

To Dad, Mum, Yasmin, Mummy and the rest of my family who always supported me. To all my friends who always encouraged me, and to my fellow writers who always inspired me. – D. T.

To my parents, Cynthia and Mark, I will be forever grateful for you helping me follow my dreams. – A. D-B.

LITTLE TIGER
An imprint of Little Tiger Press Limited
1 Coda Studios, 189 Munster Road,
London SW6 6AW

Imported into the EEA by Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

www.littletiger.co.uk

First published in Great Britain 2023
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ISBN: 978-1-78895-612-3

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK.



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DAVINA TIJANI

ILLUSTRATED BY ADAM DOUGLAS-BAGLEY

YOMI

AND THE FURY OF NINKI NANKA



LITTLE TIGER
LONDON



CHAPTER 1

THE DRAGON KING

The sky exploded like a supernova. This was no regular storm but one furious at the rest of the world. It was crazy, dangerous ... *exciting!*

“Have you seen this?” Yomi turned eagerly to her younger brother Kayode, who had a toothbrush in his mouth.

“Definitely the worst one since we got to The Gambia,” Kayode replied, through the minty foam.

“I wonder what’s causing it?”

“As long as those lightning bolts don’t fry us, who cares!” Kayode headed back to the bathroom where Yomi could hear him gargling far more energetically than necessary. She wasn’t so sure.

Just then their bedroom door opened and

their uncle Olu entered the room. “Have you two brushed your teeth?”

“Yup!” Yomi and Kayode said in unison.

“Good, so time for a story, right?” he offered.

As Yomi guided her long cornrow braids into a green bonnet, she watched Olu quickly divert his eyes to the raging storm outside. He was always watching, always alert.

“Make sure it’s a good one, Uncle!” she demanded.

Olu, slightly startled, turned back to his niece and nephew. “A good one?”

“There are so many to choose from!” Kayode dived into bed before making himself comfortable under the covers.

Their uncle grabbed a chair and slotted himself between them. “Hmm...” He stroked his short beard in deep thought. “All right, how about ‘Ninki Nanka: the Dragon King’?”

Yomi’s eyes widened and she sat up straight in the bed. That was one of her favourites! “Yes! The Dragon King, please!”



“Many moons ago, during the age of the Mali Empire, enemies would try to cross the Gambia River to invade the empire. Ninki Nanka would spring out of the waters and order the trespassers to leave or face the consequences. All the groups left except for one – *the Lethu*.”

Yomi and Kayode were transfixed. Uncle Olu had this way of telling a good story.

“The Lethu were an army of prowlers who had come together to storm The Gambia for its

treasures. Made up of mercenaries, thieves and explorers, they all had one thing in common – a lust for power and an obsession with *hunting*. You see, to conquer an empire was a challenge, but to defeat a Sacred Nkara was the ultimate test. And so the stage was set for one of the greatest battles the continent had ever seen.”

Stories ran through their family like water and Ninki Nanka often featured in Yomi’s grandma’s tales of the Nkara – the Sacred and Grand Beasts of Africa. But the idea of people trying to hurt Ninki Nanka, or any Nkara, always horrified Yomi.

“Are the Lethu like Beast Hunters? The people who hunt Nkara?” Yomi had never heard of them before and Olu nodded grimly.

“Whoa! Who won?” Kayode asked.

Their uncle sat back, satisfied. “Ninki Nanka, of course. He defeated them all! And so Mansa Musa, the ruler of the Mali Empire, rewarded him with the title – the Dragon King of The Gambia and Protector of the Gambia River.”

“A king.” Kayode smiled at the thought of a great

dragon ruling over an entire country.

“Does he wear a crown?” Yomi joked.

“A crown doesn’t make a king.” Olu laughed.

“Ninki Nanka’s only goal is to guard the river and its inhabitants, like he’s been doing for centuries. The river is the country’s bloodline and without Ninki Nanka, well ... let’s not think about it.”

“Have people seen him?” Yomi asked. There had been a time where Sacred Nkara dominated the land, but that world had now become unrecognizable. Everyone knew Nkara existed but now the creatures preferred to stay out of sight and out of harm’s way, especially as there were groups dedicated to hunting them. Of course, some people might be lucky enough to spot one, but whether you lived to tell the tale depended on the Beast.

“Fleeting glimpses of Ninki Nanka here, shadows there. But it is thought he still patrols the river.”

“Does he breathe fire?”

“Well—”

“Is there more than one Ninki Nanka?”

“Let me—”

“Is he the strongest Nkara in the world?”

“That’s hard to say—”

“Oh! Oh! I know, does he *eat* people?” Kayode’s eager-eyed expression changed into one of alarm.

“Actually, don’t answer that!”

Their uncle took a deep breath. “Ninki Nanka is a water dragon, so no fire. He is the only one left of his kind. His strength? Well, I wouldn’t want to face him if he was angry. His fury can shake the world! And, as to whether he would eat you.” Olu looked at Kayode’s wide eyes and chuckled. “No, you’re right. I won’t answer that.”

“What does he look like again?” Yomi pressed, always wanting to hear this.

“He is huge, with a body like a gigantic crocodile covered in scales. His tail is shaped like a rudder so he can slice through water like a knife. His eyes are green like the jungle and they give him perfect night and underwater vision. He has rows of teeth which mask both a long, forked tongue and glands from where he spurts out his water attacks. He has three horns on his head, four wings and razor-point claws

to slash into his enemies.” Olu sliced his hands up through the air.



“Great, so now we know to look for him in both the sky *and* water!”

“No, Yomi. *Never* go looking for him. It is no game,” their uncle said in a suddenly serious tone. “Anyway, we have other plans while we are here.”

Yomi rolled her eyes at that. Olu probably meant work. This was supposed to be a holiday and an

important one – after this summer Yomi would be going into Year Six (her last year at school!) and Kayode into Year Four. But so far everything had somehow involved their uncle’s Nkara research, without any Nkara! Yomi was just hoping for a bit of fun. A bit of *adventure*.

“It’s time for you both to go to bed.” Olu turned again towards the storm, thrashing against the glass as if it wanted to break in. “Like this weather, there’s already enough against us.”

“Uncle?” Yomi looked at Olu and his troubled expression.

“Don’t worry about it, Yomi. With my work, some people don’t understand what’s important but I’m going to make them see sense.”

Yomi frowned. Their uncle could be so secretive!

Olu gave both Kayode and Yomi a hug before heading to the door. “Goodnight, you two. You’ll need a good sleep before all the exciting things we have planned for tomorrow. You don’t get to see a Yarcoss nest every day!” he said before switching off the light and exiting the room.

Kayode was already snoring by the time his head hit his pillow and Yomi threw the covers over her head to block out her brother’s annoying sounds. But finally she too soon began to drift off.

Yomi always dreamed of Nkara. Big and small, winged and multi-legged. Hairy, scaled or covered in feathers. Some friendly and others dangerous. Yarcosses, despite their multiple rows of teeth, were known to be gentle to humans when encountered. So when in her dream Yomi entered their nest and reached out her hand to the Nkara, she was horrified when it opened its mouth to yell at her.

“ROOOOOOOAAAAARRR.”

Yomi sat up with a start, her heart beating furiously.

“*What the...?*” Hopping out of bed, she raced to the window. Her palms and nose stuck to the glass as she looked out for something, anything. In the back of her mind she knew that the noise wasn’t just in her dream. It sounded like the battle cry of an impossible Beast, the declaration of war against an evil enemy.

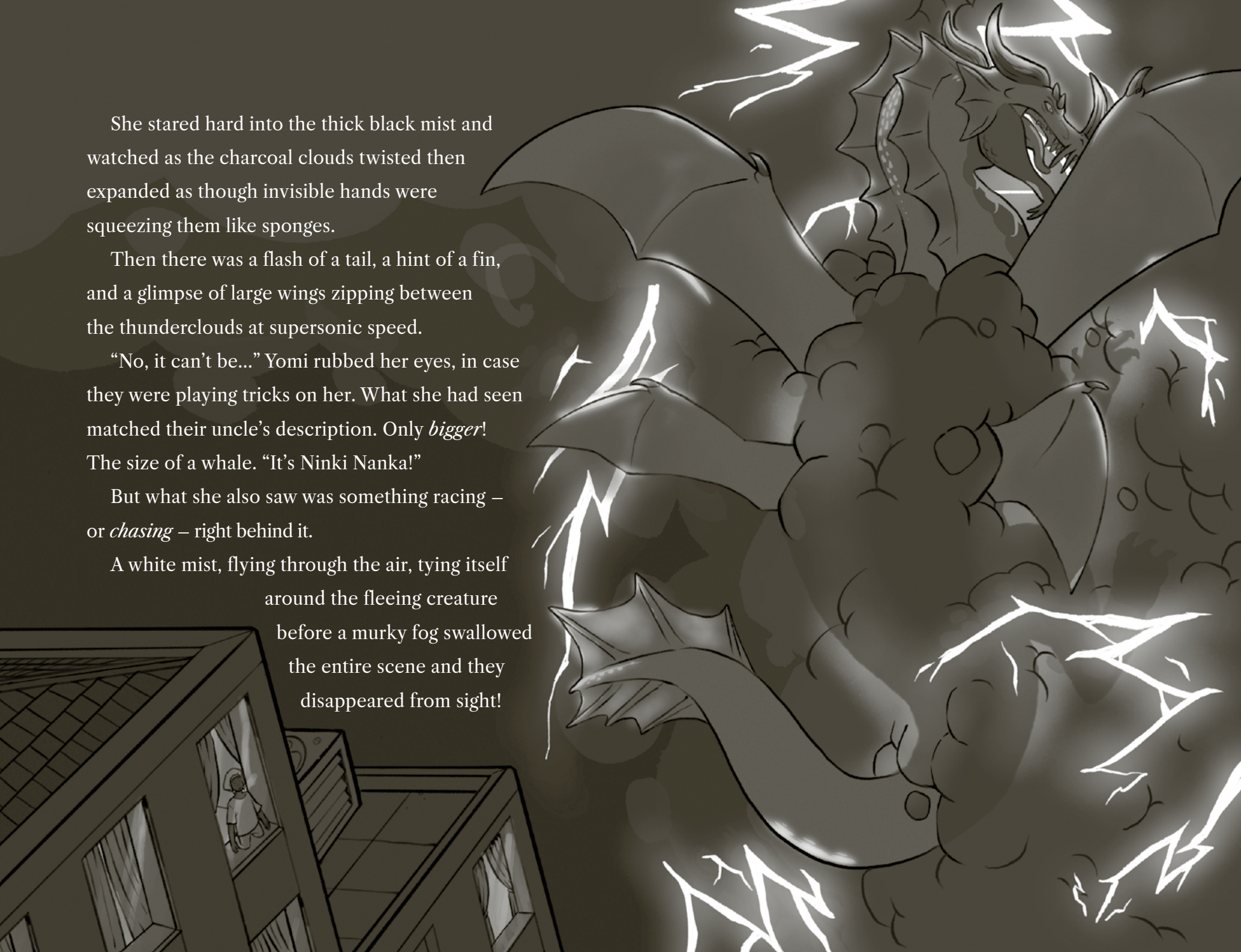
She stared hard into the thick black mist and watched as the charcoal clouds twisted then expanded as though invisible hands were squeezing them like sponges.

Then there was a flash of a tail, a hint of a fin, and a glimpse of large wings zipping between the thunderclouds at supersonic speed.

“No, it can’t be...” Yomi rubbed her eyes, in case they were playing tricks on her. What she had seen matched their uncle’s description. Only *bigger!* The size of a whale. “It’s Ninki Nanka!”

But what she also saw was something racing – or *chasing* – right behind it.

A white mist, flying through the air, tying itself around the fleeing creature before a murky fog swallowed the entire scene and they disappeared from sight!



“Kay!” Yomi had to stifle her shout.

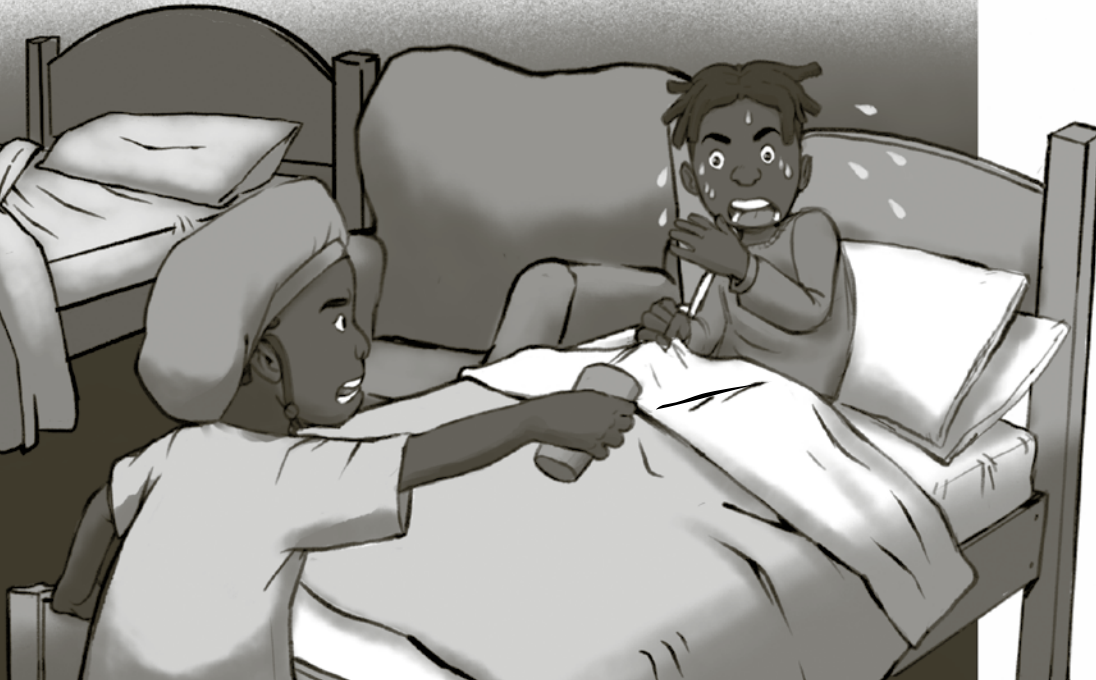
She ran over and shook her brother by the shoulders, but even that didn’t wake him. Kayode could sleep through an earthquake! There was only one thing for it. Yomi ran to the bathroom and returned a moment later with a cup of freezing water. At first, she sprinkled a few drops on his face.

Kayode twitched his nose.

She tried again.

Dreamily, he wiped his face.

“Gah!” Yomi groaned, and threw the entire cup of water over her brother.



“Blurggh!” Kayode stared at his sister, saw the cup and then noted the guilty expression on her face. “What is *wrong* with you?” he spluttered.

“I saw Ninki Nanka in the sky.”

“Who goes throwing water in people’s faces when... Wait, you saw the Dra—?”

Yomi slapped her hand over Kayode’s mouth before he woke the entire hotel.

“Don’t let everyone hear you,” she hushed, staring at the bedroom door. The last thing she wanted was for their uncle to rush in.

“I can’t believe you didn’t wake me!”

Yomi looked at her brother – was he being serious?

“Do you know how *rare* it is to see a Nkara? A Sacred or even a Grand?” Kayode’s voice was now so high, Yomi thought only dogs could hear him! But she understood his excitement. The stories were absolutely, definitely all *true*.

“I think he was in trouble.” Yomi sounded concerned. Scared even. And if his sister was

scared then Kayode definitely was too.

“Why? What happened?”

“I don’t know. He was being chased, though. Something or someone wanted to hurt him, or they already had.”

“Or maybe the thunder hit him and he was actually tumbling from the sky.” As soon as Kayode finished speaking he shook his head. He’d only managed to frighten himself!

The fast tap of feet coming up the corridor towards their bedroom cut their conversation short. Just as they jumped back into their beds, their uncle gently opened the door to check if they were asleep. He was on his phone and they could just make out his whispers.

“A new assignment?” Olu asked in his quietest voice. “Ninki Nanka?” He wasn’t giving much away and with one final glance at the children, he closed the door and walked off.

Waiting just enough time to be sure their uncle was at a safe distance, Yomi quietly padded over to the door, followed closely by Kayode. Opening

it a little, they could see Olu had stopped halfway down the corridor.

“A party at Madam Ngom’s house for *them*.” Their uncle sighed.

Yomi looked back at Kayode, who simply shrugged. Who was Madam Ngom?

“I refuse to attend if they are there,” Olu continued. “This truce is ridiculous and I told everyone how I felt about the deal. It’s only a matter of time before they cross the line.” He went silent for a few moments to listen to the response.

“I will think about it. I have my family with me and I’d rather steer clear of any parties,” he said dismissively, then waited again. “OK. Goodnight.” For just a moment Olu stood staring at the phone. With another heavy sigh, he carried on down the corridor back to his room.

“We’re going to figure this out,” Yomi said.

“Figure what out?”

“What’s going on with Ninki Nanka, obviously!”

“No.” Kayode shook his head profusely. “No. No. No! I don’t want to get wrapped up with a dragon.”

“Too late.” Yomi grinned. “So you better sleep good tonight. Tomorrow we need to keep our eyes wide open.”

CHAPTER 2

THE BEAST HUNTERS’ GUILD

The golden sun hung high in the sky, its intense heat beating down on the roads of The Gambia’s capital city, Banjul. Yomi’s brown skin glowed hot and sweaty yet all she could think of was Ninki Nanka. Had it been a dream? Their uncle had said as much when she told him at breakfast what she’d seen.

“Nkara are the strongest Beasts in the world. They don’t get chased by mist,” he’d told her. “Forget about it.” But she couldn’t. Yomi knew what she had seen.

Olu was a Nkara researcher for the Mikosi Institute, and lectured at universities all over the world on African Studies. His talk at the university