

she got them into? The atmosphere on the river was unnerving. The unfamiliarity of the creatures around them, the barren, decaying nature of the riverbank. And then this man who had appeared from nowhere.

“We need to hurry if we are going to get to the hippo,” Kayode said.

“How do you know about Nyanya?” the stranger interrupted.

“We read it in—” Yomi elbowed Kayode to be quiet.

“You are right. You mustn’t go telling strangers your secrets.” The old man’s eyes intensified and for a moment Yomi thought they turned gold.

“I am sure you know Ninki Nanka is missing,” Yomi declared.

“Yes. The river will die if the King is not found,” the old man warned. “So many have fallen to *their* hands. If humans are not careful, perhaps the world will enter a new era. One without humanity.”

“But it’s not all humans. It’s just Beast Hunters,” Kayode said deliberately.

“We’re on the Nkara’s side and that’s why we need



Nyanya’s help to find Ninki Nanka,” Yomi pressed.

“Indeed. Perhaps you *can* match the willpower of those who took the Dragon King. I wish you good luck on the way to Nyanya, but be careful. The river is full of danger.”



The canoe sailed over the now silent but murky waters. The further Yomi and Kayode drifted downstream, the more plant life surrounded them. This part of the waterway seemed unnervingly bountiful and the air was heavy with an ominous silence.

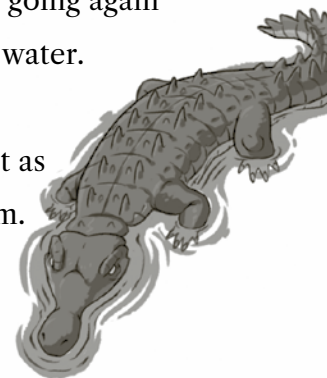
As they went along, they spotted a group of crocodiles watching them hungrily from the riverbank.

“Kayode. *Do. Not. Stop. Paddling.*” Yomi urged through gritted teeth.

But just as Kayode was about to get going again the predators started slinking into the water.

“Yomi!” Kayode squeaked.

Yomi’s heart hammered in her chest as the crocodiles headed straight for them.



What *were* they going to do?

As Yomi looked around, trying to find an escape route, her attention was abruptly interrupted by a kind of buuuurble. Big bubbles floated up, popping on the water's surface until...

Everything went still.

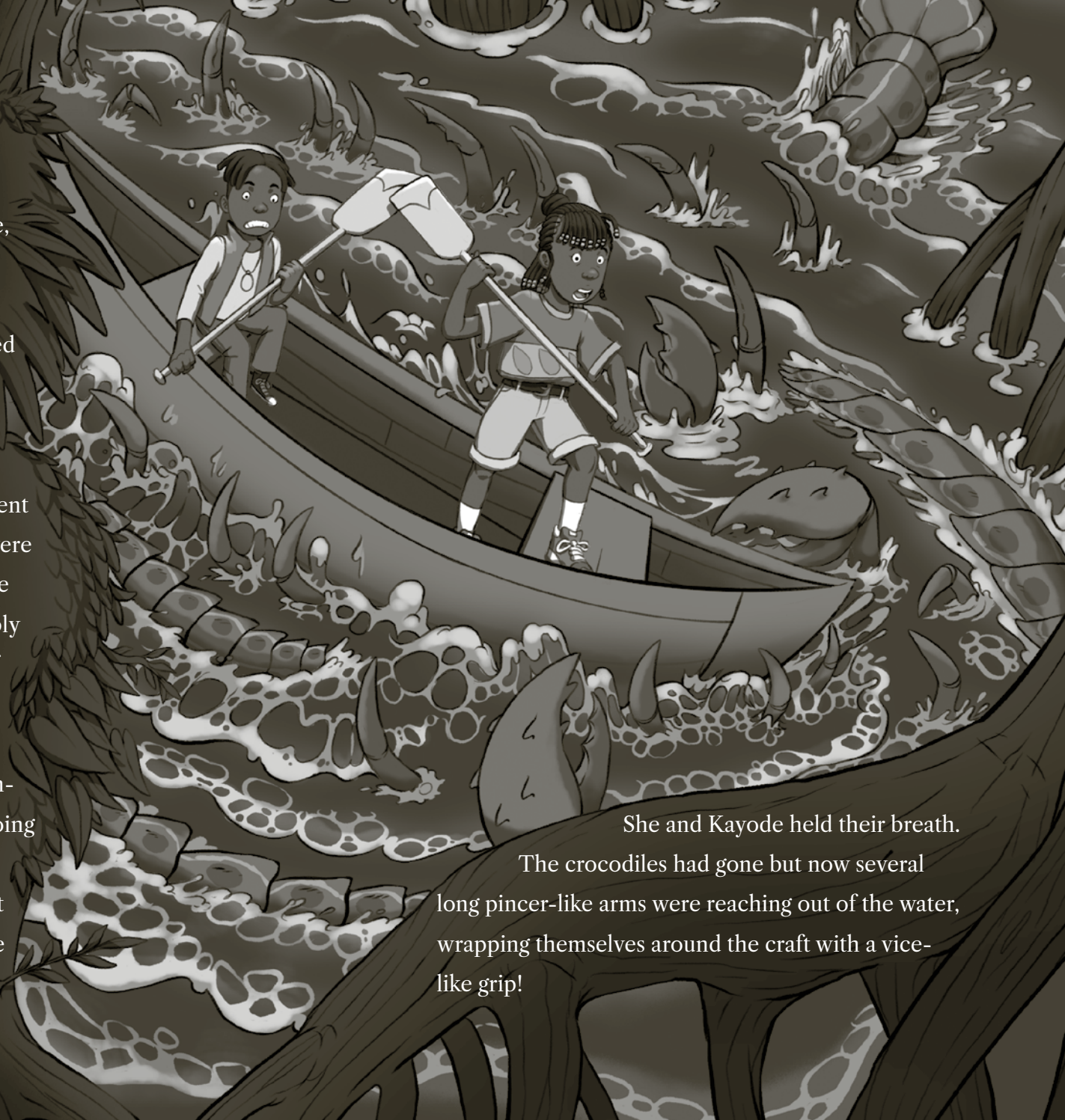
Suddenly, there was a violent swirl of water. The reptiles were dragged down, each crocodile whipping round uncontrollably as they tried to thrash free of whatever was sucking them beneath.

"Oh-my-gosh-oh-my-gosh-oh-my-gosh, Yomi, what is going on?" Kayode screamed.

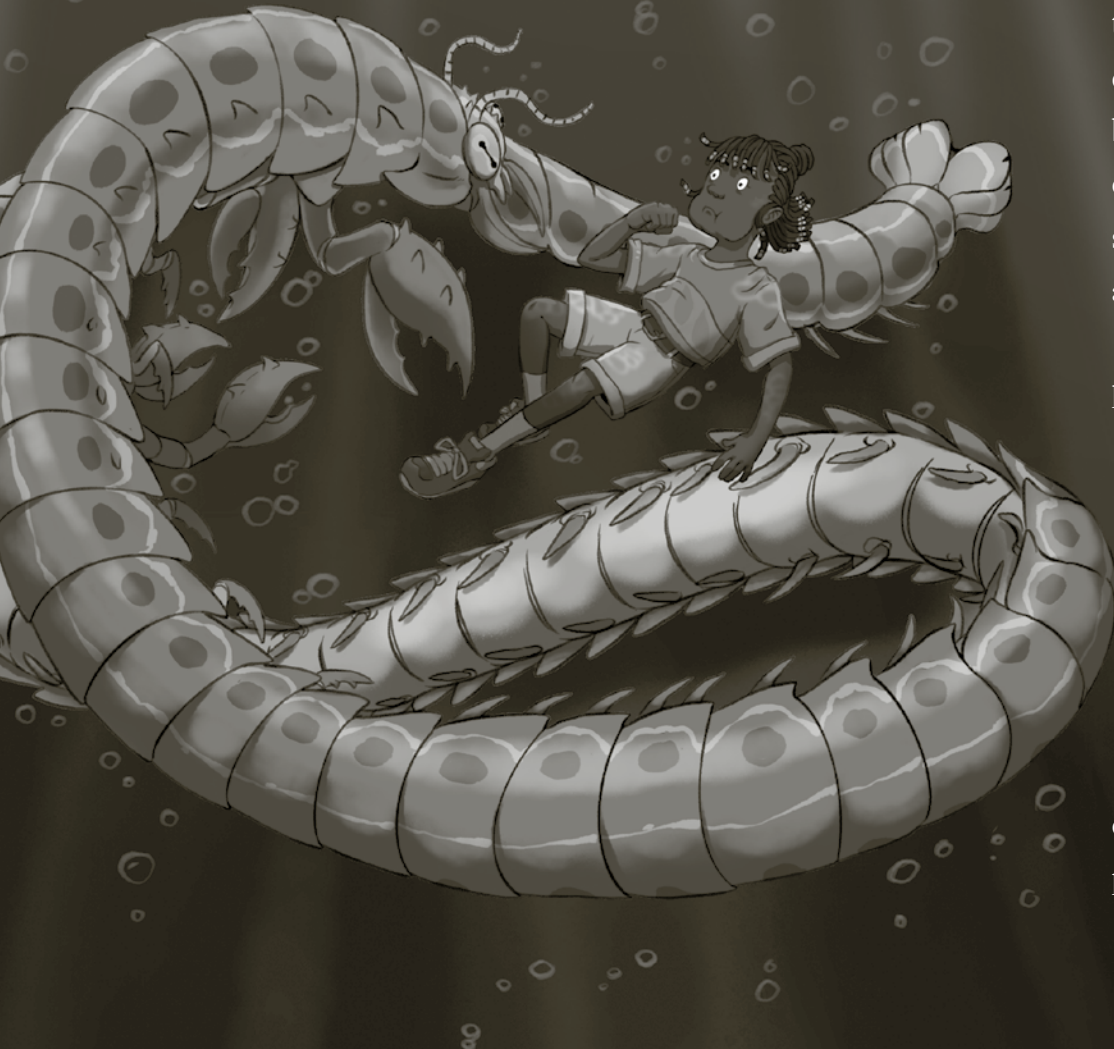
"I don't know!" And at that point she felt something large bump underneath the boat.

She and Kayode held their breath.

The crocodiles had gone but now several long pincer-like arms were reaching out of the water, wrapping themselves around the craft with a vice-like grip!



As Yomi and Kayode clung to each other, the oversized, bodyless claws twisted and shook the small vessel violently, throwing them about until Yomi, with nothing to hold on to, was tossed straight into the water.



“Yomi!” Kayode’s cry was the last thing she heard before slipping into the river’s depths.

Within the darkness of the waters, Yomi tried not to panic. She knew that if she did, she’d very quickly run out of breath. She looked around, trying to get her bearings, until she spotted two lights directly below her. As she stared at the glowing bulbs, to her horror they turned into two blood-red eyes staring right at her. There was a moment of stillness and with a dull sounding whooOOOOOsh an elongated mandible struck out to snatch her!

Yomi gave an underwater scream, wildly flailing her arms and legs in an attempt to stop herself being captured. It reached out with a claw again but Yomi dodged it and poked its right eye in response.

Out of nowhere, Yomi felt something brush against her face. She looked up and saw the fibres of a net. Without a moment’s hesitation she grabbed on to it and with a strong tug she was dragged back up to the surface, barely escaping the pincers snapping at her feet.

Yomi took a deep intake of air. “Oh, Kay, thank you. So *so* much.” She wheezed.

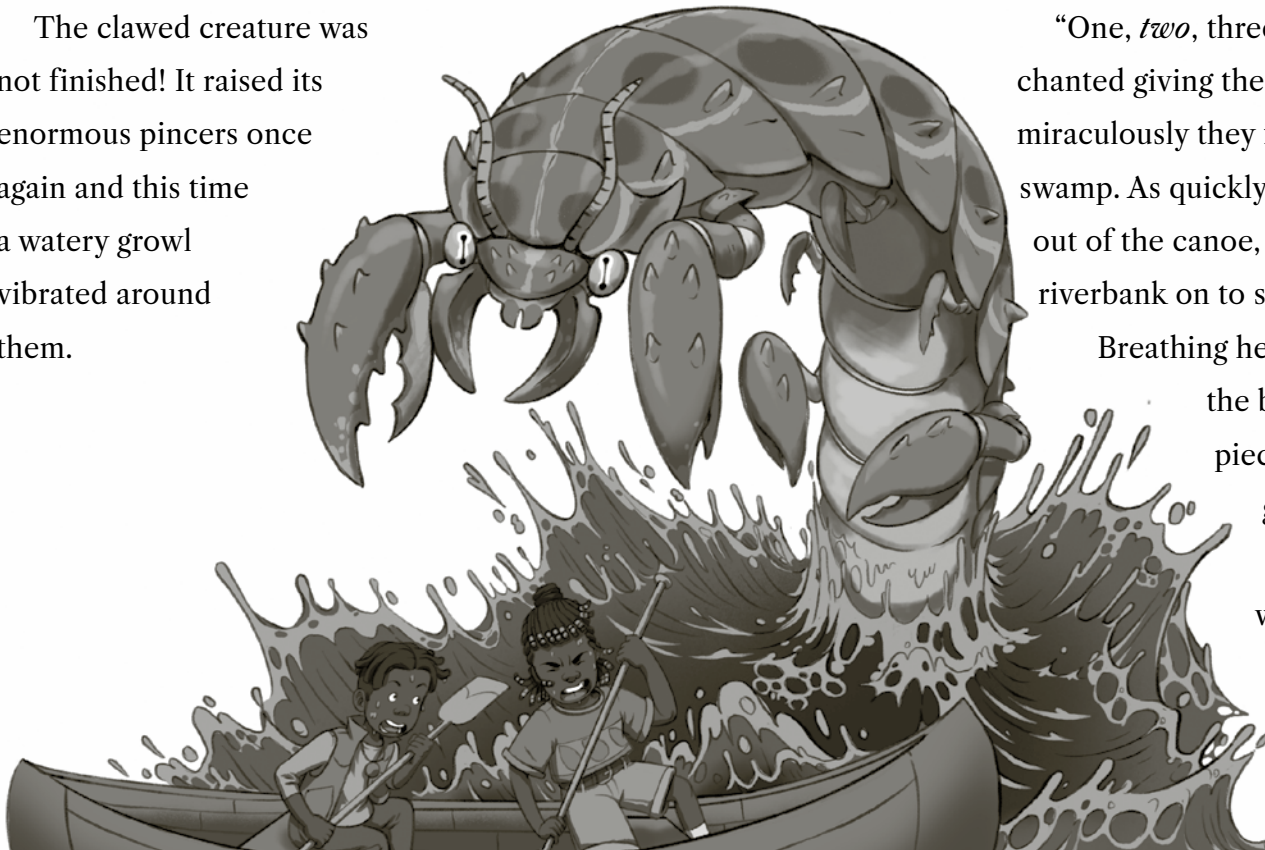
“Are you all right?” Kayode asked.

“Smart move.” Yomi nodded and coughed while her brother slapped her back.

“Arabella Carter, volume seventeen, when she saves her friend from killer squids in Norway,” he explained.

Yomi turned to smile at her brother, but very quickly her gratitude turned to alarm.

The clawed creature was not finished! It raised its enormous pincers once again and this time a watery growl vibrated around them.



“GRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR.”

“Paddle, Kay,” Yomi rasped at her brother.

“Paddle for your life!”

Yomi banged her oar on one of the claws with as much force as she could, momentarily causing the creature to release its grip.

Yomi and Kayode didn’t hesitate but their sheer terror messed with their paddle strokes, causing them to row out of sync.

“One, *two*, three, one, *two*, three,” Yomi chanted giving them a rhythm to follow and miraculously they found themselves across the swamp. As quickly as they could they jumped out of the canoe, pulling themselves up the riverbank on to safe and solid ground.

Breathing heavily, Yomi looked back at the boat, amazed it was still in one piece. She was dripping wet but gave herself a once-over and then made sure her brother was also uninjured.

“I nearly lost you!”

Kayode said angrily, grabbing then gripping her in a tight hug. “What would I do without you?”

Yomi could hear the sob in his voice. Her brother never got angry, and seeing him like this was something she never wanted to do again.

“You’d not get into danger any more, that’s for sure,” Yomi tried to joke but it failed. Finally she hugged him back. “I’m not going anywhere. Especially if you are with me. It’s going to be all right.”

“I hope so.” Kayode held on a little longer before eventually sitting back and wiping his eyes. “So what do we do now?” he asked.

“What we came here for. Let’s find Nyanya,” Yomi declared.

CHAPTER 8

NYANYA

“Do you think we’re in the right place?” Kayode peered over Yomi’s shoulder to look at the map. While Yomi had dried quickly under the summer sun, the map was still soaking. They could just make out they were near the X Yomi had marked for Nyanya’s lair. The mud on the riverbank was softer too. Perfect for hippos.

“I don’t know but I hope so!” Yomi’s nerves continued to bubble away in her stomach, their narrow escape from the unknown clawed Beast keeping her on edge.

“Do you think this is even safe?” Kayode asked.

“It’s better than back there,” Yomi replied.

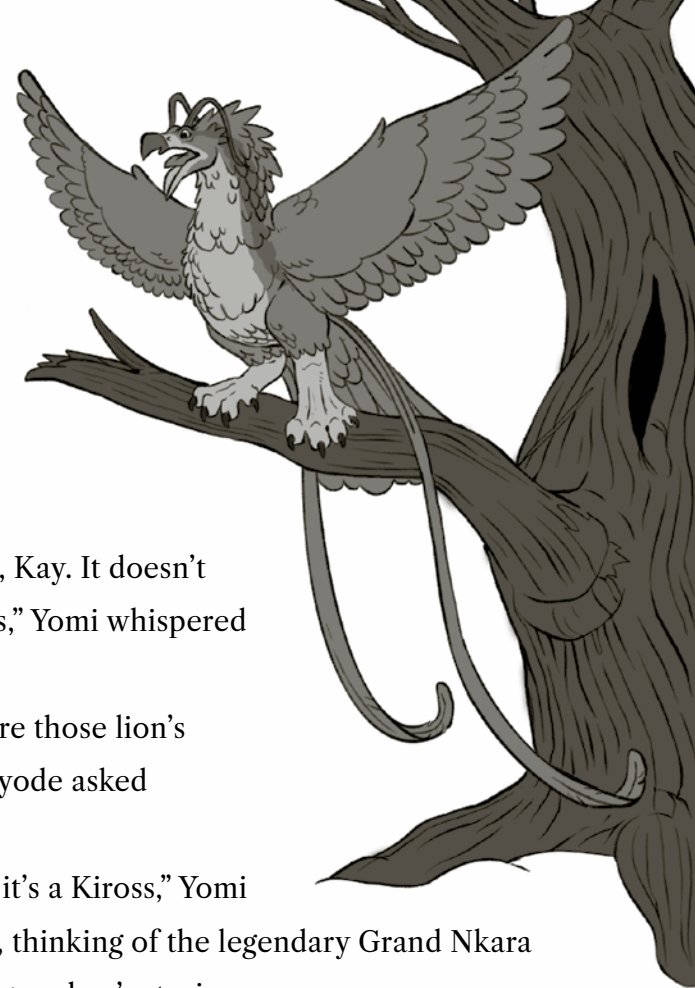
“Yomi, a giant claw attached to who knows what

tried to snatch us. There's a reason no one can find Nyana's lair. We also don't know what this hippo is capable of!"

Kayode was right but there wasn't much Yomi could do about it now.

They reached a tidal flat with a cave close by. Thickets of bamboo and other reeds grew around it, but several sections were either bent or squashed like they had gone up against a massive weight and lost.

"This has to be it," Yomi said as they headed towards the lair. Not far from the entrance, a stunning reddish-gold bird was perched on a broken branch. It had a gold ribbon-like tail of feathers which touched the ground but as Yomi's eyes followed it down, she noticed something unusual.



"Its feet, Kay. It doesn't have talons," Yomi whispered nervously.

"Wait, are those lion's claws?" Kayode asked hesitantly.

"I think it's a Kiross," Yomi whispered, thinking of the legendary Grand Nkara from their grandma's stories.

With its long wingspan outstretched, the bird made a screeching sound as if celebrating some sort of victory. Yomi examined the fiery gold feathers with black streaks covering its entire body, taking in its large claws and its piercing gold eyes. The bird held her gaze.

Yomi could tell Kayode was petrified. So was she!

“OK. Let’s stop staring and just walk calmly straight ahead.” She tried to sound as reassuring as possible.

“If Nyanya makes a go for us, run in a zigzag,” Kayode said.

“I don’t know if that’s the right animal. I think you just have to hide from hippos,” Yomi said.

“How are we supposed to hide? We’re in *her* lair!”

“Are you sure you want to go in there?”

Yomi and Kayode both yelped. The question had come from the Kiross.

“You can talk?” Kayode squeaked.

“I’m speaking to you right now, aren’t I?”

“Who are you?” Yomi questioned.

The Nkara leaned forwards as if to answer.

“Come inside and all will be revealed.” It flew off its perch and into the cave. Yomi quickly followed, dragging Kayode with her.

“Mistress Nyanya, am nanu visitors kan am dikka pur dimbal,” the Kiross announced the pair as they entered the cave.

“I only help fisher people and these children are no fisher people,” roared a voice from the darkness. The voice was huge and as it echoed around the dark space, Yomi swore she could hear the scurrying of little creatures running away in fear. She could sense Kayode holding his breath.

“We need your help to find Ninki Nanka,” Yomi declared.

“*You* do not demand anything from *me*. Take your commands elsewhere,” Nyanya proclaimed.

“Do you not care about Ninki Nanka?” Yomi argued.

“Are you challenging me?” Nyanya’s voice turned cold.

“No. No, No. Of course not,” Kayode stuttered as he stepped back, dragging his sister’s arm with him.

“Leave now before I *crush* you.” Nyanya took a step out of the shadows. Though they couldn’t quite see her, they saw her outline. Large didn’t quite cut it.

“We’re not leaving,” Yomi piped up. She had

to stand her ground.

“Why do you wish to help Ninki Nanka? What do you humans get out of it?” Nyanya probed.

Yomi looked at Kayode, whose nervous expression changed into a supportive smile, and took a deep breath before she began. “My family are storytellers, we’ve always been told the great stories of this continent. Ninki Nanka is one of those stories. His life is important to all life here. All Nkara need to be protected because...”

“Because what?” Nyanya sneered.

“Well, because at the end of the day, we all have to share and take care of this world.”

Nyanya gave a hearty laugh and stepped out of the dark.

Yomi and Kayode gasped. Before them, Nyanya’s belly loomed round like the sun; the hide covering her flesh glowed like burnt gold. Stumpy legs supported her gigantic body. She was indeed a very grand beast.

“So.” Nyanya chuckled. “You are brave. And you certainly have honour. Don’t they, Mustafa?”

