

## Time Vampires!

Kwame's nose was so cold it hurt. Rubbing the frost out of his eyelashes, he opened his eyes—and promptly wished he hadn't. If he'd kept his eyes closed, he wouldn't have seen the bats clinging to his bedroom ceiling.

But he did see them—ice-rimmed wings; pointed, ice-frothed noses; fangs...

*Fangs?*

The bats had vampire fangs!

One swooped so close the tip of its wing brushed Kwame's hair.

He yelped and yanked his quilt over his head. But he couldn't make his eyes close. His eyelids, shocked wide open, were stiff—as in *scared stiff*. He lay still, staring at the underside of his quilt, hardly daring to breathe.

Nothing happened.

Holding his breath, he slowly drew the quilt down just far enough to gape as the bats drifted across his room and out through the closed window.

Kwame shivered, not sure whether he should be relieved or alarmed.

*"Kanika-nika-click-clack!* I'm nearly too late!" a mechanical-sounding voice clattered in his ear.

Kwame jerked his quilt back up over his head.

Now the clacking came from under his pillow. *"Clickety-click-kanika-nika!* Hiding under your quilt won't solve anything, Mr. Prince Charming-Kwame!"

Kwame shrank down off the pillow. "What?"

*"Clickety-clack!* I know all—*Kanika-nika*—about you and your proud African heritage." The voice shifted into an imitation of Kwame's own well-practiced explanation: "You were named *KWAH*-mee, after a once-upon-a-time Ashanti prince in your father's family."

With a sharp *"Clickety-click!"* the voice shifted back to mechanical mode. "So your friends figure that makes you a sort of prince. And Lisbeth always says, 'It's too bad you're not charming,' but of course, she's wrong. You *are* charming." The voice click-clacked teasingly. "That's why the other girls call you 'Prince Charming' even though

you pretend not to notice.”

Kwame blushed.

“Prince Charming-Kwame—tall and handsome, kind and generous—just like the first Prince Kwame. And just like your father, Akua, also named after an Ashanti prince.”

Kwame suffered a bad case of the shiver-all-overs. *This is crazy!* he thought. *I’m hearing things! And seeing things! But why?* A sudden thought struck him. *I wonder...what if—?*

He cautiously peeked under his pillow. *Woo-hoo!* He lifted the pillow and grinned at the computer mouse with the click-clacky mechanical voice. “I know you! You’re Nouse-Mouse—the guide to KaleidoKen.”

Kwame’s friends had told him wild stories about zooming through a magic kaleidoscope to a fabulous faraway world. “Kinda like when Alice fell through the rabbit hole and went to Wonderland,” Lisbeth had said. “Except this was real instead of make-believe and we went to KaleidoKen.”

“In the Universe-Next-Door,” Matt had added, as though that actually made sense. He’d never quite explained what it was next-door to, Kwame remembered. But he knew they’d met Nouse-Mouse there.

“Is this the start of a kaleidoscope adventure?” he asked the mouse. “Do you have a magic kaleidoscope for me? I sure hope so!”

On second thought, he wasn’t sure. The last time Nouse-Mouse had come to the small town of Wildwood, in northern Michigan, it was because Matt had been in serious trouble. That had been the whole reason for the kaleidoscope adventure.

“Why are you here?” Kwame demanded. “I’m not in any trouble. Unless...”

He stared out his frost-covered window. Snow shrouded the trees and smothered the daffodils he’d seen blooming just yesterday. *It’s spring. But it looks like the dead of winter out there.* A sharp, ate-your-ice-cream-too-fast pain stabbed his forehead. “What were those bat-things?”

“Time Vampires.”

Kwame dove back under his quilt. “Vampires?” he squeaked.

“Time Vampires,” Nouse-Mouse repeated.

“Wh-what are Time Vampires?” Kwame’s panic pushed out from under the quilt. “They went right through my closed window! My CLOSED window! What were they doing here, anyway? And why is it so cold? And—”

“They’re Time Thieves: they were stealing your time,” Nouse-Mouse interrupted. “Sit up and listen! I’m sure you know vampires suck blood.”

Kwame sat up slowly and nodded.

“You probably don’t know about TIME Vampires. They suck time.”

Kwame gulped and held his breath.

“They feed on time. They deliver it to Geddon, the Demon of Chaos, and when they’ve stolen it all, when you’re completely out of time...”

Kwame wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he asked anyway, “You die?”

“You die. Time Vampires suck time minute-by-minute at first. Then hour-by-hour and day-by-day, until finally they’re sucking entire weeks and months in a single gulp. As your time grows short, Geddon calls in his Not-Now Goblins and you begin to freeze.”

“G-goblins, too?” *It’s cold in here. Dad says the whole house is cold.* Kwame gripped the edge of his quilt tightly to help control his trembling hands. He struggled to keep his voice steady. “My dad’s cold all the time.” His heart missed a beat. “Colder every day...”

“The Not-Now Goblins have made themselves at home here—the Time Vampires have sucked your father nearly dry, Kwame.”

“NO!” cried Kwame, as frozen snapshots of the last few weeks—months?—flashed through his mind like a nightmare freeze-tag game. Dad: always in a rush, always talking about “beating the clock.” Dad: late going to work, late coming home from work. Dad: with no time for breakfast, eating his dinner on the run. Dad: with no time to shoot baskets with Kwame, no time to help him with homework. Finally, Dad: worn to a frazzle, huddling—freezing—under a pile of quilts.

“He’s dying,” said Nouse-Mouse. “Before his time.”

*NO! NO! NO!* Denial roared in Kwame’s ears, tightened his fists, and twisted his stomach.

"Your mom gives him as much of her time as she can—"

"What do you mean? How can Mom give Dad time? Can I give him some, too?"

"—but it's never enough to make up for what the Time Vampires steal." Nouse-Mouse finished his sentence, ignoring Kwame's questions. "Every day the time flies faster. Every day your father grows colder. He's in danger and so are you. Now the Time Vampires are stealing your time, too."

Kwame's eyebrows shot up in alarm.

"You've inherited more than you realize from your father. Now the time has come for you to follow in his footsteps and pick up the ball he's had to drop."

"That's crazy!" Kwame yelled. "I can't follow in Dad's footsteps! I'm not a scientist—I'm a twelve-year-old." *A twelve-year-old who's just changed his mind about having adventures*, he added silently to himself.

Nouse-Mouse didn't seem to care. "You understand about your father's work?" he asked.

Kwame nodded, shrugged, and shook his head all at the same time. He knew his dad was a scientist at NIST. He had to think a minute before he could fill in the full name—the National Institute of Standards and Technology, headquartered in Colorado. He knew his dad was some kind of secret agent—the family lived in Michigan so he could "keep a low profile." He knew that sometimes his dad went up in a space shuttle to run experiments. Something about the space-time continuum. Whatever that was. Did Kwame understand his dad's work? No.

"You need to know three things," Nouse-Mouse said. "It's important work. It's dangerous. And Geddon and his Time Thieves will do anything to prevent it being completed. Anything."

Kwame shivered. The temperature in his room seemed to be dropping.

Even Nouse-Mouse rattled with the cold. "Get dressed," he abruptly ordered Kwame. "It's time to go!"

"G-g-go?" Kwame stammered. "I—I'm not sure I—"

"Go!" Nouse-Mouse repeated. "Find the Time and take it back from the Time Thieves!"

"F-f-find the Time? T-t-take it...?"

Nouse-Mouse clicked and clacked, scooting back and forth from one side of the room to the other as though trying to sniff out hidden Time Vampires. "Just like his father," he clacked to himself. "Akua can never find the Time, either. But Kwame will HAVE to—Akua chose him!"

Aloud, he said, "You haven't got much Time left here—don't you feel the cold? Hurry!"

Kwame stumbled into his clothes.

"Go to the Tree," Nouse-Mouse ordered.

Kwame didn't need to ask which tree. When people in Wildwood said "the Tree," they meant the biggest tree in the woods—a huge, two-hundred year old spreading oak.

"Take this with you."

Kwame heard a sharp *crack* and felt something shoot into the cargo pocket of his pants. With a sense more of dread than excitement now, he knew what he'd been given: *A magic kaleidoscope—broken off of Nouse-Mouse's tail. Just like Matt said!*

"Climb the Tree," Nouse-Mouse instructed. "It will tell you what to do. Trust the Tree, but beware of the cold."

Kwame felt dizzy. *This can't be for real*, he thought.

A bell jingled, demanding his attention. *Dad's bell! He needs help!* The crazy mouse and his kaleidoscope-tail would have to wait; Kwame raced down the hall to his dad's room.

"I'm cold, son," his dad murmured.

Kwame ran back to his own room, grabbed his quilt, and took it to his dad. Made of long strips of the Ashanti *kente* cloth Grampa wove, Kwame's quilt had warmed him since he was a baby. Whenever he began to outgrow it, Grampa took some favorite clothes he'd also outgrown, unraveled the cloth, and wove the threads into new strips for his quilt. Each strip had a different design, and each design had its own Ashanti name.

"Thank you, son—this is the warmest quilt in the house!" Akua Norman sighed as

Kwame gently tucked the quilt around him. "The danger is growing," he warned softly. "There's important work to be done and I'm too sick—I can't do it now. It won't be easy, but I believe you can do it—you're my heir, and I'm naming you my deputy. Go to the Tree."

"But—" Kwame began.

With a nod toward the rocking chair beside his bed, Kwame's dad whispered, "Shhh...Mom's sleeping. You'll need this." His hand poked out from under the quilt, grasped Kwame's hand, dropped an oddly shaped piece of wood into it, and jerked back under the covers.

Kwame rubbed the wood between his fingers. It was flat and smooth and cold. Like his dad's hand. He wanted to ask what the thing was, why he needed it, how to use it—he had lots of questions. But his dad was still talking, explaining that a new doctor would be visiting him today, a new doctor who perhaps might have some answers. The tenderness in his voice acknowledged his son's concern when he added that Kwame's job was elsewhere.

"You can't help if you stay here," he said. "Go!"

"But—"

"Go!"

Kwame slipped the wooden token into his pocket and fled.