



THRILLER

GREGOR  
VINCENT

'A worthy successor of  
John Grisham, but in the  
world of finance and  
business' - *De Pers*

## **About the book**

2008

When Lehman Brothers folds, Dutch Belgium conglomerate Fortis slides into the abyss in the resultant financial storm. Billions of government aid is injected into the financial sector, pensions evaporate, fortunes dwindle. Fortis' former management is accused of misconduct following the unsuccessful acquisition of ABN AMRO. But a far more sinister past lies hidden behind this colossal financial disaster.

2011

Congolese diplomat Antoine Mbaka is abducted after an interview with journalist Virginie Vanderpoorten. She had asked him to provide insight into the visit of Prince Laurent of Belgium to the Congo, a visit that had been vehemently opposed by the Belgium Prime Minister and King Albert II. Although the interview left more questions than answers, one particular document had drawn Virginie's keen interest: reconstruction of the burned archives of King Leopold II of 1909.

1876

King Leopold II hatches a plan to fool all the great nations. His aim is to acquire a huge chunk of Central Africa, seventy times the size of his Kingdom, as his personal property... Congo.

## **About the author**

Gregor Vincent Witteveen is the author of the controversial thriller *Bonus Time* (2009). His experiences and detailed knowledge of the machinations of the international business world form the basis for his thrillers.

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Gregor Vincent

# Congo



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This story is a blend of fact and fiction; the truth lies in the eye of the beholder.



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*'Neither brutal assaults, nor cruel mistreatment, nor torture have ever led me to beg for mercy, for I prefer to die with my head held high, unshakeable faith and the greatest confidence in the destiny of my country, rather than live in slavery and contempt for sacred principles. History will one day have its say; it will not be the history that is taught in the United Nations, Washington, Paris or Brussels, however, but the history taught in the countries that have rid themselves of colonialism and its puppets. Africa will write its own history and both north and south of the Sahara it will be a history full of glory and dignity. Do not weep for me, my companion, I know that my country, now suffering so much, will be able to defend its independence and its freedom. Long live the Congo! Long live Africa!'*

Patrice Lumumba (1935 – 1961), First Prime Minister of independent Congo in a farewell letter to his wife

*'I have undertaken the opus of colonization for the sake of civilization and for the benefit of Belgium.'*

King Leopold II (1835 – 1909)

Statue in the city of Arlon, Province of Luxembourg, Belgium

The Cast of Characters may be found at the end of this book.

## Contents

Overture	11
1. A Royal Colony	17
2. Kiss Me Quick	24
3. Vultures Circling	29
4. A Star Lobbyist	40
5. Charting the Future	50
6. The Lynchpin	57
7. Piercing the Darkness	65
8. The Dance of the Aristocracy	77
9. Character Assassination	86
10. Gathering Momentum	99
11. Warm Blood	111
12. Terra Incognita	118
13. Elephant Tusks	135
14. Towards New Frontiers	151
15. Options	161
16. Bismarckian Blessings	171
17. A Fire called Greed	176
18. Fortune Hunters	184
19. Taking Advantage of the Weak	192
20. A Can of Worms	200
21. Drumming up Support	210
22. Divide and Conquer	218
23. Going to Canossa	227
24. Sharpening the Knives	239
25. Hecatombs	249
26. A Slice of Africa	257
27. Happiness	266
28. A New Beginning	272
29. The Great Swindle	282
30. Storms of Protest	287
31. Legalized Slavery	295
32. Hidden Fortunes	308
33. The Unspeakable Truth	319
34. Petticoat Politics	330
35. Global Shockwaves	337

36. Myths and Reality	344
37. Pillage	353
38. Tableau Vivant	361
39. Time for Heroics	370
40. The Inheritance	377
41. Turning it Over	385
42. Echoes of the Past	394
43. Borrowed Time	404
44. Beyond the Grave	417
45. Pontius Pilatism	423
46. A Hornet's Nest	428
47. Reunion	436
48. The Corporation	440
49. Coming Clean	449
50. Breaking the Silence	455
51. Russian Roulette	463
52. Vitriol	468
Epilogue	473
Author's Note	481
Acknowledgments	482
Cast of Characters	484
Bibliography and Sources	491

*Those that live in the hearts of others never die.*

**Roderick Habermehl**

1956-2013

**Ian Murray Kerr**

1942-2008

**And for all those millions of Congolese who have no name.**

# Overture

**Brussels, 4 April 2011**

The journalist had taken out a notebook and a pencil out of her handbag. They sat at a small table in a coffee bar in Matonge, a neighborhood in Brussels, mainly frequented by Congolese. Three men were chatting animatedly at the bar, enjoying their morning coffee. A young couple sat huddled in an amorous embrace at an end table.

‘What about Prince Laurent?’ the journalist asked. ‘He’s a member of the Royal family, twelfth in line for the throne but a man with a checkered past apparently. Lost his driver’s license for speeding and refusing to wear a seatbelt, involved in a corruption scandal – allegedly misappropriated Navy funds for the renovation of his residence. Is his behavior of no concern to you?’

The Congolese diplomat shook his head. ‘Of concern? Speeding? Corruption?’ He shrugged.

‘His visit to the Congo did tally with our desire to reaffirm our colonial legacy. We certainly haven’t forgotten your Royal family and it appears, more importantly, that you haven’t forgotten us.’

The journalist looked puzzled. ‘But the King, the Belgian Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign affairs have all refused to approve his trip to your country. Weren’t the Congolese offended?’

The man’s tall frame shifted in his seat. ‘Offended?’ he shrugged again. ‘Not in the least. Haven’t you learned anything from the past?’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘Well, there’s a difference between what people want to hear in Brussels and what,’ he paused, gazed at the exit and gathered his breath, ‘what my government wants its people to hear. You have your truth and we have ours. But do you ever consider ours?’

The journalist bit her lower lip. ‘Which is?’

‘Everybody here advised him against visiting the Congo. He went on

his own initiative, and the Congolese welcomed him.' He stared into his cup of coffee.

She raised her head, and shook back her copper colored hair. 'But I still don't get it. Why were the Congolese so happy to have him there? What am I missing?'

Antoine Mbaka sighed. 'Use your imagination.' He clenched his teeth and looked away in irritation. Why were the Belgians never interested in the African side of the story? This journalist was no different from the rest. Did she really believe that such a sensitive visit had taken place without any preparation, a member of the Royal Family just wandering off to a former colony? To the Congo of all places, and then blaming everything on the Prince's lack of interest in protocol? Who believed this kind of rubbish?

'He visited Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, and some villages in Kolwezi en Bas-Congo.'

The journalist sensed there was more, much more. 'Who did he meet?'

'People in the forestry business, people trying to protect the rain forests from unbridled deforestation.'

The journalist's eyes narrowed. She decided to zero in. 'Sure. That's all public knowledge, But why Lubumbashi? Why Bas-Congo?'

'Because.'

There was a silence. *Because?*

'And why did he take that lawyer along?' she continued. 'The one who defended Jean Pierre Bemba. Isn't Bemba about to be tried for war crimes at the International Court of Justice?'

'What's the problem?' Mbaka asked steadfastly. 'What's wrong with taking someone who knows the ropes in the Congo? I tell you, you underestimate his intelligence. Prince Laurent picked his advisor with care.'

She pursed her lips. 'But did he pick him himself? Was the lawyer more than a simple chaperone?'

Antoine Mbaka hunched forward, his dark eyes wandering to the window. 'You're not even close.' There was a moment's silence.

The journalist sensed her contact was getting edgy and tried hard to meet his eyes, regain his attention. 'This lawyer, who spoke on behalf of the prince, said that the Prince regretted all the commotion. He even confirmed that Prime Minister Leterme had advised against the visit

but that the Prince's visit was purely a private matter. But *was* it purely private?

'You are still missing the point,' Mbaka spoke in an agitated tone of voice. 'Laurent did not meet *any* Belgian officials while in the Congo. His trip *was* unofficial.'

'I find that hard to believe,' the journalist said briskly. 'Laurent is part of the royal household and he is also getting handsomely paid, tax free. Shouldn't he abide by the rules, listen to the King *and* the government? Instead he chose not to. Why?'

The diplomat shook his head.

'Moreover,' the journalist continued, 'he took along a lawyer who had defended the former presidential contender, Bemba, the only other candidate in the last elections besides president Kabila. Wasn't the president offended?'

The diplomat shook his head and chuckled. 'Offended? Kabila? I don't think so. How easy do you think it would be to offend him by African standards?'

The journalist shrugged. 'Laurent's lawyer said that he couldn't comment on possible meetings with high-ranking Congolese officials. Why would he say something like that?'

'Because he is Laurent's spokesman, that's why,' Antoine Mbaka continued. 'Besides, it doesn't make any difference.'

The journalist laughed. 'You're avoiding my question. Didn't President Kabila pay for his hotel, and his trip through the Congo by private jet? Or was it protection?'

Mbaka looked towards the door and exchanged a glance with his driver, a burly man wearing a black leather coat.

'What did you expect? That Kabila wouldn't give him the red carpet treatment – in view of all the historic ties?'

Virginie Vanderpoorten stared into her espresso. The interview wasn't providing her with any answers. She tried hard not to show her frustration.

'Did the visit have anything to do with human rights issues?'

Mbaka shook his head. 'Human rights?' he spat. 'Try thinking beyond your western models of democracy, will you? Those are your inventions, not ours. Africa is different. For decades you Belgians have ruled over us and plundered our country of its resources. Why, tell me why should we now rule our own country according to your model?'

Why should we soothe your conscience? Didn't you have your slice of the cake? Will you now please leave us ours?'

The journalist nodded. This was not an argument she would try to win. Mbaka was right. While Western countries believed that democracy had to prevail, the Congolese and the Chinese filled the gaps. Business ruled.

Suddenly he ducked under the table and picked up a large attaché case. He flicked both thumbs at the gold locks, opened it and withdrew a thick yellowish folder. 'Here,' he said. 'These three maps will give you some of the answers. Just study the pencil notes and the dates.'

The first map was of the eastern Congo, *Frontiers – Revision Royal Concession 1898*. The second was worn and protected by a thick plastic cover: *Irkutsk, a railway line to the East, Central Asia. Mongolia*.

'The third map looks more like an old colored print, but it is in fact a pencil drawing. Nice piece of artwork.'

The journalist gazed in awe at the drawing. Hills, a winding river, woods, a town indicated by a turret, a castle and a road, several fortifications. Beaulieu-sur-Ourthe, Château de Coligny, the heading said.

'And this,' he whispered hurriedly. 'This is a copy of a reconstruction of the contents of King Leopold's archives, the burned archives.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'Leopold the second, *his* archives? Burned in 1909?'

The diplomat wiped his forehead. 'Follow the money trail and the legal framework,' he said 'Study the will, the codicils, and the trusts. Surf the web.'

Antoine Mbaka rose abruptly, closed his briefcase and dropped a twenty euro note on the table. 'Don't ever call me,' he said. 'It's not safe. I will call you. Then we will talk.'

'But...?'

He leaned forward and spoke in a whisper. 'No. Do your homework. It's all about your history, your former king, Leopold the second and his cronies, the nobility, the industrialists.'

A puzzled Virginie Vanderpoorten wanted to grab his hand and hold him back, but instead she stood rooted to the spot as he strode hurriedly towards the exit, his bulky chauffeur following. A sudden rush of air swept her face as the door opened allowing her to see out onto the busy street where a black Mercedes with tinted windows came screeching to a halt at the curb. Then she saw another man, who only seconds before had been sitting next to the three men sipping coffee at

the bar. He moved quickly behind the burly black man, undoubtedly Mbaka's bodyguard, trained to take a bullet, and in his hand he held a semi-automatic with a silencer. Her mouth fell open. The weapon hovered behind the bodyguard's head, two quick bursts, bullets exploding into his brain and neck, splattering the windows with blood and bone. One bullet left a gaping hole where seconds before sat an eye socket, the other sliced through the carotid artery. The man just slipped down as though his legs had stopped functioning. Mbaka froze, the back of his coat stained red. The gunman stepped over the gasping bodyguard and pushed Mbaka brusquely towards the waiting Mercedes where arms pulled him in through the open rear door.

At that instant their eyes met again, the journalist and the diplomat. It was as though he wanted to tell her something, his mouth opened, his hand gesticulated, pointing at the curb.

It all happened in a flash. An old man moved towards the black man lying on the doorstep at the bar's entrance, while the Mercedes roared off. A woman started screaming. A cyclist had stopped at the other side of the road and was punching a number into his phone.

Inside the bar, Virginie Vanderpoorten dropped the folder on the table, grabbed her digital camera and ran to the window. She took a couple of photographs of the dying man, the cyclist, the old man tending to him, pressing his finger against the pulsing artery, trying to stop the rush of blood. The man's legs were kicking.

When she stumbled back to her table, she realized that the folder wasn't there anymore and her heart missed a beat. Not on the table or the floor nor anywhere else, the yellow folder, the maps, the copy of the Royal archives, all gone. She gazed about the room. Who could have stolen it? Who had been here? And then she noted the empty seats. The three men at the bar, but also the amorous couple, the man with the guitar case and the pretty girl had all disappeared. A cry of frustration escaped her.

The bodyguard appeared to be dead and the old man kneeling over him was shaking his head, his shirt and trousers splattered with blood. She heard the siren of an approaching police car while ever more bystanders crowded the area. She held her camera above her head and clicked and clicked and now something else, a forceful tug at the strap of her Nikon. She reacted instinctively, hitting a man squarely in the jaw, her feet stamping on his feet, hitting their mark. Their eyes met.

It was the young man from the bar, the one with the guitar case. He released his grip on the strap and as Virginie Vanderpoorten ran across the street, clutching her camera in her arms, she didn't dare to look back.

# 1. A Royal Colony

## **The Royal Palace of Laeken, January 1876**

‘Small country, small people,’ the tall, bearded monarch declared. ‘My people are weak, divided and poor.’

He opened the window and arms spread wide, took in the imposing vista, the freezing air filling his lungs. ‘Rest assured, my people, I will lead this country, shape its history and bring it to power. The world is our oyster.’

The King of the Belgians gazed out over the snow-covered palace gardens, seeming irritated and impatient but also very determined. Emperor Napoleon III of France had touched a nerve when he had referred to France and Holland as true nations with historic grandeur and rich histories. It suggested that the young Belgian Kingdom founded in 1830 was a lesser, insignificant state. Wedged between France and Holland, the second King of the Belgians, Leopold II, felt belittled and endangered, and he didn’t like it.

He clenched his fists, turned on his weak sciatic leg and limped to the bookcases that lined the walls of his study. Hundreds of books, maps and reports filled its shelves, data he had collected on countries, on people, on trade and finance, on spheres of influence. He pulled out a report made by a count he had sent to Ceylon. It had been a fact-finding mission on its potential as a possible colony. Although it had led to nothing he still regarded the accumulation of information on any area, a matter of the greatest importance, in the belief that information gave the owner power over those who did not possess it.

He turned and settled behind his desk. On it lay another edition of *The Times*, his daily window on the world. The newspaper had been delivered in a special canister by the first mail boat to the seaport of Ostend, and hurried by carriage to his palace in Brussels. After the

newspaper had been ironed to kill germs, a footman delivered it to the King's inner sanctum and laid it on his Majesty desk. Minutes later the same footman would bring in several pots of lukewarm Ceylon tea, the King's special brew and *The Times*, a daily routine.

'Let's have a look at what the world has been up to,' he muttered to himself after the door had been closed. A freezing draft blew in through the open windows but the cold did not seem to bother him as he leafed through the paper. The article that caught his attention today had been written by a man whom he considered to possess everything for which he had been looking, a man of determination and standing. '*An amazing discovery, a land of unspeakable richness, waiting for an enterprising capitalist,*' he read out, 'very, very interesting.'

He hardly seemed to notice the knock on the door, but emitted a distracted, guttural 'yes' and gestured for his visitor to enter and take the gilded chair opposite him.

'Here, Count de Coligny,' he said, turning the newspaper and pointing his bony finger. 'Do read this.'

Fleshy, small hands took the paper and beady eyes zeroed in, scanning the article.

'Livingstone's closest disciple,' King Leopold II said excitedly. 'And come over here, my dear count. I want to show you something.' The tall figure of King Leopold rose from his seat and limped to a large conference table, where he unfolded a map of central Africa. His forefinger pointed at Lake Tanganyika and swerved from the right to the far left of the map, the Atlantic Ocean.

'This courageous man travelled from the coast in the East all the way across to the West, from Zanzibar to Benguela on the coast of Angola. He proved that the Lualaba River is actually the Congo River. I've heard it's a huge, treacherous river, larger than the Nile.' The King rubbed his hawk-like nose. 'And I like him. He achieved what Livingstone always wanted to do. Livingstone called this area the open sore of the world, the heart of darkness.'

A deep wrinkle appeared on his forehead. Totally absorbed in the matter at hand, he rolled up the map and paced to the window. Here the monarch stood deep in thought, gazing over the snow-covered gardens. His eyes rested on a stone fish on the edge of a frozen pond, its mouth filled with crumbs of ice.

'The current is with us,' the King spoke. 'Isn't it?'

‘Your Majesty is quite right,’ Count de Coligny replied. ‘No one has claimed the area, as yet.’

‘And Belgium needs a colony,’ the King cut in. ‘Of course it would have been easier to invade Holland and grab theirs, but...’

Count de Coligny’s arm rested on the table. ‘Your Majesty was right not to take such a course of action.’ De Coligny knew that the King had asked Napoleon III for permission. It had been refused and if he had been disobeyed, the French army would surely have intervened and perhaps even gobbled Belgium up.

The noble man could hardly suppress a smile. ‘But your Majesty confused the English by expressing an interest in New Guinea, a master-stroke of deception. The English could never have offered you New Guinea as a colony. They couldn’t risk upsetting their ally Australia, and since the Dutch, the English and the Portuguese aren’t willing to sell or give up any of their colonies...’

De Coligny rubbed his hands, stiff from the cold. The windows were still wide open. He could see his breath as the temperature in the King’s study was close to freezing. ‘The English are mere expansionists, don’t you agree?’ The Count spoke in a raspy voice. ‘But it will be to your Majesty’s advantage that they are currently pre-occupied with India, South Africa. Colonies require attention, they cause problems.’

The King’s mind returned to his last visit to Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace. Refusing him New Guinea had set the tone. Refusing him a colony as a matter of principle was taking it to the extreme. The King felt they owed him his due. Was Belgium a mere country? No. Was it a prominent nation among the other powerful nations? Yes.

‘But let’s not forget the French, your Majesty,’ de Coligny continued. ‘They are pushing eastwards through Gabon from the north. An explorer called de Brazza. The French are a serious contender for Africa. But I agree the momentum is there for Belgium. We need to strike, advance and explore this potential area of richness.’

‘A royal colony,’ the King whispered, his eyes widening. ‘There’s no time to lose.’

‘Indeed, your Majesty.’

The King looked de Coligny straight in the eye and grabbed the startled count by the arm, bony fingers pressing into his flesh.

‘And a colony it will be, dear Count. Everything is allowed in a rev-

olution. And I intend to become a revolutionary in Africa. Everything will be possible, there will be no limits.'

Count de Coligny nodded fervently. He knew that the King felt secure as long as others agreed with his line of thinking. Outshining the King had proved a fatal mistake for those who had taken their position for granted. Flattery and asking for minor favors were and would remain the key to the King's heart.

'I need to think,' the King said. 'And you need to think with me. Let's reconvene tomorrow.'

'Of course, your Majesty,' de Coligny said formally, as he rose to his feet. He bowed slightly and left the room.

In the minutes that followed, King Leopold II unrolled the map of central Africa once again. A white patch stared him in the face. His mind drifted to the beauty, the vastness and more importantly the rich colonial pickings he had seen during his years of global travel. India, China, the river Nile, the Egyptian treasures, the canal by Lesseps he had even invested in, the wild nature on the Island of Ceylon. Why hadn't Queen Victoria and her ministers taken his wishes seriously? Why did this superpower repeatedly refuse him a colony? He didn't get it.

'I have to throw more sand in their eyes,' he said to himself. 'Why expect gratitude? Perhaps it's better to appeal to their self-interest, and then get what I want, for Belgium's power and prosperity.'

He reached for a copper bell. 'I will have to teach them a lesson. Shape history in my own way,' then he rang the bell with vigor. 'De Lambermont! Fetch me de Lambermont.'

After the aide had dashed off to fetch his foreign secretary, the King settled in the large chair at the conference table littered with maps.

'There is a world beyond this small country, my dear cousin Victoria,' he whispered. 'Rest assured I owe it to my father's memory to broaden Belgium's view. As for you, my dear Napoleon, you refuse me Holland and its colonies? Well, I will outclass you and your explorers. I will grab this piece of the world before you even get a chance.'

He placed four onyx paperweights on the corners of his favorite map, then wiped his fingers clean of the ink left by the newspaper. The white patch still stared him in the face. It had to be at least eighty times the size of his Kingdom of Belgium. There for the picking. Why did nobody take him seriously? His fellow countrymen, apart from some of

the trusted nobility and key industrialists, didn't have a clue about the possibilities the world offered. To his chagrin, Belgium's political position vis-à-vis England, France, Austria and Germany was insignificant. His divided Kingdom simply did not exist in their eyes, worse, it risked being gobbled up by some other man's plans. Why was he the only person who understood that Belgium was vulnerable? It needed a colony to expand its powerbase. And since no one understood, he knew that only deception and trickery could land him his tropical paradise. 'I will outsmart the Powers, appeal to their self-interest,' he whispered, 'France, Germany, Austria, and England.'

**In the deep rain forest, somewhere in the Congo Basin, January 1876**

'It's a buffalo. Ngombo.'

'No.'

'It must be a buffalo.'

'Listen first.'

The old man with the sharp features kept quiet. After a while he whispered, 'Listen to the branches. Its tread is heavier. No sliding leaves.'

'The tread?'

'Yes. No buffalo.'

'No buffalo.'

Both were lost in concentration.

'Do we have to lie down?'

'I told you. You never lie down.'

'Because of the ants?'

'I said you had to listen. There is more.'

They remained motionless... The silence was broken three times by the warning shrieks of a toucan.

'Did you notice the wind?'

The boy nodded. 'It changed direction.'

'And the smell, you noticed?'

The man pointed a stick at a pile of dung.

'Ndjoku, *elephant*.'

'Very good, now stand still.'

Bright eyes looked upward. 'But the ground is shaking, the leaves, the branches, getting closer.'

‘You must never run. A lonely bull and no other elephant is dangerous.’

The bull appeared, ripping leaves from branches. Its huge frame shook, its ears flapped, huge tusks and feet trampling the underbrush, breaking branches.

‘I’m scared.’

‘Stand still.’

The foliage closed. They heard branches cracking and breaking. The bull wandered off. The sound slowly died away. Total silence enveloped them again.

‘You did well. You stood still.... Hear that rain.’

They listened to the pelting rain. The drops did not reach them.

Somewhere far away there was the chatter of monkeys. They could not see them as the light was hidden by a roof of somber green.

‘Bongale, *swamp monkey*.’

They sat on a branch while the old man spoke about fishing, hunting, and farming. They walked in file on a path leading through thick undergrowth, climbed trees and sat motionless atop a huge one and gazed out over the unending sea of undulating green. The man gestured at landmarks, circling birds of prey, birds skimming the tree tops scattering flocks, the measure of silence, movement and sounds of monkeys, blackened darkness and slurs of cloud, different shades of green, thunder and forks of light far away.

‘Look for unusual canopies, the brush parting for streams, the great river, smoke.’

The boy held his wrinkled hand and rested against his chest, the older man and the younger man in harmony.

‘This is the territory of your ancestors, Mbaka. Smell the air, feel the weight of the sky and the force of the earth.’

They climbed down. The young boy felt his weight on the forest floor, a decaying carpet of thousands of years of trees, leaves, animals dead and alive, a never-ending frenzy feeding. He smelled the earth, the odors, dampness. He loved the earth. They walked on in the semi-darkness. A flock of green pigeons passed overhead.

The older man suddenly grabbed him by the arm. ‘Don’t move.’

The air was thick with tension and Mbaka immediately understood. Danger, there was an extended moment of silence.

‘Head is raised above ground,’ his father said, nodding to the large

snake near a hollow tree. 'Now step back very slowly. No sudden movement.'

Mbaka saw the snake's forked tongue, the inky-blackness inside its mouth.

He heard his rapid breathing after they stood at a safer distance. His voice was more reassuring now.

'The most dangerous snake, his bite is death. Did you notice?'

The young Mbaka nodded. He spoke in a whisper, 'Brownish, large strong snake, dark spots on the back, moves at incredible speed.'

'Deadly venomous, did you see...?'

'The hollow tree, nest inside, cools off there. Smaller snakes are also unsafe.'

'And...'

'Fearless. Can kill an elephant. Strikes many times, an incredible fighter and should never be threatened.'

An admiring smile washed over the older man's face. They had run into a black mamba, a highly toxic snake. One bite would quickly and surely kill a man, even an elephant. Mbaka had learned fast. His hand stroked the boy's neck, his son.

The young boy gazed up at him. His eyes were bright and warm.

'Some day you will become a great king, Mbaka. A great king,' his father said.