang out. She looked over the class like a god, standing with her hands sharply by her sides and her spectacles balancing on the edge of her nose. Her navy-blue dress suit sat perfectly, emphasising the seriousness of her

face. Her thin, curly, grey hair lay tired on her head. She seemed as though she was probably no more than a year or two from being bald.

‘Now, I have Miss Muloy with me. She is new and she will be joining us this term. I would like to stress that here at Oakwood we pride ourselves on our hospitality.’ She paused, probably for effect. Her spectacles slid down to the very tip of her nose as she placed a hand on Shamiso’s shoulder. ‘There’s an empty seat at the back; you can make your way there.’

It was clear Shamiso did not want to be here. Her fists swung close to her hips. Her breath was tempered. She gazed at the students, each with some kind of book in front of them and neatly placed behind their desks as though someone had taken the time to carefully align them. Their shirts were a crisp white, with the girls in green cardigans and the boys in maroon.

The room itself had grown old, with sagging paint and aging Post-its, windows with rusty frames and the wood-tiled floor. She stared at the tiles. There was something about their tired and unkempt state that she could relate to.

‘You can sit down!’ the principal told her, but it was as if Shamiso wasn’t in her body. She continued to stand, almost dazed, her feet forming some sort of bond with the floor.

‘To sit, or not to sit, that is the question,’ one of the students chuckled. The class broke into wild sniggers as Shamiso snapped back to reality.

‘Quiet! the principal said, turning to one of the girls at the front. ‘Paida, shouldn’t you be keeping the class in check until your teacher arrives?’ Shamiso’s eyes popped. The girl! The girl from reception! She shifted towards the principal.

‘Because of the strike, ma’am, Miss Ndlovu hasn’t been coming to teach us. We were reading from our Shakespeare set book. I believe that’s what Tinotenda is referring to,’ the girl said with a smirk on her face.

The principal halted by the door. ‘Things are hard for the staff, but I will talk to Miss Ndlovu.’ She paused. Three distinct lines formed on her forehead. ‘Paida, can I trust you to make sure that Miss Muloy settles in?’

‘Yes, ma’am!’ The girl answered confidently.

As soon as the principal was a safe distance away,



the class broke into chatter. There was only one thing Shamiso liked about this arrangement: she could sit in the back corner where she could hide and blend into the wall. She opened her desk, fighting the lump in her throat. She had to pull herself together. Her mother had insisted on this school. She was convinced that it was only at a mission school that a good education was guaranteed, and had groped for every cent she could find to pay the fees.

Oakwood High was one of the few mission schools left in the country, built by missionaries during the unstable liberation war of colonial times. It was located close to Chinhoyi, just a few kilometres west of the capital Harare. It had stood there for decades, thriving due to its exceptional pass rate and good morals.

Travelling to Oakwood had been close to a nightmare. Since petrol was scarce, only a few buses a day went to Chinhoyi. The bus had been packed beyond capacity in spite of the heat. Shamiso leaned close to the classroom window, still sticky and hungry for fresh air. She wiped the film of sweat from her forehead and gazed at the enormous oak tree outside. It reminded her of home.

‘You know, it’s always a good idea to come a day early. It takes away most of the stress and frustration,’ the student in front of her said, turning around. She had a delicate voice, soft like ripples of water, and a smile that lit up like gasoline. She extended her hand.

Shamiso lowered the lid of her desk, her eyes gliding from the girl’s face to her outstretched arm. The girl’s eyes had bags under them, carrying a world of fatigue. Shamiso stared a second longer and looked away. She could make out a *mbira* beneath the girl’s chair. She blinked rapidly, reached for her backpack and felt for her textbook.

‘Around here, you’re going to need friends,’ the girl said with a chuckle. ‘When you realise that, my name is Tanyaradzwa.’



# 3



SHAMISO'S MOTHER SAT on the bus on her way back home. She knew her daughter hated the new place. To be honest, she hated it too. But she had to keep it together if they were to make it through this. She stared outside, watching the trees rush past. Shamiso's tuition would cripple her finances. But at least the new environment would keep her daughter distracted for a while. She fanned her face with one hand. The last time she had ridden down this road was when her husband had taken her to see the famous Chinhoyi caves. He had asked to marry her that day. She smiled as she remembered how nervous he had been the whole drive there. It hardly felt real.

She wondered if this was one of the many times he

had gone chasing a story. Memories crowded in, and she shook them off. There were more important things to do. She had to figure out how she would take care of her daughter; how she would get money. All this had caught her off guard! But time is friend to no man. The cuddling eventually stops and time's blow unleashes its rage.



# 4



A SERIES OF SCREECHES spread across the room as the chairs scraped against the classroom tiles, the students all scrambling to their feet. Everyone except Shamiso, that is. She remained seated.

A short middle-aged man stood in front of the class, one hand holding a textbook and the other stroking his carefully trimmed beard. She could hardly make out his face. He paused awhile, before placing the book on the mahogany table in front, then began to walk between the rows of students, inspecting the classroom with lazy eyes. As he got closer to Shamiso, she sensed an uneasy recognition. He was one of the men she had seen earlier, in the administration block.

Tanyaradzwa glanced back at her, her expression

clearly advising that Shamiso get up. Shamiso knew she ought to stand, but something stubborn hardened inside her.

The man walked on, one hand in his pocket, his steps calculated as though preparing to pounce on an unsuspecting chicken. His knees refused to bend, making him drag his feet as he walked.

As he neared her seat Shamiso sprang up, avoiding eye contact. He stood by her side, his breath touching the soft skin of her face.

‘Mmm,’ he murmured. ‘Please don’t stand up on my account.’ There was a pause. ‘Your name?’

His exaggerated pauses aggravated Shamiso. He seemed to enunciate every word, taking his time, like someone combing lice out of a child’s hair. She turned to him. He wore a proud smirk, ready to assert his power. She noticed little spurts of sweat on his face and felt pleasure in knowing that the heat was baking him to perfection in his elegant coffee-coloured suit.

‘Umm . . . Shamiso. Shamiso Muloy,’ she said, her trimmed accent causing waves of amusement in the class. Tinotenda softly mimicked her until the teacher

glanced back with a stern look. He stared at Shamiso for a second longer as though he recognised her from somewhere, then turned and began walking towards the front of the class.

‘And you are . . . ?’ Shamiso asked.

He halted. The class brimmed with whispers, nervous on her behalf.

‘Excuse me?’ he said.

‘You are . . . ?’ she repeated, holding her voice so it wouldn’t tremble.

The teacher drew closer, pushing his face into her space. He lifted his left eyebrow a little. She drew her head back.

The class stared at her, some in awe, others in plain amusement, waiting to see what would happen next.

‘Why do I hear noise?’ he breathed, tilting his head and turning to the group of girls nearest to him. There was immediate silence.

He turned back to face Shamiso. His right hand was in his pocket and his left fidgeted with a piece of chalk.

‘Looks as if we will have fun here . . . Won’t we?’ He signalled to the class to sit down, then paused, tugging

at his chin hairs. ‘But maybe you shouldn’t sit down, you know . . . so that your brain will retain my name . . . like mine has yours. It’s Mr Mpofu . . . Don’t worry . . . I guarantee . . . you definitely won’t be forgetting it.’

He stared at Shamiso, making sure a cold chill ran down her spine. Shamiso rolled her eyes and looked out of the window next to her. Her heart was beating fast as she awkwardly stood there. The teacher’s voice echoed in the room.

‘Now, class . . . we are going to be looking at equations today,’ he said, flipping through his textbook. ‘There is an example . . . on the first page . . . you know what to do . . .’ Mr Mpofu stared oddly into his book, his head close to the paper.

‘Excuse me, I’m not clear on these instructions,’ Shamiso said, her voice betraying a slight wobble of fear. She looked nervously around the class. She had become quite the spectacle!

‘Mmmm . . . Well . . . if most of you get it right . . . then I’ll allow you to proceed with today’s exercise . . .’ Mr Mpofu ignored her, his head still buried in his textbook. He selected a piece of chalk and scribbled



something on the board, his speed at odds with his personality.

Shamiso weighed up the numbers and symbols carefully. ‘Excuse me . . .’ she said hesitantly. ‘I think you got that wrong.’

‘What did you say?’ he asked, lifting his head from the textbook.

‘The equation’s wrong. There is a bracket there, so you were supposed to multiply first, before you divide.’

‘Oh . . . so you think you are a genius?’ he said, inspecting the board to verify his answer.

He stared at the board a bit longer, then looked at Shamiso, his eyes digging into her flesh. Without another word, he erased the answer and wrote in a new one. Whispers surfaced everywhere. The teacher twisted to face the class, narrowed his eyes then turned back to the chalkboard.

‘Try solving this . . . since you are such a genius,’ he said, writing a new problem.

Shamiso chewed on her pencil and stared back at him with a blank face.

‘Our friend here . . . is challenged. What is wrong now?’

Shamiso popped her knuckles one by one, her eyes fixed on him. ‘38b.’

He looked at her for some time, then flipped to the back pages of the book with urgent speed. He glanced again at the chalkboard and then went to the answer in the textbook. A wry smile came over his face. He clapped his hands then stopped. One clap . . . another . . . and another, dramatic and slow.

‘I’m . . . impressed. Have you done this before . . . at your previous school?’

‘No.’ A slight smile crept up on her, stretching the corners of her lips. ‘I woke up like this.’

The room broke into laughter. Mr Mpofo reached for his beard again and paced slowly in front of the class. ‘Without the attitude . . . maybe you’ll go far.’ He nodded. ‘Now, class . . . today’s work is on the board. I want my books in . . . at the staff office . . . first thing tomorrow morning. And the whole chapter for our maths genius here . . . That will be sixty-eight equations to solve.’

Shamiso began to protest, then, seeing the look on his face, retreated. She took on the challenge.



# 5



THE SIREN SOUNDED, ending the first leg of the day's lessons. Lunchtime! Students scurried off to the dining hall, a short distance away.

'You still think you can do this alone?' Tanyaradzwa asked.

Shamiso disregarded her completely.

Tanyaradzwa shrugged. 'Suit yourself.' She fastened the buckles on her backpack before making her way out of the room.

Shamiso waited till Tanyaradzwa was out of the door then followed the masses, walking down the wide avenue rich with arching jacaranda and gum trees swaying blissfully on the sidewalk. She breathed in the thick scent. A lump formed in her throat. Her father

would always talk of the old festival that happened when the jacarandas were celebrating the birth of November. This was back in the day, after the liberation war, when her father had been only a boy growing up in the village, with a growing patriotism and booming zeal to serve his newly born nation. Back when the country had just transitioned from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe.

Her father would tell stories of the war, the ‘guerrilla struggle’. He would talk of how the country had been won back from colonial rule by the revolutionaries. He had wanted to be part of it, to fight for his country, for the freedom of his people. The issue for him was that he had been too young then. But when he had grown older, living in the city, he had tried to serve his country in his own way: with his writing. She remembered his heartfelt oration of his newspaper article about how the liberation struggle had changed everything.

The gentle breeze from the trees accompanied her as she walked alone to the dining hall. She wiped her brow again. It had been a long time ago and she had been very little, but she did not remember it being this hot. She looked up into the clear blue sky, so different from the

grey skies that usually loomed over Slough.

Her friends back there had asked her before she left if she would be living with tigers and elephants in the jungle, like Tarzan. She hardly remembered life back in Zimbabwe, but she had still found it strange that they would ask that. She smiled as she thought of it. All she could do was pray that distance would not be ill-mannered and greedy. That it would not swallow up her friends, tire their efforts and erode all the memories.

She missed her friends back in Slough. Especially Mary-Allen and Katlyn. The times she used to stroll over just to hang out with them. Now all that depended on time difference, school schedules and a significant phone bill she could hardly afford. Even so, it was hard not to feel hurt that they hadn't made more effort, especially knowing what had happened to her. But this was why she didn't need friends. Because in the end, one way or another . . . everyone leaves.

Her shadow flickered in front of her, a reminder of her loneliness. She sensed endless prying eyes skittering in her direction and picked up her pace, eager to reach the dining area. The circling spotlight zoomed in. All

the laughter and giggles seemed directed at her.

She finally made it to the dining hall. The tiles on the roof had been scorched by the heat. Its contrast with the vibrant colour of the trees was unbecoming.

A young man sat on an old bench under the shade of one of the trees. His overalls were rolled up, leaving his lean ashy legs exposed. He was possibly from the nearby farm. A matchstick parked at the corner of his mouth was swinging gently at the tickle of his tongue. A watering can sat by his foot. His eyes moved in Shamiso's direction. She wondered if he had watered anything at all. The lawn lay thirsty in the sun, patchy and dry.

'This way,' Tanyaradzwa said, signalling Shamiso to follow her. Shamiso looked at her in surprise. Tanyaradzwa beckoned again so Shamiso followed her to a table in the middle of the dining hall. Every table had two bowls, each covered by a plate to keep flying things out. Next to the bowls sat a pile of ten plates, two ladles and a pile of spoons.

Tanyaradzwa slid into her chair. 'It's bean soup if you're wondering.' She lifted the plate covering one of the bowls. Shamiso straightened her face and drew out a

chair. A thick aroma escaped from the bowl. Tanyaradzwa chuckled as she noticed Shamiso's expression.

'They used to make really good food, to be fair,' Tanyaradzwa said as she fidgeted with the plate, sliding it back into position. 'It's just that lately . . .' She stopped herself. 'Oh, you'll get used to this . . . or you could always do the more acceptable thing: starve!'

A smile escaped Shamiso's lips. She quickly tucked it in and looked away. Something about these peeling walls reminded her of the little cottage she had left her mother in, back in Rhodesville, a low-density suburb in Harare. It seemed nothing could be done about them there either. Her mother had tried, insisting that the cottage should feel like home. She had scrubbed the walls until her nails bled. But because the paint was washable, that had only discoloured them even more. Shamiso wondered as she sat there what she resented more – being stuck in a boarding school in the middle of nowhere or those awful dining-hall walls.

She glanced again at the peeling paint. Definitely the walls.



# 6

THE SUN DANCED in the light blue sky, showing off its rays. The heat teased the students as they walked to their hostels after a tiring day. The directions that Shamiso had been given led to a red-brick walled building inside the hostel complex. It looked newer than the others, as if it had been recently erected.

Shamiso dragged her luggage along the corridor. Her satchel rested loosely on her shoulder. It had been a difficult first day. She had never been to boarding school before. Her father had worked for a small political newspaper and certainly did not make enough money to afford to send her to boarding school in England; not that she'd minded.

There was an incredible energy in the chit-chatting



students. They ignored her, as though she was invisible. The attention she had been so worried about seemed to have fizzled away; perhaps the heat had dried it up.

The weather wasn't as she remembered it. She had thought the rains would escort the old year out in December and usher in the new year in January. But everything was different because of the drought. It didn't rain as much any more, and the heat ate away at everything! It was a shame about the weather.

Opening week felt strangely relaxed. She could see students busying about; catching up with one another, laughing in little groups and tidying their rooms.

'Are you lost?' a passing girl asked Shamiso with a quick smile. Her uniform was different from the others'. Rather than a green cardigan, hers was white, and instead of a flared skirt, she wore a pencil one. She held a clipboard to her chest and a pen in her left hand. Her presence intimidated Shamiso.

'Who are you?' Shamiso asked curiously.

The girl crossed her hands. 'Are you lost? Yes or no?' The smile had vanished now. She stood waiting for a reply.

‘Neither. I just need to find my room.’

‘Well, you won’t find it with that attitude. What’s your name?’

‘Shamiso Muloy,’ she answered.

The girl paused a while, flipping through her clipboard. ‘This way,’ she said eventually. She stopped near the end of the hallway and stepped back to allow Shamiso to enter before scribbling something down.

‘I hope next time we meet the attitude will be gone,’ she said as she started to move away. ‘Oh, and if you’re going to survive here, you definitely want to respect your prefects. Definitely!’

Shamiso drew her head back. Surely this wasn’t like the movies with some domineering authority they all had to obey.

‘Yeah, whatever,’ she said, heading into her room. The prefect shook her head and walked away.

Shamiso stood just inside the doorway, luggage held lightly in her hand. The room carried a rich aroma of floor polish. She could see the floor gleaming in the light from the wide window at the far end. The room lay empty, with just a few traces of human existence.

Trunks sat adjacent to some of the beds. One or two buckets stood abandoned. She entered slowly, eyes darting around. Two of the beds had already been made. A third had its bedding simply put on top, and the fourth, in the corner of the room, was untouched. She walked to the empty bed, realising that it now belonged to her, hauling her suitcase before dumping it in front of the bed. She reached for the handle of the window and pushed, but the stiffness of the paint still held it. She struggled awhile before finally giving in.

As she sat, trying to get used to this place that was meant to be her new home, she felt a painful lump in her throat. Tears streamed down her cheeks before she could control them. Hearing the sound of footsteps getting closer, she wiped her wet cheeks, knelt beside her bed and opened her suitcase. There was barely anything in it. Her mother had only been able to part with a little money. She had bought a few things so she could have some snacks to munch on through the course of the term. But then again there was barely anything in the stores any more. There had been nothing much to buy, except a few packets of *maputi* and biscuits.

‘Well, look at this!’ a soft voice said a few seconds later. It was Tanyaradzwa, with two carefully ironed shirts hanging neatly from her arm.

She caught her eye for a tiny moment before turning back to her unpacking.

