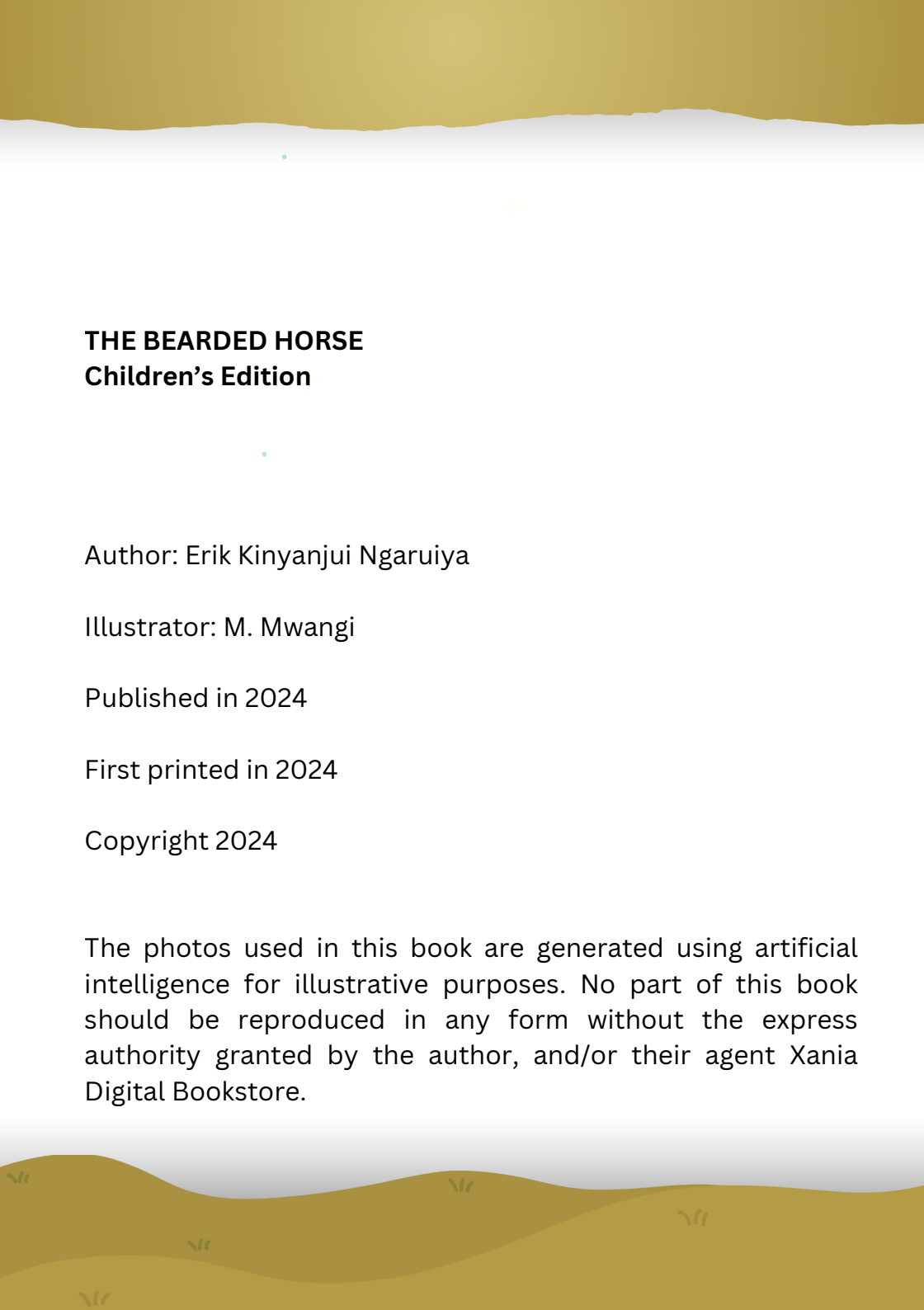




THE BEARDED HORSE

Children's Edition

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THE

BEARDED HORSE

Children's Edition



story time

One evening far away in Arabiland, deep in the jungles of Africa, a young man sat in the fading light from a spent cooking fire. It was supper time, and with him were his mother Nyambu, his younger sister Wange and his two elder brothers Jora and Jobu. His father Kinya, was in some serious discussion with his mother. She politely excused herself to talk to Dungu.

“Dungu, why are you not eating your food? You know how bad it tastes when it gets cold.”

Dungu was the youngest of her sons, and Dungu was not even his real name. It was a nickname he had acquired years before his present age of sixteen.

He was an unusually athletic little fellow of light, sinewy build and not very tall. The most striking feature about Dungu was his mature and very likeable personality. It was also rumoured that he had great hidden physical strength that nobody could explain. Of late, this latter quality was no secret to his family.



They had recently seen Dungu lift a log from the ground that Kinya and his two other sons could hardly move. After he had left, Kinya and his two sons painfully dragged this log together into their compound for firewood.

Dungu emerged from his deep meditation and replied, “It’s alright mother, and I will actually finish before Wange!”

There was laughter all around as everybody noticed Dungu’s calabash still half full. Wange’s had only a handful of food left.



As they continued eating, Dungu broke the silence a few minutes later.

“Father, please don’t think I am being rude or forgetful. Was that warning you gave us about the bearded horse serious? You know how often grandmother has narrated countless stories to us about man-eating ogres and greedy hyenas. Is it the same with the bearded horse?”

Kinya was caught off-guard by Dungu’s question.

Not that it was wrong for Dungu to ask, no. The problem was that the bearded horse was a subject only discussed delicately, among grown-ups. It was virtually taboo to talk casually about it.

In all of the region called Arabiland, just off the forested slopes of the Arabi Mountains, the bearded horse was legend. Not only did it exist in the folklore of the Chiyuku tribe on the eastern mountain slopes of Arabiland, but also among the Aloki tribe in the north, and the fierce dominating Wakapi to the south.

“It is three weeks now since I issued that warning, Dungu. I don’t recall the details of what I said, but before I answer your question, what do you really know about the bearded horse?” Kinya slowly asked.





Before Dungu could speak again, Nyambu quietly upbraided her daughter Wange, who had started giggling on hearing about a horse with a beard.

“Ssshhh! Wange kindly leave us in peace if you are going to laugh when no one else is doing so!” Nyambu sternly said.

Wange promptly shut up.

Jora and Jobu rose up at this point, and pulled their three-legged stools closer to their father. The discussion about the bearded horse was taking a serious direction and neither wanted to miss a single detail.

Kinya’s expression was grave as Jobu spoke quietly.

“Why don’t you tell us again father, in as much detail as you can?”

Dungu also drew his stool closer and they all looked at their father earnestly. It was apparent that the bearded horse was a subject Kinya needed to expound on very carefully.

He began his story about the bearded horse, careful not to omit a single fact.





“Many years ago, before I married your mother,” began Kinya, “I was herding your grandfather’s sheep high on the slopes of Arabi Mountain. There were two of us, and my companion’s name was Leki. He was from among the Aloki community, who are our neighbors to the north of here.

As you might all know by now, the Aloki and the Chiyuku are ruled firmly by the war-loving Wakapi. Although we all pay tribute to their king, Enyiro, to maintain peace, the Wakapi are known to occasionally steal livestock from both the Aloki and the Chiyuku. That is the reason our herds and flocks graze under the watchful eyes of two or more armed men.”

Kinya paused and stood up to stretch before sitting down to continue.

“On this day, as evening approached we paused to look up the slopes. High up where the grassland ends and forest begins, we saw a strange mist or smoke along the tree-line. Before we could understand what it was about, a loud roar thundered from the trees! It wasn’t a roar like that of a lion, but more like the bellow of a horse or Zebra, only louder and terrifying to hear. Our sheep fled down-hill as we trembled and prepared to follow suit. Suddenly, heavy galloping sounds emanated from the trees, getting louder and louder!” Kinya exclaimed.





As Kinya continued this strange tale, every eye was wide open with wonder and amazement. Even Nyambu couldn't help but shudder with apprehension at this frightening and shocking episode. Had Kinya not been known to hate loose talk, Nyambu would have burst out laughing in dismissal of the story.

“Before we could take a step in fearful flight,” Kinya continued, “we heard a great crashing and crunching of gravel, and an enormous beast tore over the hillside in a furious gallop! Later, as we tried to make sense of what we had seen, Leki insisted it had been a buffalo. I did not argue much but I had caught a good glimpse of it!”

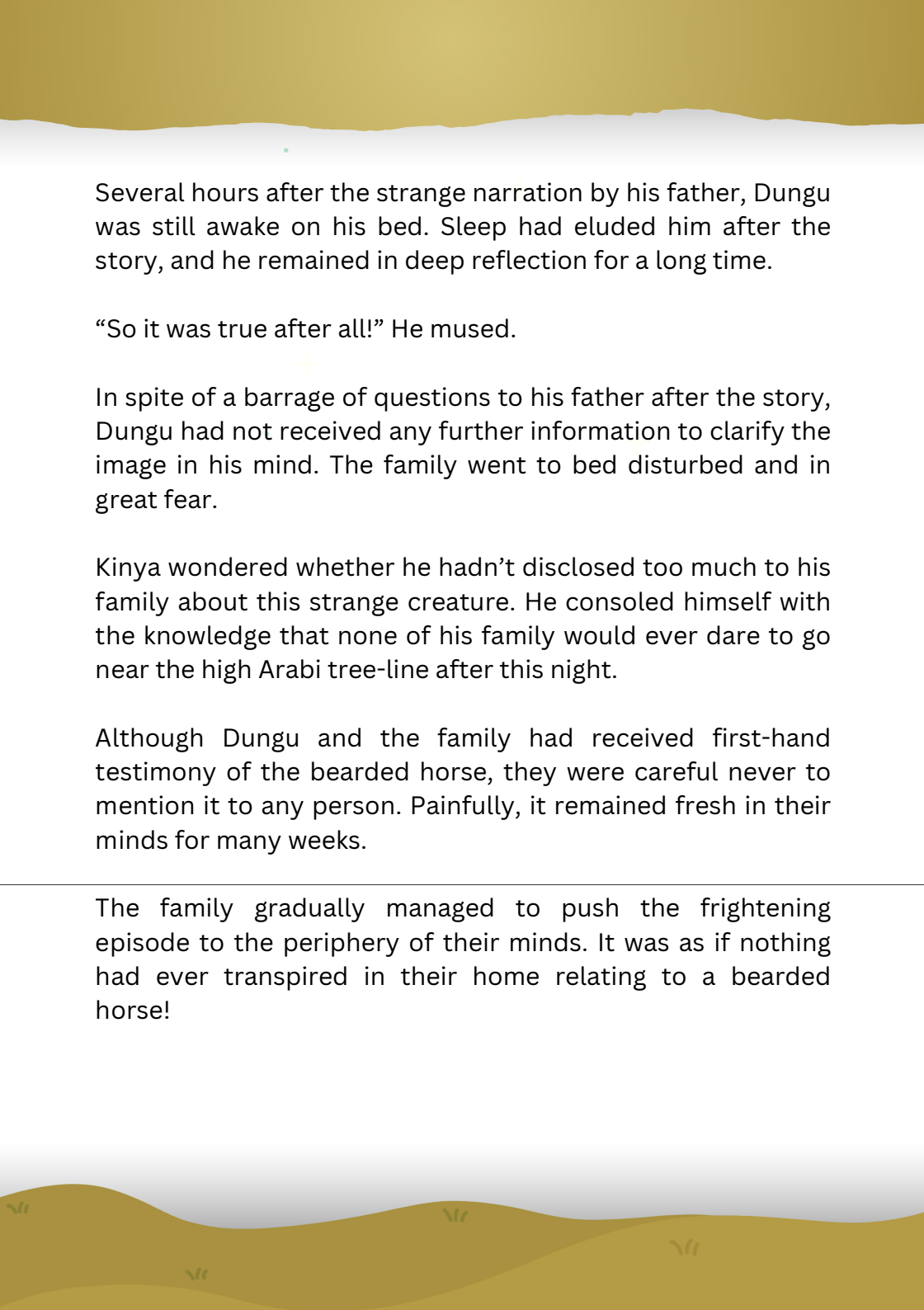
Dungu, at this juncture, quickly asked his father, “What did you see father?”

“A terrible sight, my children! Truly fearful! The thing was taller than a Zebra, and more muscular than a buffalo. It was hairy, and of a silvery grey hue. Its hooves tore up clumps of grass and bush, sending showers of stones flying as it sped away. The final detail that sent me racing down the slopes to catch up with the sheep, was the horn!”

“Father, what horn are you talking about?” Jobu asked incredulously.

“The strange beast had a single horn between its wild, fiery eyes,” Kinya replied. “I imagine it had a beard too, although terror did not allow me to get a better look!”





Several hours after the strange narration by his father, Dungu was still awake on his bed. Sleep had eluded him after the story, and he remained in deep reflection for a long time.

“So it was true after all!” He mused.

In spite of a barrage of questions to his father after the story, Dungu had not received any further information to clarify the image in his mind. The family went to bed disturbed and in great fear.

Kinya wondered whether he hadn't disclosed too much to his family about this strange creature. He consoled himself with the knowledge that none of his family would ever dare to go near the high Arabi tree-line after this night.

Although Dungu and the family had received first-hand testimony of the bearded horse, they were careful never to mention it to any person. Painfully, it remained fresh in their minds for many weeks.

The family gradually managed to push the frightening episode to the periphery of their minds. It was as if nothing had ever transpired in their home relating to a bearded horse!

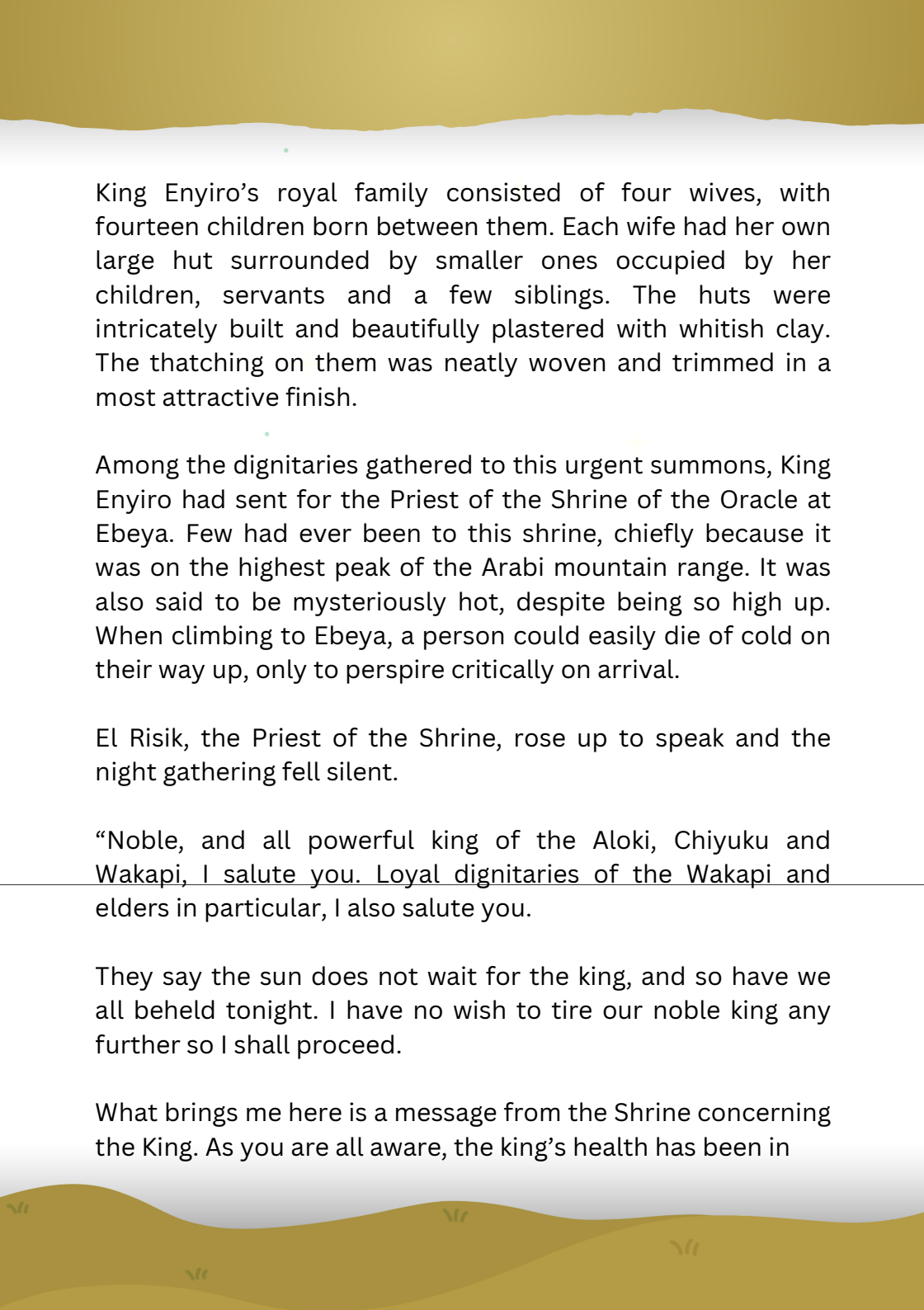


In a different part of Arabiland, a full moon graced the night sky over the land of the Wakapi. This was King Enyiro's domain, and a hush fell over his hastily convened court on this night. Although his tribute every three months from the Aloki and Chiyuku kingdoms had arrived, the king was deeply disturbed.

Dressed in soft deerskin robes, and mantled with a full leopard skin, King Enyiro was regal to behold! His head-dress of ostrich and peacock feathers, together with sheep skin cuffs at his ankles made him look truly majestic. He was indeed what a king over the peoples of three kingdoms should look like.

Seated at his side was his favourite wife, Queen Nebi, the mother of Princess Ezi, the most beautiful among the king's many daughters.





King Enyiro's royal family consisted of four wives, with fourteen children born between them. Each wife had her own large hut surrounded by smaller ones occupied by her children, servants and a few siblings. The huts were intricately built and beautifully plastered with whitish clay. The thatching on them was neatly woven and trimmed in a most attractive finish.

Among the dignitaries gathered to this urgent summons, King Enyiro had sent for the Priest of the Shrine of the Oracle at Ebeya. Few had ever been to this shrine, chiefly because it was on the highest peak of the Arabi mountain range. It was also said to be mysteriously hot, despite being so high up. When climbing to Ebeya, a person could easily die of cold on their way up, only to perspire critically on arrival.

El Risik, the Priest of the Shrine, rose up to speak and the night gathering fell silent.

“Noble, and all powerful king of the Alok, Chiyuku and Wakapi, I salute you. Loyal dignitaries of the Wakapi and elders in particular, I also salute you.

They say the sun does not wait for the king, and so have we all beheld tonight. I have no wish to tire our noble king any further so I shall proceed.

What brings me here is a message from the Shrine concerning the King. As you are all aware, the king's health has been in

decline since a mad buffalo gored him three seasons ago during a hunt.

He wishes us to start thinking about whom among his subjects and family, would best be suited to take over in his place. He has sought divine guidance and the Oracle has responded by sending him a clear message. Behold, O King Enyi, and hearken.

The man who shall ride the bearded horse in broad daylight is the man to whom you shall entrust the Kingdom of Arabi, as well as the beautiful Princess Ezi. I have spoken.”

The priest mysteriously vanished into the night shortly after this address, hardly awaiting refreshments from the king’s catering staff.





Several weeks went by, filled with consternation as the story of the strange turn of events spread. Even regions beyond the Alokí and Chiyuku kingdoms heard about the eerie message delivered to King Enyíro by the priest.

People talked in hushed tones about what it all meant. Most had never even heard of the Shrine of the Oracle. Many others were only now hearing about a bearded horse. On top of all this, there was no shortage of controversy surrounding Princess Ezi. She was said to be the most beautiful among King Enyíro's children, but by no means the eldest. Several of his daughters were older and culturally, more eligible for marriage to the King's heir.

Notwithstanding, the Oracle had spoken and the King did not mince his words in his next decree to his subjects.

“Greetings to the Kings of Alokí, Chiyuku and Wakapí, as well as all my subjects. The oracle has decreed, as have I, that the man who shall reign in my place, and marry my daughter Princess Ezi, shall be the man who will ride the bearded horse in broad daylight. We eagerly await his response from this moment on. So have I decreed and so let it be done.”

Swift couriers soon heralded this message to every corner of the three kingdoms.

One morning after this, Jora and Jobu engaged in a heated discussion about the strange events in Arabiland. They sat





under a Mogu tree as Dungu quietly approached and spoke.

“Hey brothers, have you heard the latest from King Enyiro’s kingdom? Our king either wants war or clearly has never seen the beast described to us by father! What do you think?”

Jora quickly held up his hand to Dungu. He didn’t like where this was going, and was determined to bring his latest dreams to reality.

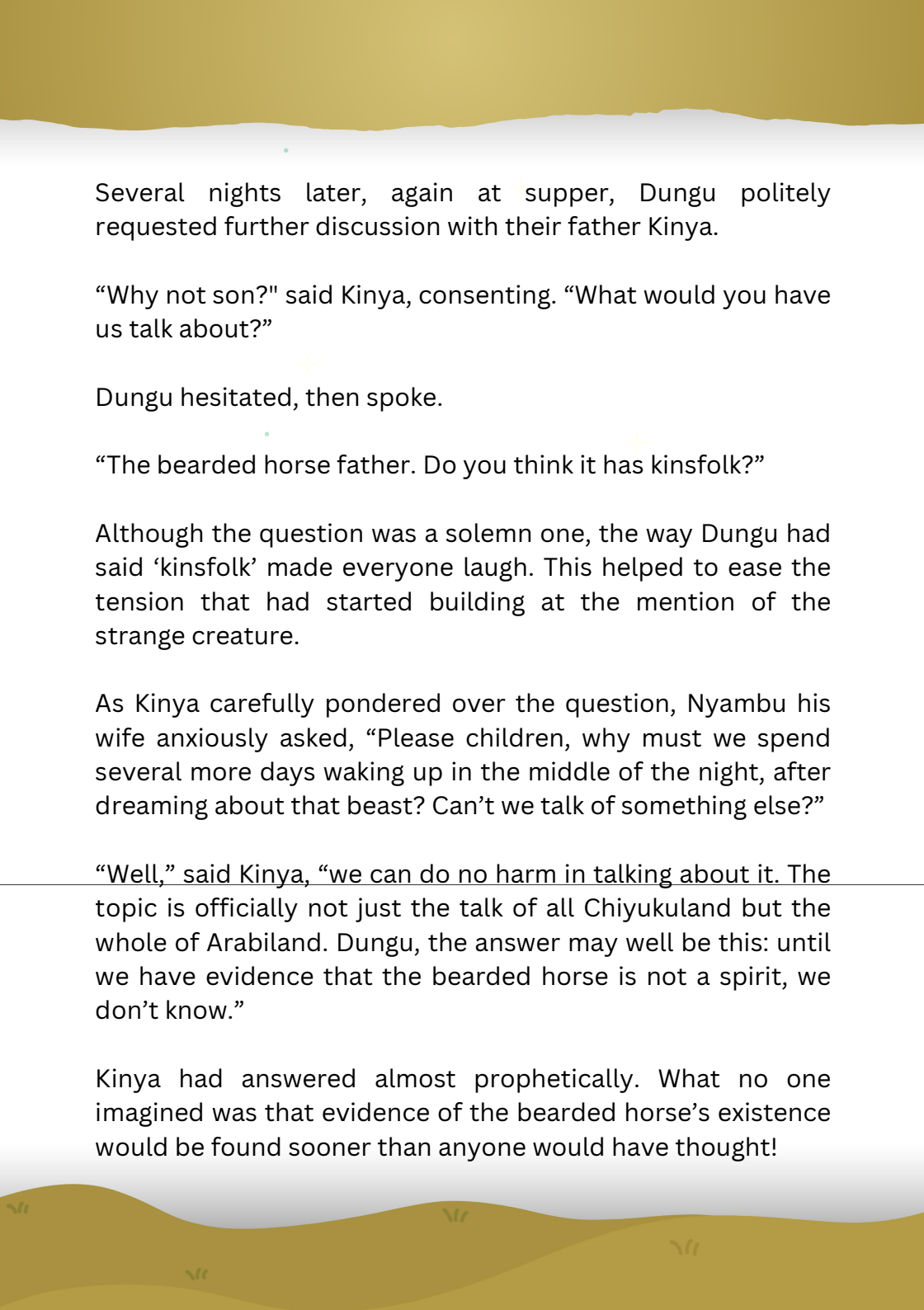
“Brother, please get serious. I know you are too young to marry, but have you ever seen Princess Ezi or heard about her? Why, the king doesn’t even let her out of his sight for fear that someone would abduct her! Her incredible beauty would probably confuse even the bearded horse!”

Jobu too decided to give Dungu some perspective into what was really in question here.

“Dungu, I myself would gladly fight the demons of Ilukuluku Caves just for a chance to win Princess Ezi! She is the loveliest and most enchanting of all women in Alokiland, Chiyukuland and Wakapiland!”

The issue of Princess Ezi appeared to have become too sensitive now so Dungu said no more. Of late he had begun harbouring serious misgivings about this task presented to every young man and warrior in all three kingdoms. The whole endeavour didn’t look good. It didn’t look good at all.





Several nights later, again at supper, Dungu politely requested further discussion with their father Kinya.

“Why not son?” said Kinya, consenting. “What would you have us talk about?”

Dungu hesitated, then spoke.

“The bearded horse father. Do you think it has kinsfolk?”

Although the question was a solemn one, the way Dungu had said ‘kinsfolk’ made everyone laugh. This helped to ease the tension that had started building at the mention of the strange creature.

As Kinya carefully pondered over the question, Nyambu his wife anxiously asked, “Please children, why must we spend several more days waking up in the middle of the night, after dreaming about that beast? Can’t we talk of something else?”

“Well,” said Kinya, “we can do no harm in talking about it. The topic is officially not just the talk of all Chiyukuland but the whole of Arabiland. Dungu, the answer may well be this: until we have evidence that the bearded horse is not a spirit, we don’t know.”

Kinya had answered almost prophetically. What no one imagined was that evidence of the bearded horse’s existence would be found sooner than anyone would have thought!

One morning several days later, Dungu's attention was caught by shouts of alarm. Men, women and children were running frantically towards the market.

"Why is everyone suddenly running in broad daylight?" wondered Dungu. "Well, there is only one way to find out," he decided, taking to his heels in the same direction.

Outside the market place, on a raised ground upon which dignitaries and elders sat during important meetings, a huge crowd had gathered. It was difficult to make out what the attraction was at first, but Dungu ducked and wove his way until he could see what it was.

A huge, hairy carcass lay on its side, its legs secured to a strong pole by taut ropes. It appeared to be a buffalo, and had been carried by several herdsmen to this place. Dungu's unspoken questions were answered shortly after this.





“Men and women of Chiyuku, silence please”, began an elderly looking man. As the murmurs subsided the man continued.

“What you see here today is evidence of just how difficult King Enyiro’s decree is! This beast was found by herdsmen today just below the forest-line of Arabi. It had already died. Kindly note the injury that probably killed it!”

As he spoke, the old man ordered the herdsmen to turn the carcass over.

An audible gasp of shock and surprise emanated from the crowd!

A huge, ugly hole gaped open from the buffalo’s side. Out of this hole blood and some darkish fluid oozed out. It was not a tear or slit like that of a spear, but a neat round hole. One of the herdsmen thrust his stick into the hole and it almost all disappeared inside. There was a gasp of fear from the onlookers. The crowd gradually dispersed and Dungu went on his way.

That night Dungu told the family about the buffalo. Thence, Kinya’s previous warning about the bearded horse took on new meaning.





A few weeks after the strange death of the buffalo, Dungu came across a small crowd gathered around an old Alokí man. He bore a sorrowful countenance, and it was only through much difficulty that the crowd succeeded in persuading him to recount his sad tale.

Apparently, some young Alokí men anxious to win Princess Ezi's hand in marriage had embarked on a mission up the Arabi slopes. They had planned to find the bearded horse and, through their combined effort, succeed in at least getting one of them to ride it. Six young fully-armed men had embarked on this quest, carrying several days' provisions.



Only one had returned, badly injured and lacerated by thorny bushes as he fled. After several days of careful nursing from deep shock, the young man had come out of his trauma. The only words he could mutter were, “they are all dead, killed by the bearded demon!”

After this tragedy, the King of Alok had urgently sent out a troop of armed warriors. Their mission was to recover the dead bodies of his fallen subjects. It was futile, chiefly because numerous scavengers also roamed the forests at night on the Arabi slopes. A few discarded weapons and items of clothing were all that remained of the gallant suitors-to-be.

Hardly a month passed after the Alok tragedy before worse news befell Arabiland.

King Enyiro had issued a declaration of a compulsory three-day mourning period amongst his people, the Wakapi. It had been occasioned by the death of seven of his best warriors. They too had gone in quest of the bearded horse in order to win Princess Ezi.

Again, only clothing, weapons and a few utensils were recovered when a search was made for their bodies. A strange factor in this sad episode was that the side of Arabi that they had ascended was many miles away from the scene of the Alok tragedy. No one was certain anymore whether it was the same beast that had destroyed all these suitors.





That night at supper time, Dungu quietly spoke.

“Father, it would now appear that the bearded horse has kinsfolk, after all!”

“Maybe you are right Dungu,” Kinya quietly replied.

“All the same, the idea that the bearded horse is one of several is terrifying! I do hope that none of you is even contemplating becoming suitors!”

Jora and Jobu, older and bigger than Dungu, looked uneasily at each other. They had just concluded making plans for what was evidently now a mission impossible.

“Father, we were actually wondering whether you could give us your blessing to try,” Jobu hesitantly disclosed.

Kinya trembled within but did not let any of his family see this. Instead, he made a carefully-worded statement.

“If you can just show me how you intend to do what thirteen other men like yourselves have failed to do, you may.”

The silence that had followed only confirmed what Kinya knew all along, that they were just infatuated with Princess Ezi in their minds but had absolutely no idea of how to even approach the bearded horse, let alone ride it!

Perhaps it was fate, or perhaps not, that led to a strange turn of events in Kinya's home shortly afterwards.

For a long time, Kinya's children desired to see their only surviving grandmother. She was his mother and quite advanced in years. She also lived far away near the Chiyuku's border with the Aloki kingdom. Imagine their surprise, then, to see her trudging slowly towards their home a few days later!

Wange ran to meet her, laughing in delight. Her brothers Jobu and Jora, almost carried their grandmother inside for joy. That evening, Dungu arrived home to the smell of roast chicken, roast bananas and great merry-making in welcome of their granny. He was delighted to see her too, but how frail she now looked. After much feasting, the family finally settled down for the night.





With alarming abruptness, their grandmother called for silence after everyone had finished eating. She had decided to disclose her reason for coming.

“My children and grandchildren, I have arrived here only through great effort as you can see. I would not have made this painful journey were it not for a very strange dream that I had some nights ago.

As you might have heard from your father here, I seldom dream. I thought I saw Dungu in my dream, but he looked different. He looked like a mighty warrior! Worse still, he was riding some strange animal like a bull. Before my dream came to an end, I heard a voice saying, “Tell him to look for the beast!” This has been my burden since, and here I am.”

Nobody uttered a word after grandmother finished narrating her dream in Kinya’s household.

That night Kinya and his entire family retired to bed in troubled meditation.

A few days later, their precious parent and grandparent returned home, escorted much of the way by Kinya’s sons.

Many days passed by after her departure, during which nobody ventured to talk about the strange dream or what it meant.





Dungu finally broke this self-imposed ‘curfew’ on the subject.

“Father, would you say that I am destined to ride the bearded horse?” Dungu innocently asked one evening, as the family waited to eat.

To his surprise, Wange’s response was to burst into tears and painful sobbing. Kinya and his wife could not find a reply, and Jora and Jobu wondered whether to support Dungu or join the frightened majority!

“Mother, can’t we decide whether it was God who spoke to grandmother or not?” Dungu continued.

“We all know how godly grandmother has always been!” He ended by saying.

Nyambu, for her part, averted her gaze and wondered what game fate was now playing in her household!

Three days later, around mid-day, Dungu decided that he would actually venture up the mountain towards the forest of Arabi. He resolved to tell no one, after observing how dreadful the whole subject had become to his family.

After three hours of climbing through the scrub, grassland and bush, Dungu came to the edge of the dreaded forest. He wondered what he would do should he meet the bearded horse.



Dungu had few weapons, equipped only with a small, sheathed dagger and a light hunting axe. Both hung from his waist by leather thongs. He had no protective dress whatsoever, but felt strangely confident that the voice that had spoken to his grandmother had not been the voice of evil, but the voice of God.

As Dungu climbed, he realized that he was right at the edge of the forest. He couldn't help noticing how beautiful his surroundings really were. It wasn't thick and impenetrable, but open and full of strange trees like pygmy pines forming a canopy over thick bushes and scattered areas of grass.

Occasional openings in the foliage allowed sunlight to send warm rays into the forest, turning these areas into illuminated meadows extending deep into the forest. Dungu could not immediately see any large trees but, once in a while, saw unusual gnarled trees with thick twisted trunks.





As the beauty of these forested slopes illuminated his mind, Dungu wondered how such radiant and pleasant surroundings could have become so fearful to graze in. The forest certainly made excellent pasture, as well as hunting grounds. In the last hour alone, at least three small deer had criss-crossed the grassy meadows in swift flight.

As he continued on his journey here, Dungu began to feel the need to at least prepare mentally for the ominous task ahead of him.

Among the Aloki and Chiyuku, it was considered great honour to die in battle. A common saying among these two tribes, and even hinted at among the feared Wakapi, went thus; “It is nobler to live a short life of bravery, than to live a long one in cowardice”.

These communities all concurred that a truly great man was not known by his own accounts of his greatness but by the grace with which he had made achievements.

Since early youth, Dungu detested bullies, and had long held that real gallant men were never braggarts. He could not tolerate any person that he thought was a bully. He readily came to the assistance of anyone harassed by bigger bullies. It was common knowledge among the Chiyuku boys around Dungu’s village that it did not pay to bully him or any person he chose to defend.





Two big and brutal village boys had found this out one day after Dungu's initiation when they challenged him to a fight. On that occasion, Dungu had only accepted to fight them if they fought jointly against him.

By the time the fight ended, it was humiliation rather than physical injury that caused both boys to flee. Dungu had flung them around to the ground the way a father would do to his small children in a mock wrestling match! He didn't even appear to have exerted himself as he walked away quietly from the crowd that had gathered to witness this one-sided affair.

It was against the backdrop of all these experiences and fleeting reflections that Dungu sought inner strength to face this impending encounter with the terrifying bearded creature!

A strange quietness had, over the last few minutes, settled around the forest. It roused Dungu from his sombre thoughts. He had just concluded that he would need more than bravery or strength to face the danger before him. He had faith in God although he had never known whether this great person really cared for his trivialities.

All the same, Dungu said a small prayer to this divine entity in as much sincerity as he could express. The prospect of facing the bearded horse alone could not be a triviality at all!





He now wondered why crickets, as well as other normally vocal forest creatures, had all suddenly shut up!

A great crashing sound and steady, heavy hoof-beats from deep in the forest startled Dungu. Birds immediately took flight and a great variety of forest creatures fled in all directions! Dust and debris of every sort filled the air! This was followed by dreadful snorting and heavy grunting as the hoof-beats approached in his direction .

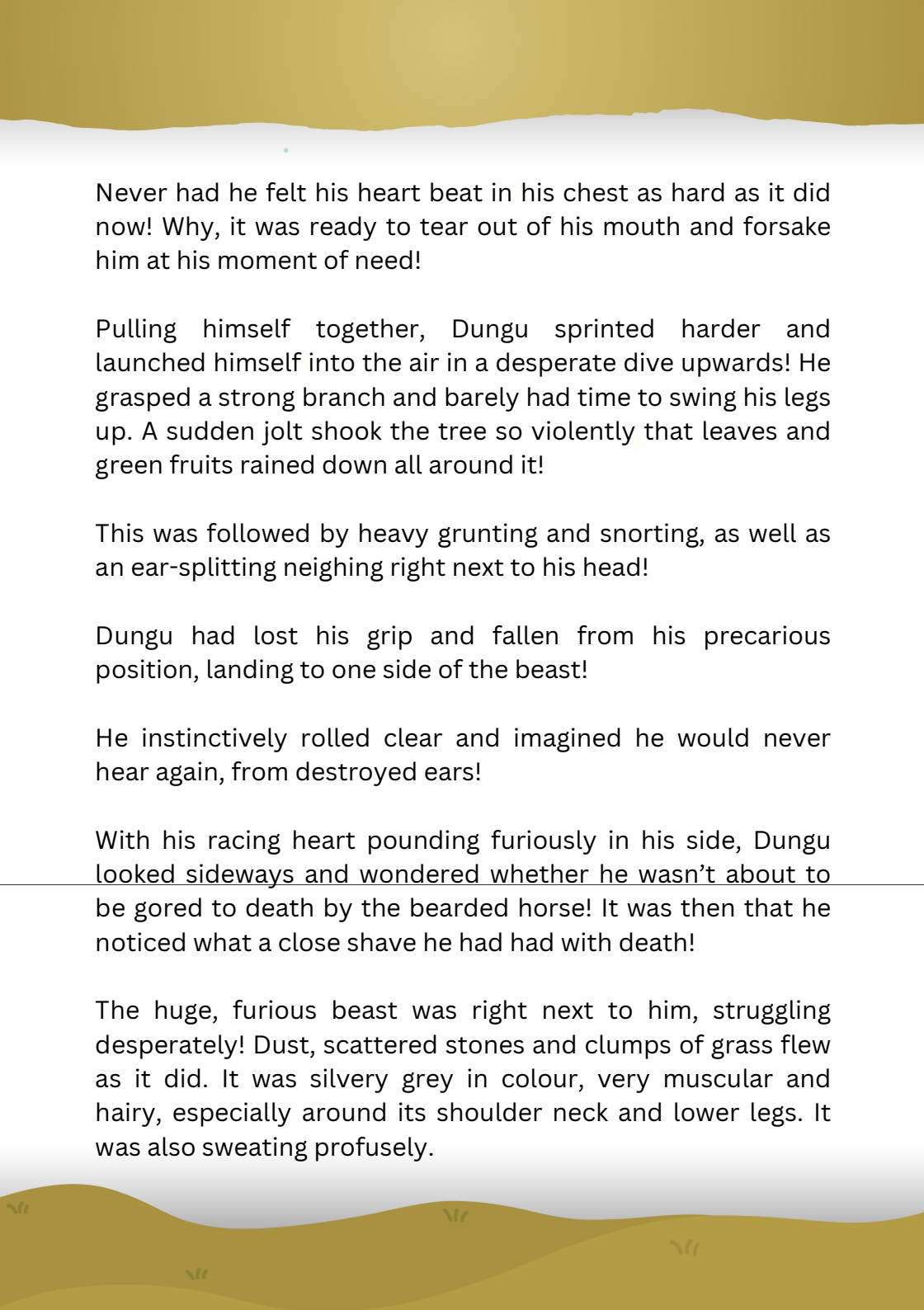
Dungu's heart skipped several beats and he looked around desperately for a place to hide or a tree to climb. He considered it very unwise to face an unknown foe, but had little time now to plan anything!

He calculated quickly that the charging beast needed clear space to gallop in, and that the less space he gave it the greater his chances of survival would be.

Wisdom overcame fear, and Dungu sprinted towards trees, hoping to find one thick enough to hide behind, or tall enough to climb. He had just managed to spot a thick, twisted trunk with low branches when the rapidly-approaching beast appeared from the shadows!

In all his life, Dungu had never felt so vulnerable and afraid!





Never had he felt his heart beat in his chest as hard as it did now! Why, it was ready to tear out of his mouth and forsake him at his moment of need!

Pulling himself together, Dungu sprinted harder and launched himself into the air in a desperate dive upwards! He grasped a strong branch and barely had time to swing his legs up. A sudden jolt shook the tree so violently that leaves and green fruits rained down all around it!

This was followed by heavy grunting and snorting, as well as an ear-splitting neighing right next to his head!

Dungu had lost his grip and fallen from his precarious position, landing to one side of the beast!

He instinctively rolled clear and imagined he would never hear again, from destroyed ears!

With his racing heart pounding furiously in his side, Dungu looked sideways and wondered whether he wasn't about to be gored to death by the bearded horse! It was then that he noticed what a close shave he had had with death!

The huge, furious beast was right next to him, struggling desperately! Dust, scattered stones and clumps of grass flew as it did. It was silvery grey in colour, very muscular and hairy, especially around its shoulder neck and lower legs. It was also sweating profusely.



“Ewooo!” Dungu exclaimed as he stood shakily to his feet.

“So here you are, strange one. Or is this not you?” he cried.

He didn’t expect an answer, but lifted his eyes upwards in gratitude.

He now noticed that the beast’s massive horn, between its wild rolling eyes, was deeply imbedded into the trunk of the tree he had fallen from. It was now desperately trying to extricate itself, and no amount of pulling, snorting or screaming was doing it any good.



Presently the great beast quietened down in exhaustion. Its hide glistened with sweat, and all it had managed to do was dig out a crater at the base of the tree holding it captive. As the tired creature lay on its stomach breathing heavily and rolling its eyes, Dungu noticed the beard!

It was a whitish beard like one would see on an old he-goat.
[WU1]

“So, you actually have a beard as well!” mused Dungu, chuckling to himself.

No sooner had he finished this than the beast renewed its kicking and snorting, to no avail. As the struggle wore down the great horse-like beast to plaintive, soft neighing, compassion replaced relief in Dungu’s heart.

Right from the start, this whole dangerous affair seemed so unreal that Dungu had to pinch himself to prove he wasn’t dreaming.

Now, with the night fast approaching, Dungu needed to decide on the next course of action. Who would ever believe that he had been here, with this strange and dreadful creature? As soon as he had seen the horse clearly for the first time, Dungu had resolved not to harm the magnificent beast. If anything, he now wanted to free it.





Dungu now walked clear of the beast's head. He was still trembling and his legs felt strangely unlike his usual faithful ones.

He went and looked closely at the beast's horn firmly stuck in the tree trunk. It was about an arm's length and tapered. Its shaft bore an unusual twist, almost like that of the horns of a Sable Antelope. As he prepared to contribute his own strength to that of the massive creature in one more effort to free it, Dungu stopped for a moment.

"Strange one," he begun in a very gentle voice, "do not begrudge me this one favour. I must keep some evidence that we met!"

He slowly but very gently pulled out his dagger and deftly cut off much of the beast's tuft of beard, which he proceeded to bind one end of with some leather twine. With a little more braiding of the twine, the beard transformed into a unique bracelet that Dungu tied around his wrist. The horse was too exhausted by now to raise any meaningful objection.

"Don't worry friend. Even old men shave once in a while," Dungu gently said.

He was beginning to feel grateful that no one was around to see him talking with an animal!





The bearded horse had renewed its strength, and seemed to understand what Dungu had in mind. One great heave by these two acquaintances freed the beast a moment later.

As soon as it pulled free, Dungu leapt clear and sprang behind the gnarled tree. He was not certain it would keep the pact after gaining freedom!

The strangest part of this whole encounter now unfolded!

The bearded, or previously-bearded horse, now slowly walked round to where Dungu stood trembling. He was amazed at how huge it actually was, taller than he at its shoulders. It sniffed at his left hand and neighed softly.

“Are we now friends, strange one?” Dungu cautiously asked.

As if in answer, the horse neighed again softly.

“The bond holds!” Dungu exhaled as he proceeded to stroke the massive creature’s neck and face as it came even closer.

He felt overjoyed that this magnificent creature could actually consider him a friend. His joy was, however, short-lived as the creature suddenly galloped back into the forest, sending dust and stones flying in its wake. Before vanishing from view, Dungu thought he heard a second neigh from somewhere higher up the sloping forest cover.



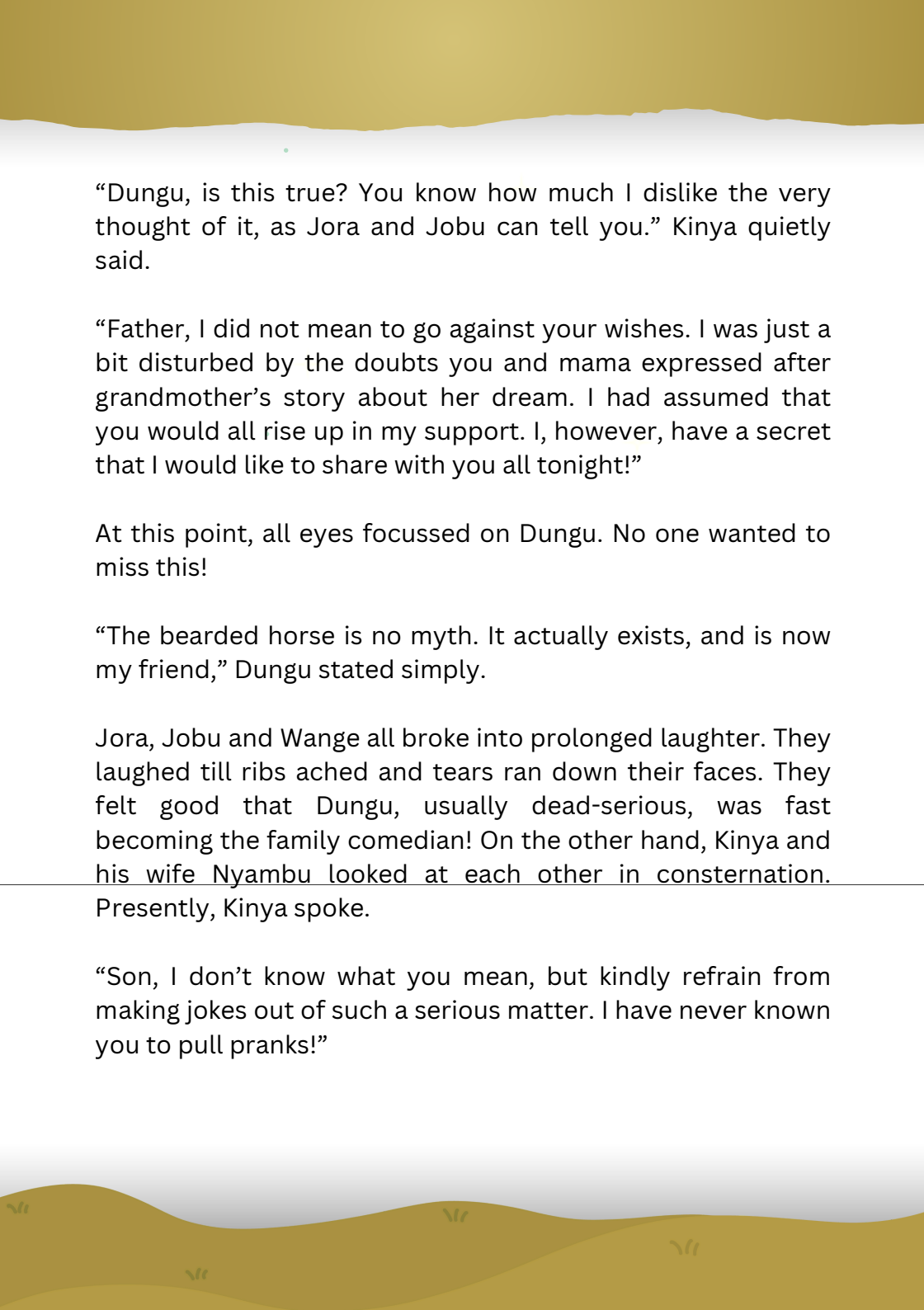


A few nights hereafter, Kinya's family sat around a fire in a relaxed atmosphere just before bedtime. Nyambu turned to face her son, Dungu.

"Dungu, ever since you returned late two months ago looking like you had met a ghost, I don't understand you anymore!"

"Father, I heard some boys saying that they had seen Dungu descending from the edge of the forest that night," Wange disclosed.

Dungu was not angry with her for this, but his father wasted no time in expressing his displeasure.



“Dungu, is this true? You know how much I dislike the very thought of it, as Jora and Jobu can tell you.” Kinya quietly said.

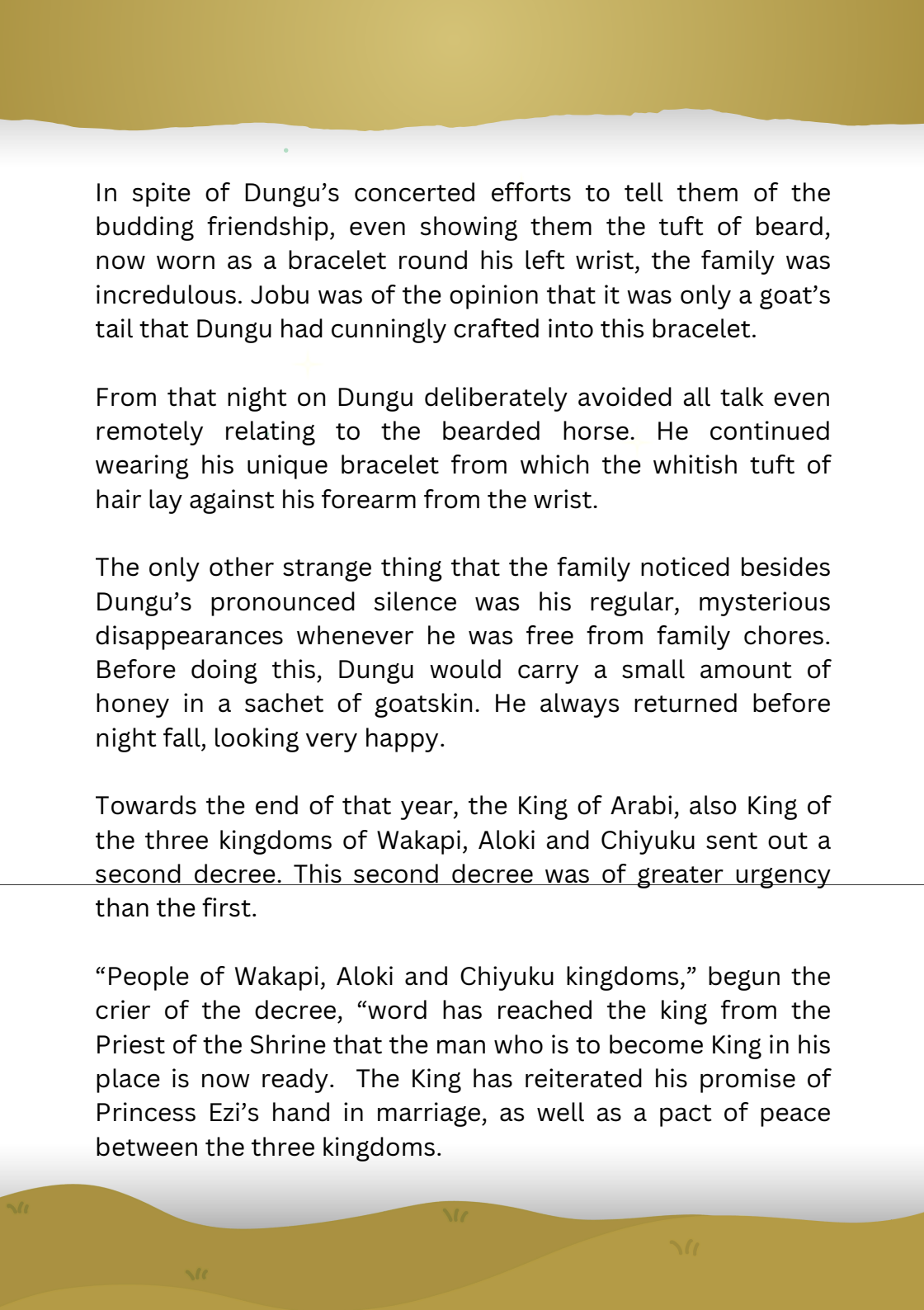
“Father, I did not mean to go against your wishes. I was just a bit disturbed by the doubts you and mama expressed after grandmother’s story about her dream. I had assumed that you would all rise up in my support. I, however, have a secret that I would like to share with you all tonight!”

At this point, all eyes focussed on Dungu. No one wanted to miss this!

“The bearded horse is no myth. It actually exists, and is now my friend,” Dungu stated simply.

Jora, Jobu and Wange all broke into prolonged laughter. They laughed till ribs ached and tears ran down their faces. They felt good that Dungu, usually dead-serious, was fast becoming the family comedian! On the other hand, Kinya and his wife Nyambu looked at each other in consternation. Presently, Kinya spoke.

“Son, I don’t know what you mean, but kindly refrain from making jokes out of such a serious matter. I have never known you to pull pranks!”



In spite of Dungu's concerted efforts to tell them of the budding friendship, even showing them the tuft of beard, now worn as a bracelet round his left wrist, the family was incredulous. Jobu was of the opinion that it was only a goat's tail that Dungu had cunningly crafted into this bracelet.

From that night on Dungu deliberately avoided all talk even remotely relating to the bearded horse. He continued wearing his unique bracelet from which the whitish tuft of hair lay against his forearm from the wrist.

The only other strange thing that the family noticed besides Dungu's pronounced silence was his regular, mysterious disappearances whenever he was free from family chores. Before doing this, Dungu would carry a small amount of honey in a sachet of goatskin. He always returned before night fall, looking very happy.

Towards the end of that year, the King of Arabi, also King of the three kingdoms of Wakapi, Alok and Chiyuku sent out a second decree. This second decree was of greater urgency than the first.

"People of Wakapi, Alok and Chiyuku kingdoms," begun the crier of the decree, "word has reached the king from the Priest of the Shrine that the man who is to become King in his place is now ready. The King has reiterated his promise of Princess Ezi's hand in marriage, as well as a pact of peace between the three kingdoms.



Not only will this man become heir and so-in-law, but even the continuous burden of tribute will be lifted from the kingdom that produces this man. Thus has the king spoken! ”

A few days after the King’s decree, Kinya set out on a journey requested by Dungu. They were to travel to the land of Wakapi, although Kinya did not know exactly what was on his son’s mind. All that mattered was for him to be a supportive father, so he agreed to do this little favour for Dungu.

To be honest, Dungu’s request had been bizarre, and also cost him several of his best animals. Nobody ever sought out a King’s audience empty-handed, and especially King Enyiroy of Wakapiland. In spite of this, the king was readily approachable to all his subjects, so Kinya shrugged off any hesitance and began the journey with his son.

As they arrived on the outskirts of Wakapi, Kinya and his son sought out the Paramount Chief whose duty it was to convey any suitor to King Enyiroy’s palace. They travelled in safety until they came to the King’s court, where they were accorded due hospitality.

After much bureaucracy King Enyiroy finally received them warmly. Kinya was requested to state his business with the king, and carefully stood up to speak.



“Noble and mighty king of Wakapi, Aloki and Chiyuku peoples,” Kinya begun, “I salute you. Your humble servant wishes your health and great happiness, and endless joy to the royal family. What brings me to your court, great majesty, is a mystery even to me. My son here has desired your audience, and requests your permission to speak, noble King”.

Kinya noticed how grave King Enyiro and his entire court looked before he sat down. This being an unusual court session, not all the King’s dignitaries or family members attended. Princess Ezi, however, had been requested to avail herself, and now sat by the King’s side. It was upon her that all Kinya’s escorts together with Dungu fixed their eyes.

Princess Ezi was young, and probably younger than Dungu. She was dressed in a beautiful calf-skin garment fastened over one shoulder with a beautiful porcupine quill brooch. On her feet, she wore leopard-skin sandals, and her arms were adorned with golden bracelets. She had beautiful glossy and long hair, braided over one side in intricate design.

It was her eyes and expression, however that held her beholders captive. They were glossy, dark eyes that looked like pools of water. The whites of her eyes were so white that everyone else’s around her appeared dull and sickly.



When Princess Ezi smiled shyly at her father, her long eye lashes fluttered in a most feminine manner, bringing a smile to the King's face every time. She was a spectacle of great beauty, as had been reported to the peoples of Aloki and Chiyuku. Dungu immediately fell in love with her. He stood to speak.

“Most noble King, honourable elders and noblemen of Wakapi, honourable mothers and ladies of the King's household here present, as well as most beautiful Princess Ezi, I salute you,” Dungu began.



“Please excuse my youth as I address this solemn gathering. I will not waste your time but herewith present my errand to this venerable and esteemed gathering. I have come to ask for the hand of Princess Ezi in marriage. I have spoken”. He slowly sat down.

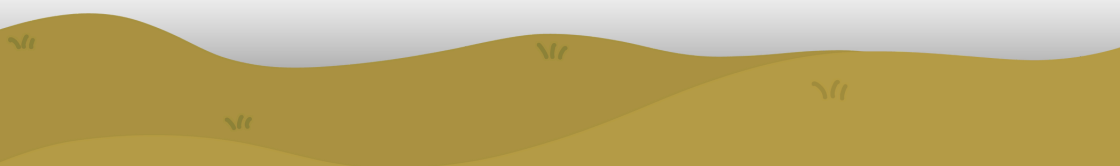
There was a deathly hush over the whole assembly. A few old men whispered together, sadly shaking their heads in disbelief.

Kinya and his escorts looked at each other in embarrassment, lost for words.

King Enyiroy was astounded at the young man’s brief address. Who could be so bold as to utter the things this young man had just uttered? The murmurs died down momentarily as King Enyiroy raised his hand for silence.

As he began to speak, Princess Ezi looked keenly at Dungu, whose eyes had not left her since his brief address. She couldn’t help but admire his gentle demeanour and cool courage. Notwithstanding, Princess Ezi wondered whether he was a Prince at all. He looked decidedly shabby.

“Honourable subjects of mine from Chiyuku,” began King Enyiroy in a strained and tired voice, “I accept your greetings and appropriate gifts. I would, however, ask of the young



man whether he seeks to humour me or is actually serious in this request of his. Is he the only resident of our three kingdoms not to have heard my decree in this matter?”

Dungu stood up again, troubled at the growing resentment and animosity openly visible on the faces of all but Princess Ezi.

“Your majesty, and all distinguished and worthy people here present, I greet you again. It is not, and cannot be my intention to abuse the great privilege accorded us in approaching this august gathering. I speak this time to allay your fears in this matter. I am aware of King Enyiro’s decree, which has been twice heralded in our hearing in all the three kingdoms. I am also aware, noble people, of the tragic demise of seventeen loyal men to-date, on this very quest. I dare say, they were each more worthy than I am, and may their gallant souls find peace in the land beyond this life. I am, however, here to make this quest in all solemnity and sincerity. I have both ridden, and will ride again that beast you all know as the bearded horse. I have spoken!”

A gasp of astonishment went up in King Enyiro’s palace court! The wisdom and nobility expressed in his words astounded them all, but the subject matter defied belief!

Even King Enyiro himself was shocked.



Kinya nervously looked at his escorts, and wished the earth would open up and swallow him whole! He also quickly looked around to see if an escape route could be established in this emergency! It was evident that Dungu was very ill, and unless King Enyiro also deduced this, the whole party from Chiyukuland stood in peril of their very lives!

The King stood up slowly to speak.

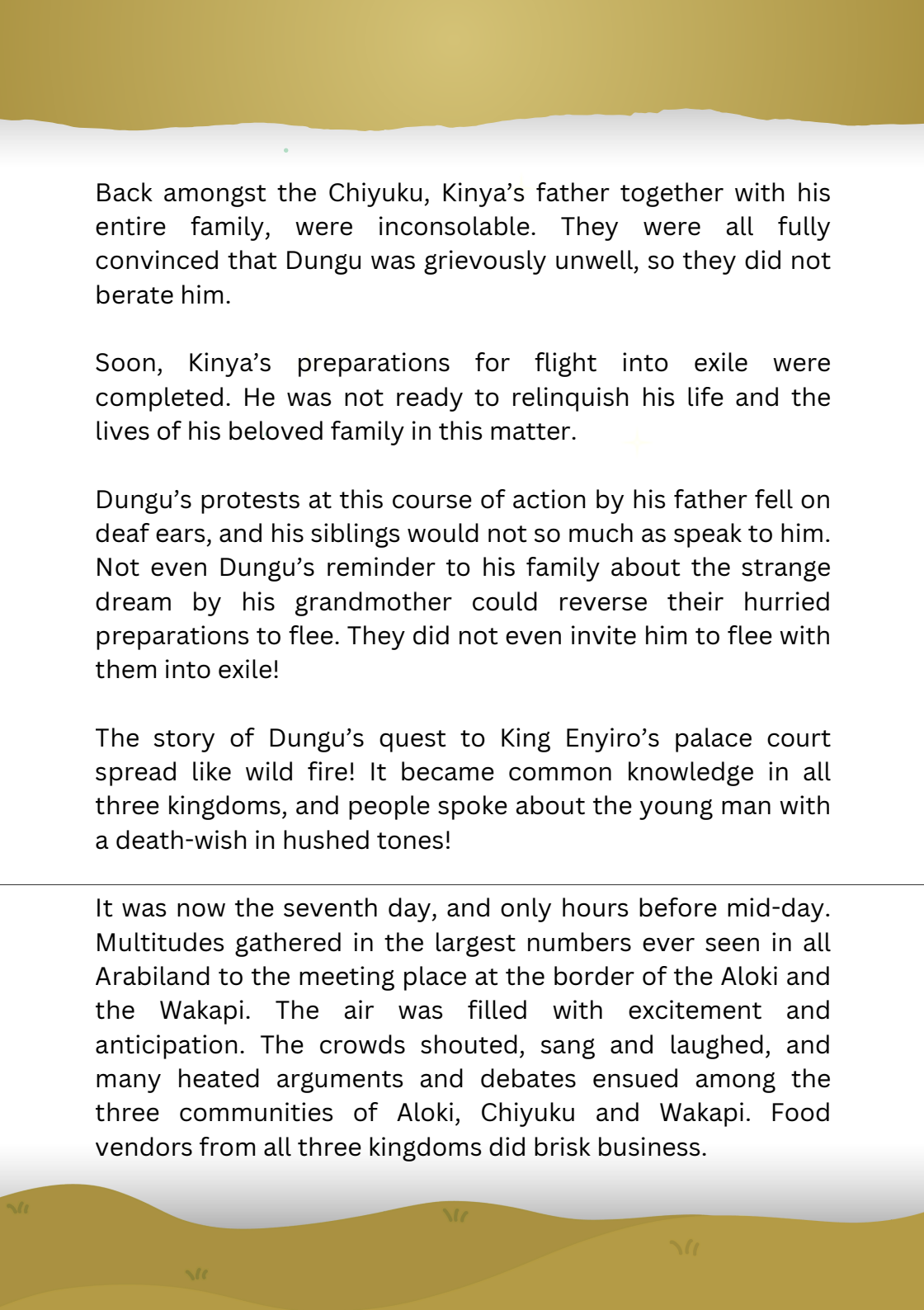
“Young man, I do not wish to share your humour, and yet something tells me you jest not. I hereby give you seven days to prepare yourself. You shall then appear before me and all the peoples of Alok, Chiyuku and ourselves by midday on the seventh day. You shall ride this creature on the hill slopes in clear daylight.

If indeed you shall, I will keep my word and abdicate my throne to you the same day. You will also take my daughter, Princess Ezi, to be your wife from the very same day, only awaiting a grand wedding celebration that we shall arrange thereafter.

May all here present note, failure of this pleasant young man to do as he has declared, will spell immediate death for him and all his family for making a fool of our royal court. I have spoken, and you are all herewith dismissed”.

The parties went their separate ways into the night.





Back amongst the Chiyuku, Kinya's father together with his entire family, were inconsolable. They were all fully convinced that Dungu was grievously unwell, so they did not berate him.

Soon, Kinya's preparations for flight into exile were completed. He was not ready to relinquish his life and the lives of his beloved family in this matter.

Dungu's protests at this course of action by his father fell on deaf ears, and his siblings would not so much as speak to him. Not even Dungu's reminder to his family about the strange dream by his grandmother could reverse their hurried preparations to flee. They did not even invite him to flee with them into exile!

The story of Dungu's quest to King Enyiro's palace court spread like wild fire! It became common knowledge in all three kingdoms, and people spoke about the young man with a death-wish in hushed tones!

It was now the seventh day, and only hours before mid-day. Multitudes gathered in the largest numbers ever seen in all Arabiland to the meeting place at the border of the Aloki and the Wakapi. The air was filled with excitement and anticipation. The crowds shouted, sang and laughed, and many heated arguments and debates ensued among the three communities of Aloki, Chiyuku and Wakapi. Food vendors from all three kingdoms did brisk business.



Few noticed the complete absence of the Chiyuku clan that Kinya's family belonged to!

As King Enyiro arrived in splendour and appropriate dignity, escorted by formidable guards and commanders from his forces, he was met by the two kings of the Chiyuku and the Aloki. They too were arrayed in grand attire, and no less majestic than King Enyiro's entourage. The latter two presently bowed themselves in homage to King Enyiro, as did all the subjects of the King.

Thereafter, each king retired to a large designated area with his own people. They soon settled down facing the clear, grassy hill slopes of the Arabi range along the Aloki boundary. There was no formal address by the King, as all people present on this day knew exactly what to expect, or thought they did!





As the sun rose steadily to gradually shine directly overhead at midday, the din and deafening hum of thousands of people in excited conversation eventually fell to a deathly hush!

A shriek of terror announced the arrival of their expectation, causing ripples of movement as people nearest the slopes began a stampede downhill in horror!

Their flight was halted by hasty assurances from those below. There were shouts that a man was actually riding the dreaded beast that had begun a swift gallop along the slopes. This assurance was the only reason many survived being trampled to death by the fleeing crowds.

As Dungu rode out of the forest on his friend, the dreadful bearded steed, he quickly realised what panic this might cause among the throngs gathered to witness the event.

He slowly and gently steered it away as it galloped downwards, on a more parallel course to that of the multitudes.

Dungu was dressed in broad cow-hide straps crossing his upper torso. His loins were covered with a short calf-skin wrap secured to his waist by a wide colourful beaded belt. To this belt were attached his dagger and hunting axe, as well as a quiver of arrows hanging from his back.





Each of his weapons hung in beautiful sheaths of beaded cow-hide. A stout bow fashioned from large gazelle horns crossed his back diagonally, and Dungu's arms were adorned with wide bronze bracelets intricately indented with the silhouettes of a stallion on one hand and a flying eagle on the other.

Although riding bare-back, Dungu's lower legs and feet were covered in fleecy sheep skin leggings and cow-hide sandals. His arms, looking muscular now as he struggled to maintain balance on the great beast, held sheepskin straps above his biceps.

Never in all the kingdoms of the Wakapi, Aloki and Chiyuku had any warrior looked as grand or as formidable as Dungu now did as he rode the bearded steed fearlessly.

As he galloped swiftly along the grassy slopes, looking like some mystic warrior from some other world to some spectators, many children fled and hid behind the crowds, and several women fainted. Many could not understand how this man wasn't a spirit-being from the underworld!

The heavy hoof-beats of the bearded horse, as well as its occasional neighing as it tossed its horned head from side to side sent ripples of fear and dread in even the three Kings watching!





Unknown to Dungu, Princess Ezi could not divert her eyes from him even for a moment. She watched this awesome spectacle from the protective side of her father, King Enyiroy. She had immediately recognized Dungu from the tuft of hair he wore around his left wrist, which she had first noticed on Dungu when he came to declare his intentions.

She was now in love with this strange, young man riding so fearlessly while the peoples of three kingdoms trembled in awe. It did not even matter whether he was a prince or not. To her, Dungu looked like a King!



When he was sure that the assembled crowds had all seen him, Dungu slowed down to an easy canter and turned the steed to face the three Kings. He tried to descend the slopes towards them but changed his mind when a cry of alarm rose from among the frightened crowds.

As all this took place, the three communities merged into one mammoth crowd. The three kings, in their efforts to see Dungu better, found themselves together perched on a high piece of ground as they shared excited comments about the drama unfolding before them!

Guards forgot protocol and were mixed up with the masses trying to see the stranger and his beast better!

Dungu stopped and slowly raised his hand in greetings to the three Kings. The bearded stallion reared up on its muscular hind legs and neighed loudly, tossing its great head and muscular neck from side to side without unseating Dungu.

The three Kings hugged each other in delight and waved back!

Their subjects also shouted greetings to him in excited acknowledgement. Women ululated and children ran about in a frenzy of joy. Girls and unmarried women nervously giggled in speechless wonder and admiration for the strange, gallant warrior!





After dismounting from the bearded horse, Dungu clapped his hands and it galloped back into the Arabi forest. Before vanishing, the steed stopped and neighed loudly as if in farewell to its rider. He proceeded to slowly walk down the rest of the way to meet King Enyiro.

On nearing King Enyiro, a strange thing happened!

All three kings took off their royal head-dresses and bowed! Their soldiers immediately raised their spears in salute and knelt on one knee. This was followed by the whole multitude from the three kingdoms going down on their knees in hushed silence!



Dungu's mind was filled with turmoil. He wondered what was going on. Who were they bowing to? He felt tears prick at his eyes, and he had a strong urge to run away.

It was at this point that he remembered King Enyiro's decree.

Could he actually have become King of the Wakapi, and conversely king of all three kingdoms? All in a single moment like this?

As he approached, Dungu himself bowed in respect to each King.

King Enyiro quickly took his hand and led him to the place Princess Ezi was seated. She stood and quickly curtsied as her father took her hand to put it in his. She smiled beautifully and clung to Dungu thereafter with both hands as if he might vanish!

"Hear, o people of Wakapi, Alok and Chiyuku," King Enyiro proclaimed moments later, raising his hands for silence.

"Let all gathered here now acknowledge my heir, and our new King and Queen of all Arabiland! May the great creator of all and giver of life to all, bless them. Long live King Dungu and his Queen!"

A great deafening roar of acknowledgement and rejoicing





erupted from the gathered multitudes. The dawn of a new glorious era had surely arrived!

Weeks later, celebrations of the coronation of King Dungu began, followed by even greater ones at the royal wedding feast of the King and Queen. Every subject from the three kingdoms was invited to these events, and not one returned home on an empty stomach!

After many days of feasting, a small party of simple people arrived to visit the new royal couple. As they walked slowly and hesitantly into the court of the new King, Dungu immediately ran from his throne to meet Kinya and his family.



He tried to wipe away their tears and torrents of apology for their earlier lack of faith. When the spate of weeping abated, Dungu called for Queen Ezi to introduce her to his family, returned from exile. They were welcomed now as royalty!

Needless to say, Dungu's family hereafter became part of the royal household in Wakapi. They lived in great joy under the wise reign of their humble son, King Dungu, supreme King of the Wakapi, Aloki and Chiyuku.

