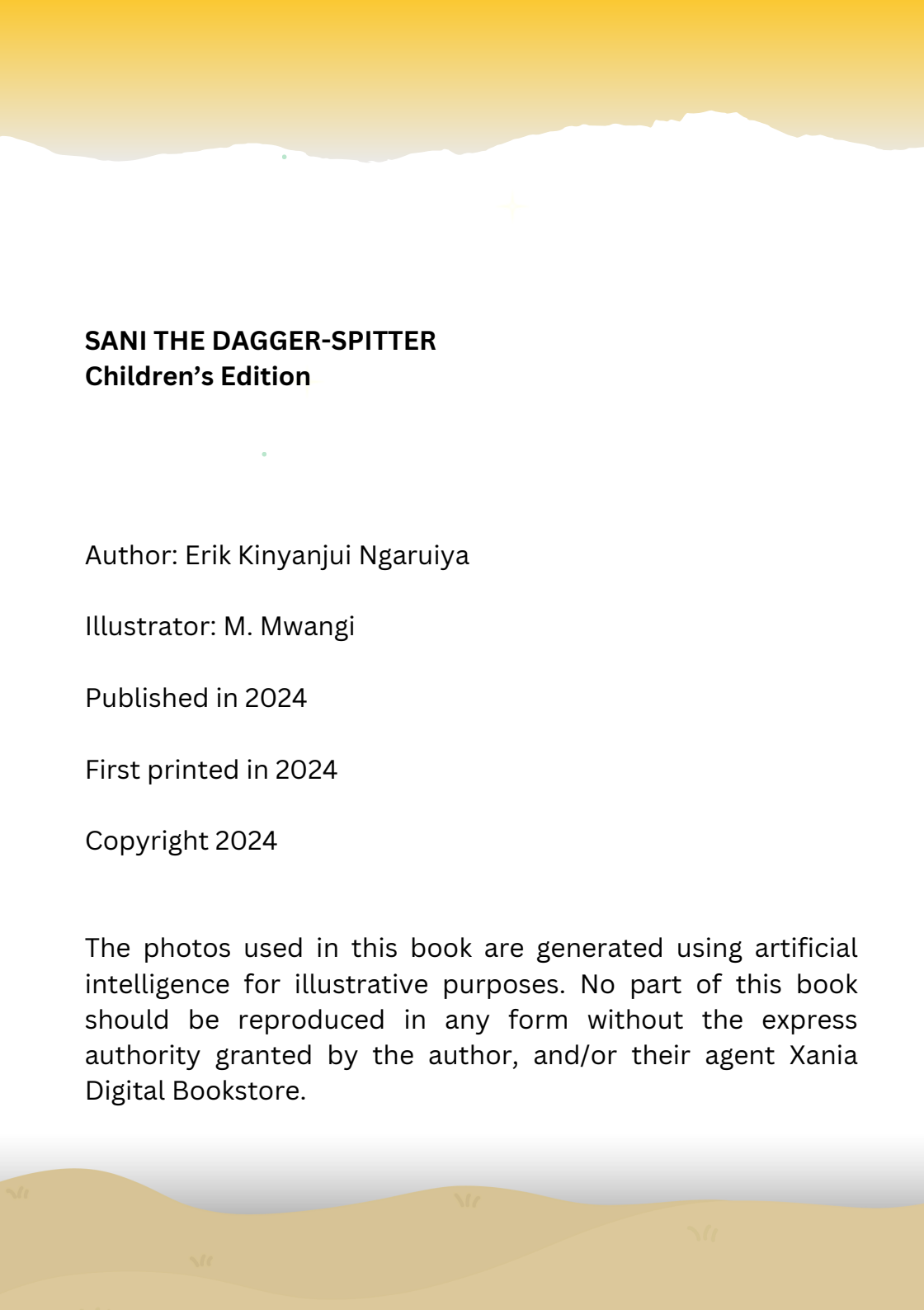




SANI THE DAGGER-SPITTER

Children's Edition

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SANI

the dagger-spitter
Children's Edition



story time

The sun was steadily going down over the mountain slope of the kingdom of Gabo in Equatorial Africa. This kingdom of the Logopo, Zede and Elomo peoples was ruled by a powerful Ogabo or king named Toku. Suffice it to say, at this juncture, that Toku was a wise and well loved ruler in all three regions of his vast kingdom of Gabo.

As darkness began setting in, a young and very athletic young man hastened his brisk walk home. His name was Sani, and he was only sixteen.

It only took Sani a few more minutes to reach home, a small enclosure surrounding three large mud huts and a few small granaries. A short fence of Elopo shrubs, thorny and matted together into an impenetrable barrier, ran all the way around this small compound. A small gate provided the entrance to this compound, and soon Sani unlatched it to make his way in.

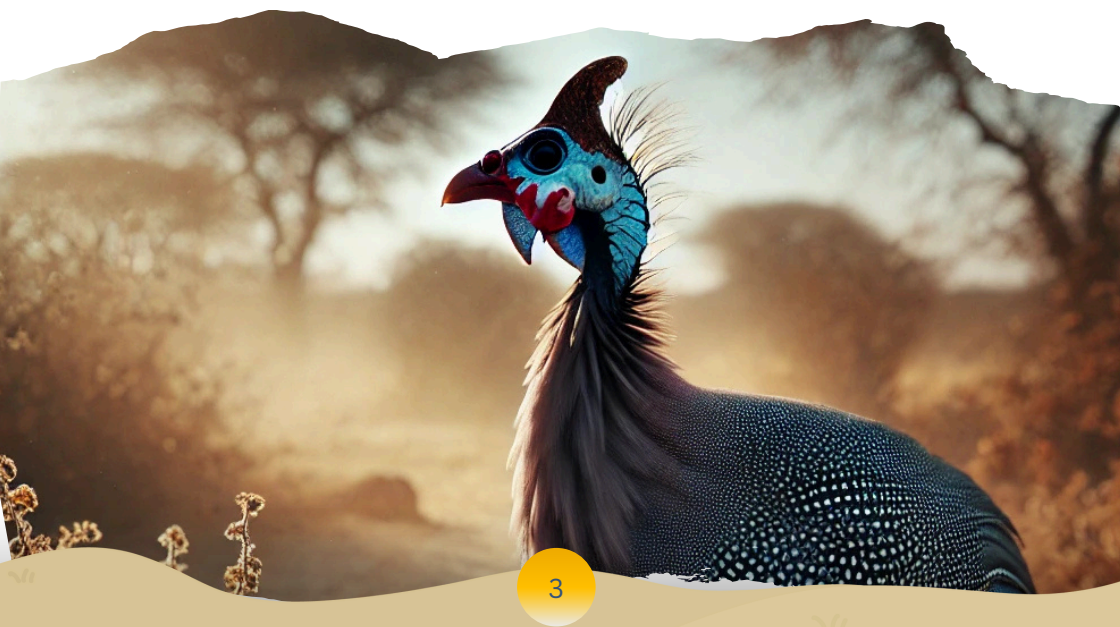


Sani lived with his mother Bilia, and a servant called Nomu who occupied one of the mud huts. They kept a small herd of goats and sheep, taken out to pasture every morning by Nomu. Besides goats and sheep, Sani and his mother had several runs of chicken which were never allowed out of the compound. In spite of this, they were fed well every day on grains of millet, sorghum and maize, grown on a well-tended piece of land near their homestead.

Unknown to Bilia and Nomu, Sani had of late become an expert hunter in addition to being an established farmer. Their home was only a five minutes walk to the biggest forest in the kingdom of Gabo, the Donga Forest. It was in this forest that Sani had begun practicing skills that neither Bilia nor Nomu knew about. The only hint at his latest prowess was the welcome addition of game meat to their menu once in a while.

“Mama, I’m home!” announced Sani as he presently entered Bilia’s hut.

He had brought his mother a special token of his affection for her, in the form of a large forest guineafowl which he had managed to shoot as a whole family of them fled swiftly into deep elephant grass near Donga Forest earlier on in the day.



To Sani's dismay, instead of the normal welcome of laughter and smiles from his mother, there came only a deep groan of pain from her sleeping quarters. Sani slowly parted the curtain behind which his mother lay on her bed. He noticed that she was perspiring heavily, and he enquired in alarm.

"Mama, what is the matter? Last night you were in perfect health!"

He quickly sought out a small piece of cloth which he dipped into some cold water. He pulled a stool from a corner and proceeded to gently dab his sick mother's forehead as he sat down next to her.

"Sani, I am sorry son. I wasn't very well even last night but I thought the fever would leave. I was wrong of course," Bilu whispered. "I have seldom been this sick before, so I must have your attention now, Sani."

Before Sani could fathom what his mother meant, she pulled her whole aching body to a sitting position on her bed.

"Please get me some milk, as well as a little of my food from last night before I continue Sani," she said in a very low voice.

A short while later, after futile attempts at eating, Bilu began her strange narration to Sani, who was almost in tears. He had never seen his mother look that bad, or speak so earnestly. His attempts to get her to postpone this discussion fell on deaf ears.



“Sani, I am telling you these things because I don’t know what tomorrow holds. As you might be aware, your father departed from us when you were only five years of age. What you may not know is that he was actually murdered by King Toku’s General, Dombu.”

Sani, at this point, quickly asked, “But why, Mama? You’ve always told me how wonderful a man father was!”

“Ssshh! Son, allow me to tell you. Many years ago before I met your father, I was the village beauty among our Elomo people. As you might realize by now, the Elomo are the smallest tribe in the Ogabo’s kingdom. Dombu happened to live near our village in those days, and he fell in love with me. Even in those days, he was still a huge, dark, thickest bully of a man and quick to anger. I turned him down and shortly afterwards met your father.

Bezu, your father, was handsome, charming and painfully funny. He swept me off my feet and we soon got married. As time went on, your father and Dombu enlisted as warriors in the Ogabo’s army. What I didn’t know by then was that Dombu’s heart was perpetually filled with hatred for your father for succeeding where he had failed.

One day, we received the tragic news that your father had been killed in battle. After grievous mourning, a friend of his came one night to discreetly reveal to me how exactly your father had died. He had been shot in the back with an arrow, and not by the enemy. To prove this, he proceeded to show me the arrow. He told me how he had investigated into what kind of weapons the enemy had used and, sure enough, none of them had arrows like this one. Sani, this is not all. You may or may not remember that you had a sister. Actually, a twin sister! Her name was Tani and she looks exactly like you, down to the strange circular patch of dark skin on one side of your neck.

She was kidnapped when you were only four years of age. I have always felt that she is alive, and that Dombu was behind her disappearance as well. Please find her, and live the way I have always taught you. Have faith only in the great creator and pray to him always. Above everything, hold to those things that are good and those that make you strong and happy. Those that are bitter and evil only weaken, so harbour none. Stay well, my son!”

“Mama, why are you talking like this now?” Sani asked, his eyes full of tears. His heart was aching strangely.

“Sani, you are a man now, and I want you to be a man with understanding. Please let me rest now,” Bilia pleaded.

The ensuing few weeks proved to be the most challenging period Sani had ever experienced. His mother, Bilia, had only lived two more days after that fateful night’s discourse. The mourning and burial arrangements that followed left Sani feeling empty and hollow. It seemed that life was now meaningless, and it was only with great difficulty that Nomu could get him to eat.

They say that time heals all wounds, and Sani gradually regained strength. Nomu played a great role in Sani’s recovery. Bilia had few friends, and both Sani’s parents had been born and raised without siblings. The few relatives who had come for Bilia’s burial had been distant relatives, and soon left.

Sani's grandparents on both sides were, sadly, ailing and too old to have managed the long journey. It was soon evident to Sani that Nomu was the only real family that he had. He resolved from then on to treat Nomu like a brother.

It was by a strange twist of fate that Sani met Zoku very shortly after his mother's death.

Sani had been walking deep in Donga forest one morning, trying to understand what his mother's strange tale meant. He was hurt that the father he loved but never knew had been killed by a colleague. That was truly tragic but presently beyond anything he could do. However, a twin sister? Alive?

This one demanded some response, but no amount of thinking could provide direction for Sani. He had just finished whispering a prayer to that unknown, all-seeing being his mother had taught him about, when he heard a cry of pain!

Sani rushed in the direction that he had heard the cry come. He soon came to a small clearing between trees.

On the ground and clutching one bleeding leg was an old man. He was an unusual man, with strange curly grey hair. His facial features, though contorted in pain, were different from the Logopo, Zede and Elomo men in King Toku's kingdom.

As he gently squatted to face the old man, Sani asked anxiously, "Greetings, grandfather. Is there anything I can do for you?"



As he paused to look, Sani observed that a snake had accidentally recoiled near the old man, its sharp spikes narrowly missing him but gashing several deep cuts into one leg as it sprung loose.

“Please son, just tear up that piece of cloth near my hunting equipment. I need to stop this bleeding immediately!” He grimaced as he spoke. Sani did as he was told, and before long, he was helping the old man hobble away towards home, deep into Donga forest. As they went, Sani politely enquired.

“Grandfather, how do you speak our tongue and yet you appear a foreigner to our land?”

The old man replied quietly, “My name is Zoku, from the Kingdom of Zateli. I will tell you more once we get home.”

Hours later, Sani sat next to Zoku in a peculiar hut. They had walked a great distance over several valleys and around great cliff sides in the Donga Forest. Sani realized that unless Zoku led him back, he could not find his way back home. He also realized that had he not been near Zoku, the seriousness of the old man’s injuries would certainly have killed him before he got to his forest home.

As they drank a warm brew while awaiting a heavier meal, Zoku spoke.

“My son Sani, I owe my life to you. My careless handling of that trap could easily have cost me my life. Even if I were strong enough to have returned, the forest is full of predators that would have been attracted by the smell of blood. I wouldn’t have got here but for you. I am grateful, and I intend to try and repay your kind gesture.”

Sani smiled at the old man and said, “It is nothing, grandfather.”

“I doubt it Sani, but thank you. And please, just call me Zoku. Calling me grandfather makes me feel like I am ready to leave earth, which I am not!”



They both laughed, and enjoyed the warmth of the fire and smell of roast antelope meat that Zoku was cooking.

As Sani later surmised, Zoku's story was as sad as that of his late father.

"Have you ever heard of the Zateli Kingdom?" Zoku asked Sani, as he began his tale.

"No, not at all," Sani replied.

“Your age, of course, precludes you from much information but to your parents that name would have brought tremors of fear!”

“Why?” Asked Sani, innocently.

“Well, the Zateli were once known as the dagger-spitters. They were the fiercest warriors ever known among African nations. Had their present King Dawok not been a man of peace, the Zateli would have continued conquering tribe after tribe and kingdom after kingdom. I know this because I was General over the army of the previous Zateli King Galol.”

“Zoku, what happened? And why were they called dagger-spitters?” Sani asked excitedly. He had a strange feeling that he had just met a most important man.

As Zoku stirred the dying embers of the fire, he quietly began his strange tale about the infamous warriors he had just alluded to.

“Let me start by saying this. Whereas other warriors went to war bearing bows, arrows, spears, axes and swords, Zateli warriors were each armed with as many as seventy special throwing daggers. These they carried around their waists, around their thighs. They bore tough buffalo-hide shields, which they used until they came within throwing range.

The daggers themselves were tipped with poison, and would

soon fly so rapidly in the air that they actually seemed to have been spat out of warrior's mouths! What followed each barrage of daggers were enemies falling dead like over-ripe fruit from a tree on a windy day. Before long, most enemy warriors would take flight rather than face the deadly daggers.

I was supposed, as general, to ensure that the King remained safe while in battle. Unfortunately, my King got too excited during a certain battle, and rushed off to chase retreating enemy soldiers before I would catch up. One of the enemy warriors speared his horse, bringing the King crashing down. We were just in time to save the King from certain death. Later, I was discharged for negligence and banished from the Kingdom. My wealth was confiscated and my family ordered to live in isolation until the King saw otherwise."

"Sorry, Zoku," Sani sadly whispered.

"I took it all in my stride, and came to Gabo Kingdom because Donga Forest afforded me the kind of surroundings most conducive to my depressing status. Over the years, I learnt the language spoken here, and here I'll stay till my time comes to go the way of all our fore fathers!" Zoku concluded in a strange quietness.

Several weeks elapsed before Zoku could walk again well enough to escort Sani out of Donga forest. Until this time, Sani had learnt from Zoku many things about the forest, its animals, its trees and diverse plants, as well as how one survived in it. He also learnt more about the Kingdom of Zateli and its strange customs and people.

When the day finally dawned for Sani to begin his journey home, Zoku extended an indefinite invitation to Sani to visit him in future in order to learn more. Sani received this with great joy and enthusiasm. Among other things, Zoku promised to teach him how to make and actually use the dreaded daggers that the Zateli were infamous for. Sani eagerly looked forward to coming back to Zoku as soon as he had ensured all was well at home.

Sani's arrival back home was met with tears of joy as Nomu ran to embrace him. "Sani, dear brother, I had long concluded that you had been killed by wild animals! Where have you been?"

"It's a long story, Nomu. I am truly sorry that I could not even send word that I would be away. Let's go inside and I'll tell you everything!" Sani replied, hugging Nomu affectionately.

It took two nights for Sani to describe the strange events that had befallen him, as well as the even stranger man that had been at the center on them. He concluded by telling Nomu that he would return to Donga Forest not many days thence.

Sani realized hereafter that any meaningful stay with Zoku would, of necessity, have to be lengthy. At the same time, Nomu would be lonely indeed when he left. It was with this thought that he invited Nomu one evening for a serious discussion.

“Nomu,” he began, “you are almost four years my elder now. I am about to leave, and yet I feel the pain I imagine you’d go through in my absence. Could you possibly have a girl in mind that could grace this homestead as your wife?”

Nomu laughed and quickly replied, “Have you been reading my mind, or listening to me talk in my sleep? I have longed to marry a certain damsel from nearby. She is orphaned and living only with her grandmother. They love me, but I lack anything to give as bride price. But for that, I would have a wife, brother!”

At Nomu’s answer, Sani had been delighted and taken Nomu by the hand to their small pen hosting their sheep and goats.

“Nomu, choose any of these and give the damsel and her grandmother. If they can come and live here with you I would also give my approval. However, a wedding and all its complications would keep me here for days on end. Please do all that is in your heart but release me, alright?” Sani asked.

Nomu agreed readily and tears stood out again in his eyes at this wonderful turn of events.



A few days later, the journey back to Donga Forest took Sani only hours. He soon arrived at Zoku's house deep in the forest, and was pleased to find the old man at home. As Zoku saw him, he almost ran to greet him. It was apparent that it wasn't Nomu alone that suffered from loneliness!

In Zoku's company and fatherly care, Sani's days passed swiftly, full of excitement. There seemed to be no end to learning, and each day added some new facet of strength to the manly character he was quickly acquiring. Days turned into weeks and weeks to months.

True to his word, Zoku painstakingly taught Sani how to smelt iron from iron pyrites in special soil, and how to beat iron to a steely hardness. This would enable him to forge the quaint but deadly daggers that had made Zoku's people so terrifying to their foes. Very soon, Sani could make daggers as beautiful and as well balanced as Zoku's. He was delighted at the strange weapons.

Each dagger was only as long as the palm of his hand. The sharp and pointed blade was heavier in the front than in the tapered rear. The handles were finely threaded with strings of fresh animal gut, and were unusually tight when the strings dried. Each dagger was honed to a sharp and shiny finish.

Among the more important lessons about Zateli daggers, Sani learnt how to make arm-bands and broad belts that numerous daggers could be sheathed into beautifully. Zoku, hereafter, took Sani through many excruciating drills with rock-weights and tree branches to strengthen his whole body. Before long, Sani's body changed into a rock-hard muscular form that any army commander would have been proud. His arms became like steel springs and soon, even Zoku could not match him when throwing daggers.

Over many hours of training each day, Sani became adept at throwing the deadly missiles from any position his body was in. Whether lying down, kneeling, jumping, running and even somersaulting Sani would hardly miss a target. His aim improved with each day, and one day, in particular, filled both student and tutor with awe.

Sani and Zoku had been quietly walking through thick forest undergrowth. They each carried daggers on arms, legs and around waists. Zoku was on this day, teaching his apt student about various poisons found in special plants, and particularly those that could cause instant paralysis or death. He had already taught Sani the range of poisons that could cause sleep or great muscular stiffness, as well as a few that would cause blindness.

As they walked quietly through the forest under growth on this day, with Zoku leading the way, Sani sensed danger. He quietly motioned Zoku to stop and crouch down. It was just at this moment that a dark object flashed over Zoku's head!

Before he realized it himself, Sani's hand sent a dagger flying into the ominous dark object. It was with shock that both Zoku and Sani then observed how close death had come, in the form of a huge and venomous serpent, now coiling and uncoiling in its death throes at Zoku's feet. Sani's dagger was deeply embedded in the serpent's throat!

"Thank you my son. Again you've saved my life, and I am truly proud of you," were Zoku's only words after this encounter.

A year passed by before Sani felt an urge to return home and check on Nomu. He proceeded to ask leave of his mentor and tutor.

“My heart bleeds to let you go, my son,” Zoku quietly said.

“I have a deep feeling that we won’t meet again.”

“Zoku, you have been what my father could not be to me. Why do you break my heart thus with painful words?” Sani asked in a heavy tone.

“Go well, my son. I am proud to see the result of my training on you. This life sometimes takes strange twists and turns. If one of them should take me away, remember always that I went away a happy man!” Zoku quietly concluded before walking away.

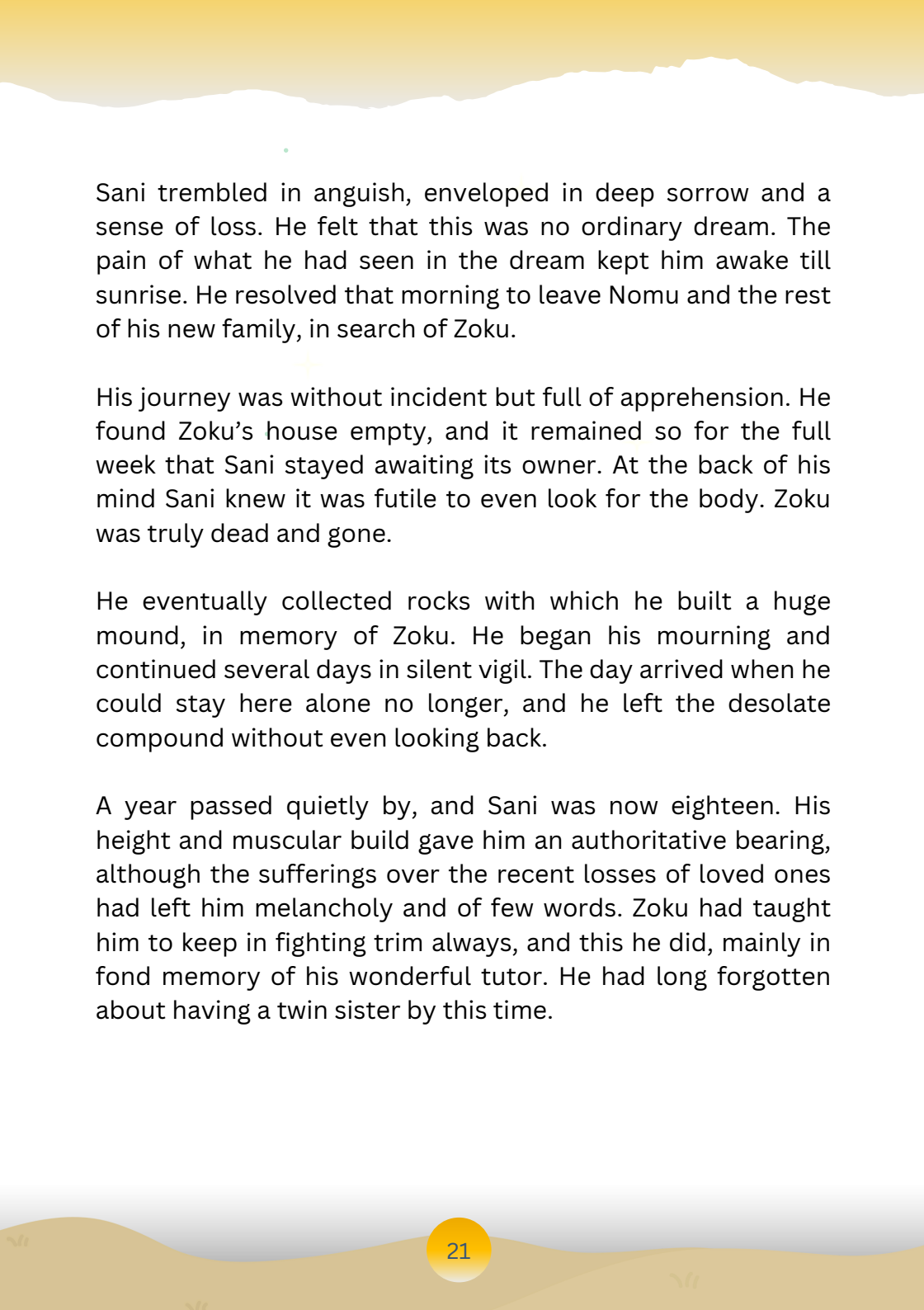
Sani shouted, “farewell too, my father!” As he left.

On arrival home to a tumultuous welcome and home coming reception, Sani narrated his long absence as well as the events that had transpired since he left. His audience, to his great pleasure and surprise, consisted of Nomu, his expectant lovely bride Titi, her grandmother and a young distant relative of Titi’s.



They all enjoyed each other's company over the next few months, culminating in yet another feast, this time to celebrate the birth of Nomu's new born baby boy!

One night, Sani woke up perspiring profusely. It was in the wee hours of the morning. He woken from a strange dream in which he saw his beloved friend Zoku walking along a high, rocky cliff at the edge of Donga forest. He raised his hand and waved at him before being charged by a buffalo that broke out of the woods. It sent the old man hanging precariously over a cliff's edge.



Sani trembled in anguish, enveloped in deep sorrow and a sense of loss. He felt that this was no ordinary dream. The pain of what he had seen in the dream kept him awake till sunrise. He resolved that morning to leave Nomu and the rest of his new family, in search of Zoku.

His journey was without incident but full of apprehension. He found Zoku's house empty, and it remained so for the full week that Sani stayed awaiting its owner. At the back of his mind Sani knew it was futile to even look for the body. Zoku was truly dead and gone.

He eventually collected rocks with which he built a huge mound, in memory of Zoku. He began his mourning and continued several days in silent vigil. The day arrived when he could stay here alone no longer, and he left the desolate compound without even looking back.

A year passed quietly by, and Sani was now eighteen. His height and muscular build gave him an authoritative bearing, although the sufferings over the recent losses of loved ones had left him melancholy and of few words. Zoku had taught him to keep in fighting trim always, and this he did, mainly in fond memory of his wonderful tutor. He had long forgotten about having a twin sister by this time.

One morning, several months later, Sani woke up with a burden. He wished to visit Donga Forest again, and Zoku's house in particular. The thought that he had allowed his old friend's former abode to fall into dilapidation troubled him.

He knew that he could not ever live there, at least not in the absence of Zoku, but letting the old man's house fall to pieces was certainly out of the question. He quickly made arrangements to leave, ensuring that Nomu had everything he needed to keep his new household in good sustenance. Presently, he set off, not knowing how long he would be gone.

On arrival at Zoku's house deep in Donga Forest, Sani felt heavy at heart. Memories of the wonderful times they had shared here inundated his mind, and tears pricked at his eyelids. As he surveyed Zoku's hut, he was surprised to find it in very good condition. Everything actually seemed to be in place and untouched. The ravages usually occasioned by alternate heat and cold, as well as heavy rainfall had done little damage to the house.

Sani entered the house and soon settled around the fireplace after coaxing a fire alight. It was late afternoon, and he felt no need to venture farther that day. As the evening approached, Sani cooked a small meal of roast meat and yams from provisions he had brought with him. Before long, he secured the door to the hut and fell asleep in the warmth that the fire, now spent, had provided.

The following morning Sani spent some time tidying up. He went on to clear the small compound around the house. This did not take long, and he proceeded to make preparations to go hunting. He was fully arrayed with daggers when he left, more out of habit than for any other reason.

Sani's excursion took him on a long journey into the vast jungle of Donga forest. Thanks to Zoku's training, he moved swiftly and silently. He did not really care for a successful kill but enjoyed the exertion the hunt was putting upon him.

A crashing of bushes and the consequent glimpse of a large Gazelle in swift flight brought Sani to a halt!

He wasn't afraid but cautious. He needed, instinctively, to know what predator had sent the antelope fleeing. Before long, several smaller antelopes also shot by in graceful but rapid leaps. Sani at once knew that something was a miss.

Applying stealth that he had learnt from Zoku, Sani quickly made his way towards the direction the animals had come from. He kept under cover as he climbed to higher ground. Soon he heard low voices. He listened closely, gliding still closer towards the source.

**SANI AND
THE ROYAL FAMILY**



An opening in the undergrowth revealed the presence of a large party of armed soldiers on what looked like a hunt. At their head, a pleasant looking and authoritative young man gave signals.

His bows and arrows, as well as his sword, still sheathed at his side, were of a regal quality and beauty. His mantle of leopard skin was the final proof of his person. Sani quickly concluded that this could be none other than the son of King Toku, the Ogabo!

Many unanswered questions swiftly crossed Sani's mind. He had noticed that the whole party was composed of warriors, several of whom carried a large net. Some also seemed to be senior officers. What were they looking for? And why did they allow good game to flee without due stealth? He decided to follow them under cover of the dense vegetation around.

The exercise of playing cat and mouse with the hunting party ended suddenly.

The same unease that had warned Sani of danger when he saved Zoku's life from a deadly serpent now returned to him. He felt the tiny hairs all over his body stand on end and his hand dropped to a dagger around his waist.

The prince leading the strange hunters was still in clear view. He was just creeping under some creepers hanging over his head when Sani's sharp eyes caught a slithering movement high in the branches above the prince.

In a flash, whatever was above the prince glided rapidly over branches and was almost upon the prince when Sani let fly with his dagger.

Time seemed to freeze as the dagger found its mark the very moment that the huge serpent lunged at the prince. As it fell over him in coils, winding and unwinding in furious death throes and filling the air with dust and flying debris, the prince yelled out in terror!

Instantly, every warrior rushed to his aid, only to stare in great alarm at the huge beast at the prince's feet. Several warriors quickly cut it deeply, and it soon lay still. As they all gathered around to see the ugly serpent, one elderly warrior that looked bigger and stronger than the rest pointed to the beast's head. There, clearly embedded deep in the throat was a peculiar haft. The prince pulled this out to reveal a strange dagger. Every person around the prince knew then that it belonged to none of them!

As soon as Sani knew that his dagger had struck the serpent, he quickly slipped away noiselessly. He did not want to gamble on what kind of reaction the prince and his hunters were going to have when they realized that someone else, besides them, had saved the young man. What he did not know was that his dagger had suddenly become a treasure to the son of the Ogabo, and one that the prince would never rest until he had solved the mystery of.

The need to hunt, as well as the need to stay longer in Zoku's hut quickly dissipated, and Sani decided to return home after the strange encounter. In his young mind, he was afraid of the outcome of appearing to have trailed the young prince. Who would ever believe that he had no ulterior motives? It took him a few hours to pack and leave Donga forest for home.

On arrival, as he rejoined the people he now called his family, he made sure to speak nothing about his latest adventures in the forest.

Several months after this, Nomu arrived home one evening in great excitement. Sani could hardly get Nomu to sit down, as he began his strange tale.

Nomu had left home that morning to take some goats to the nearest market, at Sani's behest. All had gone well, and the market at Eoli had been particularly brisk that day. Before midday, Nomu's goats had all been bought and Sani's requirements of pots and cultivating tools procured. As Nomu started leaving, he had seen a large crowd gathered at one end of Eoli Market. Curiosity having gotten the better of him, he'd drawn near to find out what was going on.

At this juncture, Sani excitedly asked, "And what was it about, Nomu?"

"You'll never believe it brother!" Nomu replied.

"Apparently, the Ogabo has decided to find a suitor for his only daughter, Princess Tufu. A great consensus in his courts seems to have determined that only the bravest and strongest will be allowed to become son-in-law to the Ogabo. And do you know what? Sani, no less than three expeditions have been carried out in Donga forest, supervised by none other than Prince Ofo, the heir-apparent. Do you know what they caught there?"

"Nomu, you're killing me in suspense!" Sani protested, "Get to the point."



“Alright, alright Sani. They caught the biggest and wildest forest hog ever seen. The beast is said to be as big as a bull, and full of stiff bristles. It’s armed with two tusks that are so deadly that three of the king’s warriors ended their services on that hunt. This is the beast that the princess’ suitor must kill in combat. It is currently at the Ogabo’s palace at Bukoba. Heralds will soon travel throughout the whole kingdom to notify every able man!”

“So that’s what it was all about!” exclaimed Sani, remembering his encounter with the prince. Of course Nomu had no idea, at this point, what Sani was talking about.

As they settled down that evening to a delightful meal cooked by Nomu's lovely wife, Sani was lost in deep thought.

King Toku's heralds soon traversed the entire kingdom, and Princess Tufu became a household name in every family with a young man. Her beauty was the stuff of every local yarn, and it was said to render even royal attendants speechless in the Ogabo's own home.

Sani heard about all these development from Nomu, but took little note. He was sure that any reasonably courageous man could win the Princess' hand in marriage. How wrong he was!

One evening, Nomu brought Sani a chilling tale relating to the fate of several suitors.

"Sani, it's not as easy as we imagined. The conditions are that no bows and arrows, axes or spears are allowed when in combat with the hog. The only weapons allowed are swords, knives and daggers, of which one may carry as many as one wishes.

The wild hog has so far disposed of seven strong men. The king, wishing to spare lives, ensures that as many as five strong warriors holding a length of stout fencing quickly jump into the sealed area to carry off any injured suitor. Notwithstanding, several warriors, as well as suitors, have been badly lacerated in the whole process. Every day since then brings fewer and fewer men with hearts brave enough to even try."

It was partially out of sympathy for the many people about to seriously get injured, and perhaps maimed for life, that Sani felt burdened to go in quest of the deadly hog. He felt more than able to face it, thanks to Zoku's endless training.

The fact that he was allowed as many daggers as he wished only added to his confidence. True, to win the Ogabo's daughter in marriage would be a most attractive inducement, but princess or no princess he decided he would still go.

The journey to Bukoba, the Ogabo's royal abode, took Sani three days. Nomu had anxiously requested to accompany him, but Sani had declined. It was best that he travel alone, he explained.

On arrival, two more suitors joined Sani at the palace. As soon as they stated their mission, they were all brought before the Ogabo. Formalities were few, and the elderly monarch welcomed them to his palace with a short speech. As the normal entertainments began that evening, with food and drinks of every kind served, King Toku, the Ogabo, called for Princess Tufu to come and greet the three suitors. Sani had, prior to this day, seen many lovely women among the Elomo, Zede and Logopo tribes of Gabo kingdom.

When he, however, laid eyes on Princess Tufu, his heart melted!



Her every feature was perfection. Her voice seemed like the sound of ripples of water, and her form caused sudden discomfort in all three suitors. Their eyes hardly blinked as she greeted them and proceeded to join the Ogabo. It was only by sheer force of will that Sani tore away his eyes from the princess. There was no more question of Princess or no Princess! He was in love, and he knew that he had to have this marvelous creature to grace his future!

The next day found all three contestants dressed in full combat attire and waiting to face the wild hog. Hundreds of the Ogabo's subjects present, among them, attendants at the royal court. Warriors, too, positioned themselves everywhere, keeping order as well as ensuring security. There was an air of festivity and goodwill all around.

The Ogabo's administrator soon gave a short speech, welcoming guests, spectators and contestants. He briefly outlined the order of contest.

“Brave men of Gabo land, welcome. The enclosure you see before you has two gates. One by one, you will enter by one gate and stand ready to battle. The other gate will then open to bring out the king's hog. Each one of you, in appropriate order will fight it to death or submission. May we have the first contestant, please?”

The first contestant, not so young, was a tall and thick-set warrior. He had legs like tree trunks, and held only one fierce looking curved sword. His body was covered with thick buffalo hide over his chest, back, thighs, shoulders and arms. He looked formidable, and walked in majestically, brimming over with confidence.

The gate he had entered by was closed, and the gate at the other end began to open. Unknown to Sani, this was none other than General Dombu's son, Etombu. He was a renowned soldier in the Ogabo's army, and had won much glory as such, being a fearless fighter.

As the huge, black, bristly hog walked out of the darkness beyond its own gate, a gasp of alarm went up from those who had never seen it. As soon as it saw Etombu, it gave out a loud snort and charged!

Etombu was momentarily shocked at the size of the hog. As he braced himself to strike, it reached him before he could bring down his raised dagger. It struck him in the stomach and lifted him on its curved tusks as if he was made of feathers. It went on to fling him sideways some distance away.

The crowd at this time had acquired a strange mix of people mourning and others crying out frantic instructions to Etombu!

By a strange and fortunate twist of fate, Etombu's tough buffalo-hide protection was the only reason his intestines did not part company with his large stomach.

It is instructive at this point to say that, in the face of overwhelming danger, as happened too often, a contestant was allowed to climb out of the combat area by rapidly scaling the enclosure's wall from the inside. This would not be held as dishonourable at all, under the dire circumstances!

On the next charge of the furious hog, Etombu dropped clean his sword and barely hopped over the high wall before the beast slammed into it. As he hobbled away, the crowd gave an audible sigh, relieved to see him alive. He limped away, bleeding from some lacerations around his hands.

Sani courteously gave the second man priority. The man grinned as if to say, “Too bad, young man, but see you at my wedding!”

This second man, a warrior too in the Ogabo’s army, was battle- scarred and of a nasty temperament. Not only was he brutish but of disgusting habits like spitting heavily into his hands before holding his two long daggers.

He was as tall as Etombu but very muscular. He wore a metal helmet and metallic bracelets all over his arms and legs. His chest and back were protected by thin plates of metal attached to each other by thick hide straps. His name, as Sani managed to hear from fans, was Zuba or ‘the Rhino’!

Zuba was ushered into the enclosure, and proceeded to yell to the admiring crowds.

“Get ready to eat royal pork!”

A section of the crowd yelled and howled in encouragement. He held the long daggers in both hands, ensuring that two more sheathed on both thighs were secure.

The crowd fell silent again as the giant hog strode out. It stopped briefly, as if in disdain, before rushing out again at Zuba. As it hit him, one of his daggers pierced its ear and the other sunk into a shoulder. The force of its mad charge hurled Zuba into the strong fence behind him!

The next thing that Zuba heard was an ear-splitting squeal that even the crowd put hands on ears to keep out. The



bleeding beast was mad with rage now. It came at Zuba throwing its head from side to side. Zuba's second pair of knives was tossed aside as its tusks missed his ribs by a whisker. He jumped clear and took to his heels. Before he could run clear inside the enclosure, the hog charged again and hit Zuba squarely into the open gate on its own side, and beyond!

As it raised clouds of dust in its mad dash, following him into this dark interior, the crowd wailed in terror. Even Sani now prayed for Zuba!

The hog shot out of its lair in a gallop, with Zuba clinging onto its back for dear life and riding it like a jockey! Its squealing now, punctuated by Zuba's own howls of terror, was dreadful! It suddenly braked hard to send Zuba sliding on his stomach towards his own gate. His frantic cries of "Open! Open the gate, am dying!!" were responded to promptly.

As Zuba slid right out of the battle zone, the warriors closed the gate. The hog's slam into it, almost broke the arms of the warriors manning it! Zuba had just got away with his life, and he practically sprinted away as soon as he got to his feet!

Sani was relieved to see Zuba alive. At the same time, he was sorry for the wounded hog. Up next, he decided to end its life mercifully quickly.

The crowd had, by this time, started to leave when they saw the young, muscular man walk towards the entry gate. His arms had strange knives stuck into leather bands. He had knives around his thighs and waist too. They all looked so small in comparison to Etombu's huge sword and Zuba's long daggers. They all kept silent as the administrator spoke.

"Son, the beast is mad with pain. Are you sure you want to go in there?"

"That is precisely why I want to go in now. As you can see, the beast is suffering greatly, and I want to put it out of its misery!" Sani replied.

As he approached the gate to the enclosure, Sani prayed quietly in his heart to the only being by whose will he believed everything worked, the Great Creator of all things. He had hardly finished his inaudible prayer when a strange series of events began to unfold!

Until now, the royal family of the Ogabo, King Toku, had been represented at the bizarre contest between suitors and forest hog. It had been generally considered too gory and cruel for them to behold, and especially after severe outcomes in the initial attempts.



Now, special horns blown only when the Ogabo or his family approached began their shrill blasts. Soon, the royal entourage accompanied by large escorts of warriors, chiefs, elders, commanding officers of the Ogabo's army and a host of dignitaries came into view. Sani wondered why they had developed this sudden interest in the event.

The answer came in the form of Prince Ofo, the Ogabo's son and heir apparent.

No sooner had the royal host and escorts been comfortably settled in the dais of raised platforms overlooking the hog's enclosure, than the prince walked up to the presiding administrator responsible for organizing the entry of contestants. A whispered discussion ensued and presently the elderly man, who had been so concerned for Sani's safety, came to where he stood.

He requested for one of Sani's daggers, which he then took back to the young prince. Prince Ofo was only a year older than Sani, and smiled broadly as the officiating administrator handed him the dagger from Sani. He quickly took it to his father, talking excitedly and pointing in Sani's direction. Soon, the Ogabo summoned the official and ordered for Sani to approach the make-shift dais occupied by the royal family.

Sani, at this juncture, was slightly perplexed. The honour of meeting the Ogabo, on the other hand, restored his confidence and he walked boldly to the raised platform that the royal dais consisted of. As he neared the Ogabo, Prince Ofo eagerly came to him and warmly shook his hand, even as Sani bowed in respect.

"Young friend, I greet you, and wish you well. I am Prince Ofo, and I desire your meeting with my father, the Ogabo. Pray, tell me your name," Prince Ofo spoke in pleasant tones.

“I am Sani, son of Bezu of the Olomo tribe in his majesty’s kingdom. I am deeply honoured by your interest Prince Ofo!” Sani smiled and replied.

As Sani and Prince Ofo climbed to where the Ogabo was, the elderly monarch stood up to shake Sani’s hand, to his great shock. Sani quickly bowed deeply in reverence. Prince Ofo then made introductions, and ended by saying, “Father, I believe this is the man who saved my life in the forest!”

As all this was going on, two strange events began to take place. On one side, Princess Tufu’s eyes could hardly leave the sight of the athletic and muscular young man with a pleasant face. His courage and manner as he walked, festooned with dozens of sheathed daggers all over his muscular limbs, overwhelmed her. She had never seen a warrior like this one, and she found her heart beating faster than usual as she carefully observed him.

On yet another side, among the King’s commanding officers seated together, a stern-looking giant of fierce disposition frowned. This was general Dombu, and in Sani’s youthful countenance, he saw an enemy resurrected. He needed nobody to explain that this was the son of his old enemy Bezu. He remembered the hateful man who had robbed him of beautiful Bilia, the woman that would have been his wife. He remembered, too, how he had killed Bezu with a single shot from his bow while in battle. It mattered little that he had shot Bezu in the back!



Dombu's frown only expressed his deeper forebodings. History seemed poised to repeat itself, and fate was about to hand over the beautiful Princess Tufu to Bezu's son!

Only that morning, word had reached him of Etombu's dismal failure to win the hand of the Princess. For his former arch-enemy's son to win her where his own son had failed was now unbearable for Dombu. He hastily ordered a warrior to fetch his weapons and armour as quickly as he could. If Etombu couldn't kill the hateful hog, he would do it himself, rather than Bezu's son succeeding!

The Ogabo was at this moment asking Sani a very important question. He wanted to be sure that it was Sani who had been in Donga forest to save Prince Ofo.

“My son, have you previously seen Prince Ofo at all in your life? Asked the King. “Yes, your highness,” replied Sani. “I was hunting deep in Donga forest about a year ago now. I came across Prince Ofo and his hunters. I discreetly avoided drawing the Prince’s attention, but inevitably had to interfere with their hunt.”

King Toku smiled broadly.

“Your modesty, Sani, amazes me! Pray, tell us what exactly happened.”

“Well, your majesty, Prince Ofo was attacked by a huge serpent, which I was fortunate enough to hit with my dagger before it could harm him!” Sani said quietly.

Prince Ofo now shouted with joy, yelling, “It’s him, my father. I told you it was him!”

Father and son hugged Sani warmly even as Princess Tufu and the royal women ululated at the unfolding drama. The Ogabo then spoke and said, “Welcome Sani to my royal family. I have no other son, and your action that day ensured that I still have an heir to my throne. From now on, you shall join my royal family as my second son!”

Sani, until now, had been full of amazement. This now turned to speechless.

“I am deeply honored your majesty. Thank you very much, from the depths of my heart.”

The imminent unfinished business of the forest hog and Princess Tufu’s suitor now dawned on Prince Ofo, King Toku and the royal dignitaries. How could they allow this pleasant young man they had all come to love face the deadly hog? There was a brief silence all around as the gravity of the situation set in. This was, however, defused by the appearance of General Dombu before the Ogabo.

“Your majesty, and all royal dignitaries, I salute you all. I am here to plead with your majesty for an opportunity to restore the honour lost from my household in the issue of the forest hog. I crave your majesty’s permission, as well as that of the young man here, to fight the beast myself. I await your leave to proceed!” General Dombu, dressed in full war attire of protective armour, bowed reverently.

This turn of events filled the Ogabo and his family with relief and permission was immediately granted.

Sani looked on in silent pity for the man. He had come to understand that this was the man who had deprived him of a father many years back. Strangely, he now felt no bitterness towards him. He decided to allow things to unfold as his maker would deem fit.

The royal spectators as well as every other onlooker soon settled down, and General Dombu was allowed to enter the hog's enclosure. He brandished two beautiful swords glinting in the sunlight. He was full of confidence as he flexed his huge muscles and gritted his teeth. He fully intended to make short work of the hog and restore family pride, besides dealing a terrible blow to the son of the hateful enemy from his past, Sani's father!

The wild forest hog had till now only reduced its deafening squeal to a heavy bellowing. As the gates opened on its side, it renewed its former ear-splitting shriek and raced out so fast that a gasp went up from spectators! Nobody had expected anything else besides an exhausted combatant.

General Dombu had only time to raise his right hand to strike with the heavy sword in it. Before he could do so, the red-eyed furious hog struck him hard in the chest and tore at him with the deadly tusks as he fell. Before he could regain his feet, a side-swipe of the beast's head tossing from side to side tore off his breastplate and flung it to one side.

In desperation, General Dombu grabbed a handful of sand and flung this into its eyes. This temporarily halted its onslaught and the General stood up to run for the wall. He had just begun to climb when the hog caught a glimpse of him and charged again. As it raised its massive neck, it swung its head and one of its tusks speared the General in the back. He gave such a cry of pain that utter silence enveloped every spectator!

The furious hog swung its head once more and hurled the dying General to the ground. Even as warriors rushed in to save General Dombu and send the hog back to its lair, the wounded man kicked hard once and lay still.

His last battle was over, and the General had lost!

There was silence over the whole assembly of people gathered. The General's body was carried out on a stretcher by warriors in deep grief. As they bore him away, the Ogabo and his entire family stood up in a show of respect, prompting the entire crowd to do the same.

Sani, for his part, felt sorry that the General's life should end this way. As the crowd sat down in hushed murmurs and bewilderment, Sani stood and went up to the Ogabo.



“Your majesty, accept my condolences on the loss of a brave soldier,” he began.

“On the same note, I humbly request your permission to accomplish my task, which I postponed to give preference to the General.”

Princess Tufu and her older brother Prince Ofo, who had both been listening intently, rushed over now and pleaded earnestly with Sani to forego the exercise.

“Sani,” Prince Ofo said quickly, “please reconsider this whole affair. I have just gained a brother, and my father has just gained a new son. Why would you let us be plunged into mourning on the same day? My sister here has also fallen in love with you. Would you not heed our cries brother?”

By this time, Princess Tufu was in tears. She was sure that Sani would not return alive should he enter the dreadful enclosure. He, however, stilled their voices.

“My beloved adopted family, I do all of you honour, not by staying back but by going and succeeding. I owe this much to my father, my mother, my mentor Zoku and our good Ogabo, whose decree we must adhere to.”

With these words, he walked away quickly and entered the hog’s enclosure, which seemed to have suddenly become the enclosure of death.

Princess Tufu was inconsolable as Sani went, and her brother had more than he could handle in trying to comfort her. Their mother had died a few years now, and they had become inseparable since then.

Sani drew two daggers in readiness as the dreadful hog charged out. As it neared him, he casually pierced the ground in front of him and flashed out a cloud of dust with the daggers before springing sideways. The forest hog's mad rush was stopped with a shudder by the wall which it almost brought down. Before it could turn, Sani's hands flashed sideways and the daggers buried themselves deep behind its ears.

It rent the air with dreadful squeals of pain and rage even as two more daggers appeared in Sani's hands. He waited again in readiness.

The hog raced again towards Sani, and the resultant cloud of dust hid the young combatant again, as he employed the same tactic as before, two daggers flew and sunk into its neck behind the hog's ears. This time, the damage done by Sani's daggers began to show as it staggered around in an effort to face its enemy.

Sani could not help feeling sorry for the creature. He hoped to find a way to kill it quickly and he now sought to send four more daggers into its neck, still somewhere behind its ears. He had correctly concluded that every other place on its body was too heavily covered in fatty mass to be of any help.

As it charged, less swiftly now, Sani somersaulted over its back juts at it reached him. He released his deadly daggers again, even as the crowd gave a shout of alarm, followed by deafening applause.

As the hog slowed down again, Sani sent his final daggers flying into its neck. One, apparently, found a vital spot and the hog groaned and fell back on its haunches. It was bleeding profusely from the eight daggers embedded in its neck like a collar. Sani now drew a longer dagger and walked over to the beast. He found it lying on its side, and swiftly ended its suffering with a single thrust to its heart. Its frantic kicking ended and it lay still.

There was an uproar and thunderous applause from every spectator! The ease with which Sani had killed the fearsome hog filled his admirers with awe. They had never seen anything like this.



The royal family was not left behind in the frenzied cheering. The prince and princess hugged each other in delight, and their father shook hands with friends and the most senior commanders of his army. This was indeed a wonderful day, and he soon held up his hands to signify silence. The tumult soon died down to a hush.

“Beloved subjects of Gabo, notable dignitaries and every esteemed guest, I salute you all. It is indeed a wonderful day that has turned our sorrow into joy, and our mourning into celebration. We mourn our departed general, and send our deepest condolences to his family and relatives. At the same time, I announce the worthy son-in-law we have hoped for, as well as my adopted son. Sani, son of Bezu! I decree a new title for this prince of Gabo. He shall be called Prince Sani the dagger-spitter! All are hereby welcomed over the next seven days to royal celebrations marking the wedding of Prince Sani and Princess Tufu!”

By delegated authority, Prince Ofo now took Sani by the hand and led him to Princess Tufu. He joined their hands together and asked them to face the rejoicing crowd. The crowd cheered again in deafening ululations and shouts of joy. Sani and his bride were now led away to sit beside the Ogabo, even as preparations began for celebrations.

Never had the people of Olomo, Zede and Logopo in the kingdom of Gabo seen such festivities as what took place to celebrate the wedding of Prince Sani and Princess Tufu!

Never had two young people be as suited to each other as these were!

A few days into the festivities, during which countless goats, sheep, oxen, chickens, geese and every manner of edible livestock were slaughtered and freely served to the Ogabo's subjects, Sani sought out the King and Prince Ofo for a special meeting. This was readily granted, and the Ogabo and his son soon heard strange things from the Prince they had come to love dearly during the past few days. They heard how Bezu, Sani's father, met his death at the hands of General Dombu. They also heard how Sani's twin sister, Tani, disappeared one day thereafter in suspicious circumstances.

At the end of Sani's tragic tale, the Ogabo and his son Ofo, in sorrowful tones, expressed their sympathy. The Ogabo then assured Sani, his new son-in-law, that he would leave no stone unturned in a secret search for Tani's whereabouts. The key to this search was going to be the strange birth-mark on Tani's neck as well as enquiries about any adopted girl among General Dombu's relatives in years previous.

Prince Ofo was chosen to represent the royal family at the general's funeral a few days after Sani's sad story. This was because the royal wedding celebrations were still at their height. It was agreed by the Ogabo's own directive, that General Dombu's funeral was the best opportunity for the search for Tani. As such, a team of twenty elders was chosen to discreetly enquire among the general's family and relatives at the funeral about the young girl.

The funeral went without hitch, and the Ogabo's gifts of several cattle and other foodstuffs to cater for the attendants was received with gratitude. The only tragic occurrence during the funeral was word concerning General Dombu's first-born, Etombu. It appeared that on arrival back home after the harrowing ordeal with the forest hog, Etombu failed to seek immediate treatment for his lacerations.

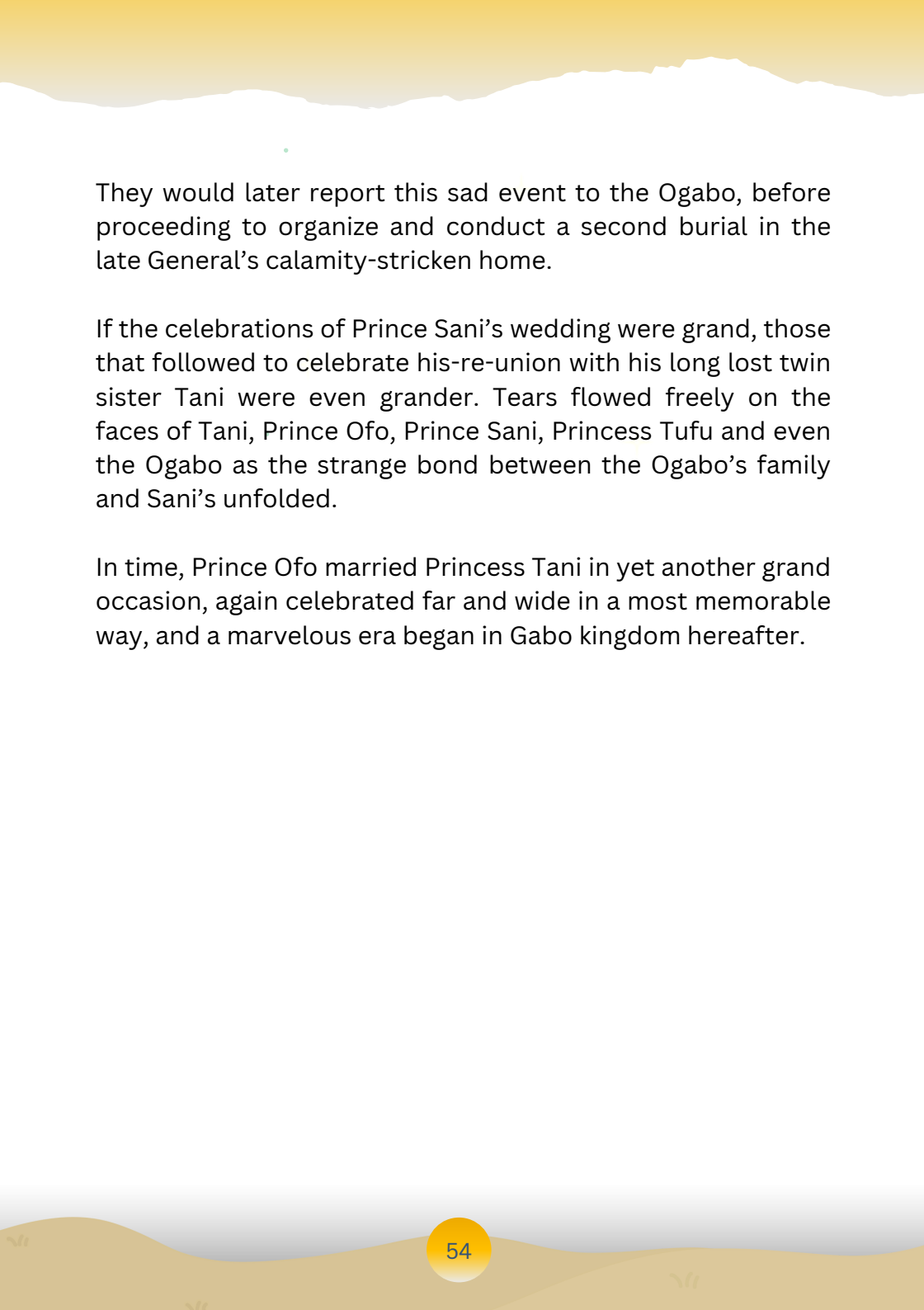
Within two days, his arms and hands had swollen and developed ugly sores from an inexplicable infection. These sores had responded poorly to all herbal applications, and Etombu had fallen grievously a short while after this. By a strange twist of fate, it was in Etombu's home that Tani had lived upon her arrival in Bukoba as a small girl. She was now a beautiful young lady of eighteen, and the only reason Etombu himself had not married her was the general's ambitious plan for Etombu to be given Princess Tufu's hand in marriage.

Tani, now renamed Shipa, arrived late at General Dombu's funeral to bring word of Etombu's critical condition. As she went about the venue, Prince Ofo and one of his special elders met her. Prince Ofo was first drawn to this strange and quiet girl by her radiant beauty and gentle manner. Her face also reminded the prince of somebody very close to him. It was only as he admired beautiful beads on her neck that Prince Ofo saw the dark, circular patch of skin on her neck. From then on, the Prince knew that he had found, not only Tani, but his future Queen.



Several warriors and elders were now allocated the duty of trailing this young girl everywhere to ensure that no harm befell her. These were orders from the Ogabo's own son, and Tani was safe in royal custody though completely unaware of all this.

At the end of the funeral, Tani and her accompanying relatives were ordered to accompany Prince Ofo back to Bukoba, the Ogabo's home. At the same time, several elders and warriors were dispatched to Etombu's home to take care of him. Sadly, news of his sudden death met them even as they arrived there.



They would later report this sad event to the Ogabo, before proceeding to organize and conduct a second burial in the late General's calamity-stricken home.

If the celebrations of Prince Sani's wedding were grand, those that followed to celebrate his-re-union with his long lost twin sister Tani were even grander. Tears flowed freely on the faces of Tani, Prince Ofo, Prince Sani, Princess Tufu and even the Ogabo as the strange bond between the Ogabo's family and Sani's unfolded.

In time, Prince Ofo married Princess Tani in yet another grand occasion, again celebrated far and wide in a most memorable way, and a marvelous era began in Gabo kingdom hereafter.