

Blossoms *of the* Savannah

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Blossoms of the Savannah

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my beloved wife, Jane, and children.

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CHAPTER ONE

Taiyo stood in the shadows by the window, her back to the room. From her **vantage** position on the third floor of the building where their flat was located, she had a bird's eye view of the sprawling town. The rising sun shone on rooftops, giving them a yellowish tinge. Across the roads that crisscrossed the town, **diminutive** figures of men and women hurried briskly to their places of work. Uniformed school children, rucksacks on their backs, jostled boisterously as they alighted from one matatu and boarded another. Beneath her, down at the courtyard, she could see her father moving and fussing. He was organizing and directing, with obvious shortness of temper, the loading of two ten-ton lorries. He was gesticulating violently, apparently reprimanding loaders for being slow and inept in carrying out the task before them.

Taiyo knew her father well. He was not a man who cared to have his well-laid work-plans delayed or disrupted. She had noticed that he had become even more belligerent ever since the family learnt that he had been retrenched and they were now being forced to vacate the house and relocate to the rural town he had left many years back. Although the distance would not allow her to hear what he was telling the loaders, Taiyo felt a mild but quite genuine twinge of sympathy for the poor fellows down there, for she knew the sting of her father's tongue.

It reminded her of her own recent battle with him when he denied her permission to travel to Mombasa with other young men and women who had been selected by an F.M Radio Station to attend an

extravaganza. She had stubbornly put up a spirited struggle but the battle was so predictably and utterly lost. That had left a wound in her heart that was still too raw to probe. Her rage, she realised, was still seething within her. The simple faith and certainty of childhood upon which her life until then had been founded, had failed her. Also, her trust that her father would give her whatever she requested for had been badly shaken.

Stemming those thoughts out of her mind, she raised her head and looked through the morning sun beams that gleamed brightly across the rooftops of Nakuru town; that beloved town that was the mother of all flamingos. A town that she was now about to leave. Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked suddenly and rapidly.

Taiyo did not hear her younger sister Resian approach. Briefly and in silence, they stood by the window side by side in the empty room. As far back as the two sisters could remember, they had always stood by that window every Sunday morning before they went to church. But their little habit of observing what went on below the streets of the town was made poignant that morning; it was going to be the last time they would do this.

Resian leaned forward and lifted her face to look into her sister's large, brown eyes. She spoke very softly but her words were distinct and her voice very clear in the silent empty room.

"Taiyo- e - yeiyo, what do you think life is going to be like in Nasila?"

"For heaven's sake, Resian," Taiyo said, turning round to face her sister. "How am I supposed to know?"

"I suppose it's going to be very different from the kind of life we are used to here, isn't it?"

"Most likely so, yes."

"It seems so very strange," Resian pressed on relentlessly; "to be leaving Nakuru town."

"We have always known that it was our father's plan to end up in Nasila," Taiyo told her sister, trying hard not to answer her directly, "That is why he built that shop that he has always spoken about. Now that he has been retrenched ... " she hesitated a moment. It transpired that the more she spoke of the relocation, the harder the reality that she was about to leave Nakuru town for good hit her. The twenty years of her life had been spent there. She loved its crowded streets, the bustle and excitement of its wholesale and retail markets, and the boisterous bus stage. But the most painful to leave behind was her boyfriend Lenjirr, the lanky dark-haired, blunt-faced young man whose big languid eyes had always smiled at her warmly, fostering in her the dreams of young womanhood.

"Taiyo-e-yeiyo?" Resian called, lifting her head to look up suspiciously into the face of her tall sister. "Is something amiss?"

"No, nothing is amiss."

"I'm somehow worried, dear sister." Resian's voice dropped a little with apprehension. "What do you think will happen to us if the shop father intends to open does not become as successful as he hopes?"

"Resian-e-yeiyo, I don't know any better than you! Father thinks the shop will be a success. I overheard him tell one of his friends that he was going to stock agricultural inputs such as fertilizer, seeds, animal drugs

and chemicals. Nasila is an agricultural area and business is bound to do well. Let us have faith in him and hope for the best."

"I don't want to work at the shop," Resian declared, her pretty face hardening and her voice sounding petulant. "I want to come back to Nakuru and join Egerton University. I want to take a course in Veterinary Science and become a veterinary doctor. I want to read everything that there is to be read and put on the graduation regalia at the end of four years. Yes, I like to be called Dr. Resian Kaelo. You aren't laughing, are you? I mean it."

"I'm not laughing, little sister," Taiyo said fervently, "you know too well that it is also my ardent ambition to join the university. How nice it would be if father were to allow the two of us to join. I would love it!" "It would be wonderful," Resian said excitedly, the elation evident in her voice. "You will then persuade father to allow us to come back to Nakuru and join the university, won't you, Taiyo-e-yeiyo?"

"I can't promise that with certainty," Taiyo said and tore her look away from her sister's face. "You know the stubborn nature of father." She looked down into the courtyard where their father was still busy moving from one lorry to the other, making sure that their furniture was loaded as fittingly as possible so that it did not break on the way. When she heard him yell at one of the workers, a cold knot of anger and resentment tightened in the pit of her stomach, a flash of almost physical pain. She wondered what made her sister think she would be able to persuade their father to allow them come back to Nakuru and join the university if that was not his

intention. Once more, she recalled with bitterness how her father's refusal to allow her to go to Mombasa and participate in the musical extravaganza had nearly damaged the father-daughter relationship that had always been remarkably close.

"Please try to talk to him, won't you, *Taiyo-e-yeyiyo?*" Resian pleaded persuasively. "He always listens to you and this time round he will. Just try." "I'll try," Taiyo said doubtfully to close the delicate subject.

Behind them and from the adjacent room, their mother's voice rose, the edge of complaint in it making them take keener interest on what was happening down there at the courtyard. At that very moment, their father craned his neck and looked up, as if to see what they were doing at the window.

"Taiyo, what on the earth are you doing there at the window instead of helping me pack?" their mother asked sharply. And to Resian, "Run downstairs and check what is happening. Are we ever going to leave?"

"They have completed loading the lorries, Yeyiyo," Taiyo said nonchalantly. Turning to her sister and nudging her urgently, she added, "Here comes *papa*) quick let's go! We better be found in the company of *Yeyiyo* when he comes, otherwise he will spoil our day with his sharp tongue!" They giggled as they rushed out.

The two girls were with their mother gathering suitcases, placing them at the doorway ready to carry them downstairs when their father entered the now empty living room.

"Ready to go?" Kaelo asked, addressing no one in particular. "We must start our journey straightaway if

we are to get to Nasila early enough to offload the trucks and arrange the furniture in our new house."

That short speech poignantly brought reality to them; they were now about to leave Nakuru town for good. Ole Kaelo cleared his throat loudly. His wife, Mama Milanoi, took out a handkerchief from her pocket and blew her nose. The four of them stood there for a moment in a sudden silence, each one of them keeping their thought to themselves. But one thing that was clear to all of them was that the flat that had been their home for so many years, stripped of all furniture, of all personal possessions, all books, pictures and ornaments, now looked bleak and shabby.

"Well," Mama Milanoi's voice wavered a little. "Let's pray that the Good Lord gives us journey mercies." And she prayed.

Then, with a last glance about her, Mama Milanoi got hold of one of the suitcases and led the way out of the flat. Her husband followed and together they preceded their daughters out of that flat. Taiyo was the last to leave. She turned at the doorway, stood for a long moment looking back into the room that she had seen all of her childhood. Then, with tears in her eyes, firmly closed the door and followed the others down the stairs.

Minutes later, when all of them were settled in the fourteen-seater minibus that Ole Kaelo had hired for them, the journey began in earnest. Father and mother sat in the front seat while the girls shared the back seat with the suitcases and other hand luggage. The two lorries snaked ahead of them.

Mama Milanoi settled in her seat and the vehicle sped steadily out of Nakuru town. She gave thought to

the bigger picture of their relocation. When her husband broke the news that he had been retrenched, she was dumbfounded. It was as though a thunderbolt had struck her out of a midday blue sky. Ever since she got married to Ole Kaelo twenty-two years earlier, Agribix Limited had been her husband's employer and the sole source of her family's livelihood. Now that it was closing its door on them, she felt as if providence itself was turning off the valve that supplied the vital air that sustained their lives. But her husband had received the distressing news stoically. He had said it was an inevitability that was always coming. It began its journey the day he was engaged and now, like a baby who must be born at the fullness of time, this had come to pass. He counseled and convinced her that she had nothing to fear for he had prepared for that eventuality. He was of the opinion that they could go back home and start afresh; embrace the life of their community.

Once she was convinced that relocation would enable them begin a new phase of life, she became unflaggingly enthusiastic. She began to see in her mind how a brand new house and a well-stocked shop that her husband promised to set up on the right side of Nasila town, predictably offered glamour and a chance to be associated with the great and the powerful of the land. She saw a chance for her family to share the good fortune enjoyed by those who were already happily settled in the rural town. But above all, she thought, it would be easier to marry off her two girls in the new town than in the melting pot that Nakuru town had become. Yes, two sons-in-law from reputable families in the land could easily catapult them right into the centre

of the affairs of the community. That could be the re-entry point into the community that they had been thinking about, she thought contentedly.

There was, however, a dark spot in the whole affair. Women friends from Nasila who had visited her in the past had asked her very intrusive questions regarding her daughters. At that time she dismissed them as busybodies who enjoyed intrusion into other people's affairs. But it now dawned on her that those could be the mothers of her would be sons-in-law. The words they used to describe the status of her daughters came back to haunt her like demented spirits of a past that was better forgotten; *Intoiye Nemengalana* they had called them contemptuously.

On his part, Parsimei Ole Kaelo sat quietly beside his wife, his mind roaming the distant past in reminiscence. He knew that he had worked his fingers to the bone over the years, preparing for that day when he was no longer going to be employed. He was on his way to opening up his business. Not that he felt any particular excitement or pleasure; he was a man to whom disappointment came more easily and naturally than contentment. And that latter attribute fired his ambition to always strive for the stars. It was characteristic of him that, surrounded by what other men would have considered evidence of a well-earned successful life, he felt nothing but the need to strive even harder to achieve better results.

He had a contentious mind that seemed to question every aspect of his life. Although he was blessed with a shrewd brain and a pugnacious obstinacy that had stood him in good stead in his struggle to rise

through the ranks, from a clerk to the coveted position of Commercial Manager of the Agribix Ltd, he still saw only, the greater successes of others. Even on the family front, he felt cheated by nature, for although it had been his prayer to get at least three boys, he had ended up with two girls. But even more obnoxious was the fact that despite all his achievements, it seemed to him that his younger brother, Simiren, who remained in Nasila, had been more appreciated and was considered the cultural head of the Kaelos by the community. That hurt him. But it did not worry him. Since childhood he had been aware, without self-pity, that no one really liked him. That, too, did not bother him since in his mind, to pursue the easy and worthless admiration of others was a sign of weakness of character.

Nature had not, however, been totally inconsiderate. It rewarded him with a gem in the form of his wife-Jane Milanoi. When he first saw her at a church service at Nasila, he was stunned. She was then hardly eighteen. Her body had now ripened to a sensual womanhood completely at odds with her childlike face. She wore her jet black hair in braids that accentuated her wide eyes. Her breasts were full and heavy, her waist slender, her hips wide and seductively curved. And the dress she wore, a simple red frock, fitted well her tall shapely figure. From the moment he saw her, he had been obsessed. And against all odds and despite all efforts, he was still so obsessed twenty-two years later. His marriage to her had been a great success.

His two daughters occupied separate parts of his heart. Taiyo, his eldest, was his pride. When she was born twenty-years earlier, his heart was enthralled. She

was the proof of his fatherhood. When his wife got pregnant the second time, he prayed for a healthy baby boy who would carry the Kaelo's name to the next generation. But that was not to be. Against his expectation, and to his utter disappointment, nature had given him another baby girl. From the moment she was born, mute and helpless, he detested her. The very sight of her enraged him. Her arrival and her continued stay in her father's home, remained unwelcome and detested. And right from her cradle, baby Resian instinctively detected the absence of love from her father. She grew up sullen, bewildered and resentful. As a result, her nature was darkened by melancholy. Self-doubt made her awkward and very difficult to deal with. And that made him detest her even more.

Even her physical appearance angered her father. Like her sister Taiyo, at eighteen, she had grown almost as tall as her father, but unlike Taiyo who was still skinny and symmetrical in formation, Resian's body had blossomed early. Signs of early womanhood were evident. The earlier he disposed of her, he declared to himself angrily, the better.

A few kilometres to Nasila, one of the lorries developed a mechanical problem and broke down. The other two vehicles stopped behind it, the crew alighted and immediately swung into action. While Ole Kaelo fussed around the vehicles, cursing and muttering expletives under his breath, Mama Milanoi and her daughters alighted and stood beside the vehicle. They huddled stoically together, eyes downcast, saying little. They knew thieves, robbers, rapists, car-jackers and hooligans lurked everywhere and could strike at any

moment. They, therefore, stood waiting with fatalistic resignation for the worst. Taiyo and Resian, both head and shoulder taller than their mother, stood on each side to protect her more from the cold blowing wind than from the fear of the marauding thugs.

"Here comes *Papaai*," Taiyo said with relief. "He is waving at us to get back into the vehicle. I think they have fixed the lorry."

Soon the vehicles roared and within no time they were rolling into the small town of Nasila. Taiyo and Resian strained their eyes in the evening darkness to see the town that was to be their new home. Their arrival came sooner than expected. The gates of their uncle Simiren's homestead where they were received swung open and a crowd of jubilant relatives, who had been waiting to welcome them, surged forward to greet them. When they stepped out of the vehicle, the girls were hugged, kissed and their heads touched by uncles, cousins, aunts and other relatives they had never met. There was so much noise, laughter, singing and dancing, that the girls, who least expected such a reception, were confused. Soon, they were all seated around a bright fire lit in the middle of the homestead, enjoying pieces of roasted meat.

For the thirty years or so that Parsimei Ole Kaelo was away in Nakuru, his younger brother Simiren acted as the head of the Kaelo family. He ably represented the family in the Ilmolelian clan to which they belonged. When there were *intalengo* to be performed, such as the initiation of girls, the circumcision of boys or betrothal ceremonies, he was always there representing his elder brother and his clan. And he was a strict adherent to his

people's customs and traditions, for which reason he was respected and appreciated by the elders. There had never been any argument or rivalry between him and his brother. Ever since they were young, and as they grew up, Simiren had always accepted his position to be subordinate to his elder brother. The fact that he had four wives and sixteen children while his brother had only one and two children, did not make any difference. Parsimei Ole Kaelo was still the *olmorijoi* and he still humbled himself before him.

During Parsimei Ole Kaelo's absence, Simiren ran all kinds of errands for him. Many times he sent him money to purchase livestock alongside his own. He drove them to Dagoretti cattle market where he sold them at a profit and brought back the money to him. Seeing the rate at which his money multiplied made Parsimei Ole Kaelo appreciate and respect his younger brother's experience as an *olkunchai*. When Parsimei Ole Kaelo put up two buildings in Nasila - a shop and residential house - his brother participated fully in the construction.

As Simiren and the clan elders sat around the fire, entertaining his elder brother, he thought quietly over how things might change. And as chunks of meat went round, he furtively looked at his brother as he selected a piece from the tray and wondered what was going through his mind. He hoped that Parsimei would appreciate that the weighty burden of matters pertaining to the Kaelo family would henceforth rest squarely on his able and mature shoulders. He, however, envisaged some problems. He had informed Ole Kaelo on many occasions, in the past, that there were murmurs in the

clan about him. Elders had termed reckless his decision to remain married to only one wife, who had only borne him two daughters. They had likened him to a mono-eyed giant who stood on legs of straw. Parsimei had got angry and called the clan elders megalomaniacs who were still trapped in archaic traditions that were better buried and forgotten. Simiren did not argue with him then nor would he do so now. He would rather have matters take their own course.

There was, however, a more sensitive matter that had not been broached; it had to do with his daughters. He had hardly given thought to their age earlier, but when he saw them that evening he knew they should have left home long ago. It would take not long before his brother earned himself the derogatory name of the father of *intoiye nemengalana*.

CHAPTER TWO

Taiyo and Resian were woken up by a lively chatter of birds in the trees surrounding the house and by the intermittent crowing of roosters. What a contrast to what they were used to in Nakuru! They were always woken up by a rowdy clatter that assailed their ears at dawn: what with matatu drivers hooting and revving their engines noisily, touts shouting themselves hoarse while incessantly banging the body-works of their vehicles. For the first time in their lives, they experienced a rare atmosphere of tranquility and serenity they had never known to exist.

Taiyo lazily got out of bed and sleepily dragged herself to the window. When she opened the shutter, bright morning sunlight suddenly flooded the room. A cool fresh breeze swept in and caressed her face soothingly. From a distant, she could hear a bustle of activity within the homestead. She could also hear the mooing of cattle and bleating of sheep not far from the homestead. But what captivated her most was the cool natural environment that was created by giant trees that grew between the houses.

Wondering what could have entranced her sister so much that she kept gazing unblinkingly at a spot outside the house, Resian too stealthily left her bed and joined Taiyo at the window. Standing behind her sister, Resian noticed features at their uncle's homestead that she had not seen the previous night when they arrived. Apart from that house in which they had spent the night, three main houses stood within a well-tended and evenly-trimmed kei-apple perimeter hedge. She guessed

that the four houses belonged to their four aunts who, they were informed the previous night, were the wives of their uncle. Between the houses stood smaller buildings that were overshadowed by massive yellow-trunked acacia trees. Interspersed were olive-green *iloirienito* trees whose fragrant foliage filled the air with their aromatic scent. Flights of birds flashed between the trees and the air was alive with their constant motion and cheerful calls.

"Hope our home will look like this," said Resian with enthusiasm.

"It's so calm and peaceful here. It's the kind of home one would look forward to come back to at the end of the college semester."

"Children," a woman's voice called from an adjacent room. "Come out and have your tea."

They quickly dressed up and within no time, they were out of the house and one of their aunts was leading them to the next house to join the rest of the family for morning tea.

The three crossed the courtyard talking happily, the girls walking closely behind their aunt. Like the house they had slept in, the next two houses they walked past were built of heavy cedar slabs, had similar wooden shutters for windows and were roofed with green painted corrugated iron sheets. Standing beside each house, on raised platforms made of strong cedar beams were large, black plastic water tanks that collected rain water from the roofs. Chicken clucked and scratched in the cool shade underneath. Clusters of bushes of *olobaai* with their shinny dark-green leaves and tiny yellow flowers scattered the compound. *Ilkilenya* climbers grew around

the beams that supported the water tanks and climbed over the walls of the houses, making them look cool and comfortable.

The last house on the row was next to the main gate through which they had entered the homestead the previous night. It was different from the previous three. It was larger and was built of stone and had glass windows and like the others, its corrugated iron-sheet roof was painted green. The front door was ajar and standing smilingly next to it was a stout woman of forty-five or so who greeted the girls affectionately. She eyed them curiously as they responded to the greetings. She introduced herself as *Yeiyoobotorr* which meant she was their senior-most aunt and the eldest wife of their uncle.

They were led to a spacious living room whose large open glass windows faced the east allowing in bright morning sunlight. The light shone on the young faces whose wide eyes stared unashamedly at the two young women who *Yeiyoobotorr* was introducing as their sisters. The sixteen or so children aged between three and sixteen were perched on benches, stools and chairs around the room, each holding a steaming enamel tea mug on one hand and a slice of bread on the other. Their mothers were there too and so was Mama Milanoi who sat placidly admiring the composure of her own daughters. It was only after the children were reassured that their new sisters were not visitors and that they would be seeing them often, that calm returned and they resumed taking their tea and bread. Room was created at the table and Taiyo and Resian sat with their cousins.

Seeing that they had the whole morning to themselves after breakfast, Taiyo and Resian told their mother they wanted to take a walk around the neighborhood. She allowed them but cautioned care and wariness of strangers who might take advantage of their unfamiliarity. The girls looked at one another and giggled. They dismissed their mother's misplaced fears as born of the misconception by the old generation that girls were weaklings, incapable of deciding what was right.

Their mother watched them as they walked leisurely down the path out of their uncle's homestead. For reasons she did not understand, a pang of a strange premonition twisted her nerves unpleasantly. A creepy feeling kept on gnawing at her conscience regarding her daughters' status of being *intoiye nemengalana*, in the midst of a community that cherished girl-child circumcision. She, however, dismissed the feeling and relegated it to the back of her mind.

"What do you make of our uncle Simiren's home?" Resian asked her sister quietly as they walked down the path.

"Honestly, I don't think all is well. Beneath the veneer of apparent happiness, I detected some apprehension, a subtle rivalry of some sort, between the four houses." "What a terrible person you are, my dear sister!" Taiyo rebuked her sister mildly. "You are not worth being a guest in anyone's home. How dare you make such judgment? Their life seems to suit them perfectly."

"Easy, easy, big sister," said Resian teasingly.

Don't be so harsh on me. All I have done is to make an observation. Am I not entitled to that?"

"Of course," Taiyo agreed and flicked an affectionate smile at her sister. "But do you know that the rivalry you detected could simply be a figment of your own fertile imagination?"

"That could be true," Resian added and smiled pleasantly. "But can you honestly claim, if you were one of the sixteen little fellows taking tea from enamel mugs in that crowded room this morning, to be content?" "Perhaps I would be happy," she answered thoughtfully. "You know happiness is relative. One could be happy in a family of twenty and another may fail to find happiness in a family where he or she is an only child."

"Did you notice that two of our aunts are expectant?" Resian asked mischievously, slanting a look at her sister. "At that rate ... "

"Come off it!" Taiyo said sternly. "There are better things to discuss. Parents have the right to have as many children as they desire. You will have that right yourself when your turn comes."

"Who? Not me," Resian said vehemently "I don't want to be a parent. At least not in the foreseeable future. I want to study. When I'll have obtained my degree, other peripheral matters such as a husband, children and such may be considered."

They were walking back to the homestead talking animatedly when they were accosted by a tall heavysset young man with a thick dark beard and moustache. He wore a pair of faded jeans and a dirty blue shirt. On his face was a wide impudent grin. Taiyo glanced at the young man and looked away. She moved closer to

Resian and nudged her to change direction. But the man walked directly to Taiyo. On seeing the man approaching, a heavy knobkerry in his hand, Resian almost fainted.

"Please do not harm us," she pleaded. "We do not have any money with us."

"Who told you I want any money?" the man jeered as he strode menacingly towards them. "Are you not the *intoiye nemengalana* from Nakuru town?" he asked laughing contemptuously. "I want to have a good look at you and know what kind of stuff you are made of!" He roughly grabbed Taiyo's arm.

"Leave my sister alone!" Resian hissed indignantly lifting her eyes and glaring into his. "Let go her arm at once!"

"Let go of my hand," Taiyo demanded, trembling with anger. "We are not the kind of women you have in mind!"

"What women!" the man retorted acidly. "Soon, you will be able to differentiate decent women from *intoiye nemengalana*."

Taiyo tried to wrestle her arm from the man's grip without success. But suddenly, he seemed to change his mind. With a sour smile, he spat and glared at the girls. Then, releasing Taiyo's hand, he told them: "You have not seen the last of me. Soon you will come to know that there is no place in our society for women of your ilk." He turned and disappeared down the road as suddenly as he had appeared.

The two girls sighed heavily and shook their heads as they watched him walk away. Although they had put up brave faces, they were terribly shaken.

"Thank God his intention was not to rape us," Resian said tears streaming down her face. "We would have been helpless in the hands of such a brute."

Taiyo bit her lower lip struggling to maintain control. "His intention could have been worse than rape," she said, tears of anger and indignation welling up in her eyes.

They quickened their steps to their uncle's home. True, the incident had taken the sparkle from the day that had begun so joyfully, but they reasoned that it could have been worse.

The girls debated as to whether to inform their parents of the ordeal. They knew their mother would understand and empathise with them. But judging from past experience, their father would be less supportive. He would blame them for having dared venture into an unknown territory without his approval. Finally, they decided to keep the incident to themselves.

When he finished supervising the off-loading of the lorries and arranging of furniture and other personal effects in his new house, Ole Kaelo set out to meet his mentor Soin ole Supeyo. He was a much older man, possibly sixty-five, a member of the Ilmolelian clan and a respected elder of Ilnyangusi age-set. He was known to be shrewd, scrupulous and honest, attributes that saw him rise from an ordinary *olkunchai* who drove his three or four heads of cattle for hundreds of kilometres to the cattle market at Dagoretti, to the now immensely rich man that he was. He was reputed to own the largest ranch in Nasila and his beef herd and sheep were said to be in tens of thousands. His business empire comprised a fleet of buses, lorries and shops, beside numerous

business premises and residential houses that he rented out.

As he drove his pick-up towards Ole Supeyo's farm, Ole Kaelo gave thought to the old man. When he was in primary school, Ole Supeyo was already a famous cattle trader. He would buy cattle from Nasila and drive them all the way to Dagoretti market where he would sell them and come back laden.

In those days, money was still a new concept to many up-coming illiterate traders. He would find it difficult to add up the notes and was forced to arrive at an aggregate of what he actually owned. Ole Supeyo had to fetch Ole Kaelo and together they would walk deep into the forest where they would find a safe place. He would then remove one of the blankets that he wore and spread it on the grass, take out his pouch and from it fish out a large bundle of notes and coins. He would ask his friend to count the money, while he stood tense, waiting, and would only relax when Ole Kaelo told him the actual amount and it tallied with the figure he had in mind.

They carried out that exercise at least twice a month and he came to trust and depend on Ole Kaelo. The two became close and their friendship developed even as Ole Supeyo became a very wealthy businessman and farmer. Ole Kaelo respected him and considered him his mentor.

Although Ole Supeyo did not attend school, Ole Kaelo thought he was one of those intelligent old men who were able to embrace modern culture, balance it appropriately, and make it run parallel to the old Nasila culture. He had six wives and about thirty children. He had sent all his sons to school and two of them had

reached university level. All his daughters were circumcised and married off to prominent elders in Nasila.

Ole Kaelo had witnessed Ole Supeyo's incense only on one occasion. A certain woman known as *Minik ene* Nkoitoi, the *Emakererei*, a manager at a certain Sheep Ranch called Intare-Naaju, and a known crusader against girl circumcision, had come to persuade him not to circumcise his daughters. But Ole Supeyo would hear none of it. When the crusader insisted on having her way, he got angry and forcefully ejected her out of his homestead, threatening to clobber her.

Later, he told Ole Kaelo, the woman, whom he referred to as a wasp, was a great threat to the Maa culture. Female circumcision, he said, was not only an honoured rite of passage that had been in existence from time immemorial, but an important practice that tamed an otherwise wild gender. Like cattle that required to be dehorned, to reduce accidental injuries to each other, a certain measure of docility was also necessary to keep more than one wife in one homestead. And Ole Kaelo agreed with him, recalling the adage that: two women in one homestead were two potent pots of poison.

Ole Supeyo's homesteads, sheep pens and cattle enclosures were at the centre of an expansive farm that extended for many kilometres in all directions. Ole Kaelo first glimpsed at the glimmer of the corrugated iron sheet rooftops from the top of a low hill some ten kilometres away. The *manyattas* that long ago used to dot the area among scrubby trees and bush had given way to modern sprawling buildings. The trees had been cut down and the bush cleared so that in one direction,

the land was now an expansive plain of thick rich grass that stretched as far as the eye could see, while towards the other direction, thousands of acres of wheat and barley lay.

Ole Kaelo arrived at the homestead and parked his pick-up outside the gate. Looking at the modern homestead, he appreciated how far his friend had travelled from being a simple cattle trader, to the wealthy man who owned that massive homestead accommodating eight large houses. The first wife's house was the largest and was built amongst tall *Iloiraga* trees.

He walked towards the gate thinking of the man he continually drew his inspiration from. He had therefore considered it opportune to make his home the first port of call before he put his hand to the plough.

Ole Supeyo came out of the house to welcome his friend. He had only just woken from his siesta and his eyes were still smarting from sleep. As he walked down the steps in front of the house, he lifted a corner of his shirt and scratched his belly while his other hand stroked the stubble on his chin.

"Come in, my brother!" Supeyo said happily, "Welcome! Welcome! Welcome! Come right inside." They shook hands warmly and Ole Kaelo was led into the spacious living room.

As they talked casually over a cup of tea, Supeyo glanced furtively at his friend, his black eyes gleaming in the afternoon sunshine. He certainly liked him, he told himself quietly, and he would have liked him to succeed in the business he had set himself to do. He, however, considered Ole Kaelo a bore and sometimes a pompous one although he did not doubt his intelligence. Little did

he know that his friend was much more advanced when it came to the murky business of the underworld.

"I hope all is well with your business arrangements," Supeyo commented nonchalantly.

"Everything is moving on smoothly," said Ole Kaelo contentedly. "I hope to open the doors of the shop at the onset of the rains."

"Good," said Supeyo cheerfully. "You will soon find out that, unlike in Agribix where somebody else provides the finances, another does the books, yet another runs up and down making sales, you will have to carry all those tasks single-handedly. And sales will be the most challenging."

Ole Kaelo's pride was wounded. How could the old fellow think he was so naive as not to know how to organise his sales? Perhaps, he thought sourly, his clansmate had not known that in his earlier years in Agribix, he had been sent out to open sales depots in remote places which he quickly developed into expanding profitable modern branches. Maybe it was time he showed the ageing businessman that younger bulls were raring to go and the old ones would better start skirting the pastures. He threw caution to the wind.

"The sales are already taken care of," Ole Kaelo said pompously. "Sales of about three hundred thousand bags of fertilizer, half a million bags of seeds plus insecticides, fungicides and herbicides are as good as bagged and secured. You see that?"

"My goodness," Supeyo exclaimed. "How did you manage such a feat?"

"I'm about to sign a four years' contract to supply all government institutions in Nasila with agricultural inputs," Kaelo said confidently.

Once he had spoken those words, Ole Kaelo felt guilty. Ever since he began negotiating for the supply of the inputs, he had told no one of the deal. It was a secret that he kept close to his heart. It had already cost him a fortune but if the deal went through, he thought apprehensively, it would make all the difference. He now felt rueful. It was as though by speaking about it, he had broken the spell that would have brought the good fortune. He grew anxious, leaned back on his seat, crossed his legs, trying to firmly suppress his own distaste for corruption that was entrenched in those contract giving offices. He had long realised that the choice was between remaining a nobody, self-righteously and accepting, sensibly, that the man with the meat was also the same man with the knife. Whoever wanted to eat meat, must of necessity dance to the music of the man who held the two.

"My brother Ole Kaelo," Supeyo called amidst malicious laughter that had a touch of friendly mockery. "Tell me, who have you been corrupting?"

"Nobody really," Ole Kaelo answered angrily, his teeth set on edge. "I only made contact with ... " he hesitated, then gaining his composure continued, "I made contact with a man called Oloisudori. I met the man in Nakuru ... "

"Do you know Oloisudori?" interrupted Supeyo sharply.

"Do you really know what you have gotten yourself into? *Taba!*" He leaned forward, elbows on the

table, his eyes growing into sudden sharp needle-points of interest. He remained so for a moment, then sunk back into his chair, smiling mirthlessly. "My dear brother, here in Nasila, everyone knows anyone who is corrupt. And Oloisudori is probably the most corrupt of them all. What a head start! I'll be glad to share some of those contracts should you run out of supplies. They are quite a bite, I dare say!"

The mockery did not escape Ole Kaelo. But to hear the man he had all along considered to be his mentor pour cold water on what he regarded as his grand entry into big business was not only frightening but disconcerting. He wondered whether his friend, was not being hypocritical. He could be one of those selfish people who, after crossing a river, would destroy the bridge so that others did not use it. He lifted his eyes to look at his friend and shifted in his seat uneasily.

"In your opinion," he said and hesitated quite embarrassed. Then he continued, "do you think Oloisudori will deliver what he promised?" Supeyo shrugged his shoulders. "My brother, you are not naive nor are you new in business," he said candidly. "Oloisudori is in business and wants to continue being in business. If you have fulfilled your part, he will do his, especially if it suits him."

"So, he is a man of integrity?" asked Ole Kaelo, a flicker of hope rising in his heart.

"A man of integrity indeed," Supeyo said, a scornful smile twisting his lips. "Don't trust him any further than you would a hyena in your homestead." Then lowering his voice as if he was letting him into a guarded secret, he whispered mischievously. "And my

friend, keep the fellow away from your daughters. He has a reputation that would rival that of a randy he-goat!" With that advice, Ole Kaelo left his friend. Though feeling discomfited, he was nonetheless the wiser, or so he thought.

In the afternoon, the Kaelo family left Simireri's homestead to be driven the one kilometre distance to their new home. They rode almost in silence, each wrapped in thoughts they did not care to share with others. Mama Milanoi, dazzled by dreams of eventual fulfillment failed to notice that her husband's silence was ominous. She even forgot the premonition that had earlier gnawed her conscience. Taiyo had not recovered fully from the traumatic experience they had gone through. The threatening hostility the evil young man displayed had not dissipated and that the sense of foreboding from the threat was still hanging in the air like the sword of Damocles. Her arm, which the man had roughed up, still felt unclean. She could still feel the touch of his heavy callous hand. She drew in a deep, trembling breath and released it in a sigh as she silently sat at the back of the pick-up with her sister. Resian also sat there silently.

At last they were home and before them was the solid, stone-built red-tiled roofed house that was going to be their home. It was built on a hill that allowed a command of a breathtakingly beautiful scene.

While his wife and daughters jumped out of the pick-up excitedly and scrambled to the gate of their new house jubilantly, Parsimei Ole Kaelo remained behind for a few minutes. Ole Supeyo's words still nettled him. Truly, he had known Oloisudori to be a notorious

criminal, but was not everybody doing business with him? Was he really that bad? He wondered. Or was it the usual business rivalry and envy? Try as he did to justify his business deal with Oloisudori, something inside him told him it was not right. He thought an old man of Ole Supeyo's seniority did not use the word *Taba* lightly.

CHAPTER THREE

When their father pointed out their house amongst other red tiled ones on top of a hill, the girls could hardly believe their eyes. That imposing huge building enclosed in a stonewalled perimeter fence, could not be their home! They nudged one another excitedly as they giggled and threw furtive glances at their father. The oppressive gloom that had weighed upon their hearts as they drove down the road, suddenly lifted and dissipated. An atmosphere of excitement and anticipation pervaded their hearts. Their faces were radiant. Their feet quickened as they walked the remaining distance with bated breath.

Mama Milanoi was also happy. Although she had not seen the house before then, she knew it was tastefully built. She had always trusted her husband to do the best for the family. There was no reason, therefore, for her to have doubted him. She married him twenty-two years ago, not only to meet the expectations of the Nasila people, but also to get someone to look after her and her children.

And true to her expectation, Ole Kaelo had always been responsible. Even as she sat happily beside him that sunny afternoon, she let her mind travel fancifully into her past. She recalled with amusement the pride of her father and mother when the parents of one Parsimei Ole Kaelo, accompanied by other elders came to their home to engage her. Her parents were all along determined to find a well-to-do son-in-law, preferably from a well known family. When the suitor happened to be a young man reputed to be an up-coming businessman, her parents were satisfied that their

daughter would not only be in safe hands, but that their grandchildren would have a dependable protector. After what appeared to her to be protracted negotiations, the parties agreed and she was betrothed.

She accepted him without any resistance. Tradition did not allow her to offer any and as expected of her, she did not resist. So at eighteen, after undergoing the mandatory initiation rituals, she had married Parsimei Ole Kaelo who was then twenty-four years old. And although over the years he had scolded and bullied her, like a half-witted child, she knew he was a good man, a great provider, a foresighted planner and a man with a will to succeed in whatever he put his mind on. She also knew that he loved her genuinely. For even after all those years of marriage he still pampered her. She loved him too and had a childlike dependence on him. She, however, knew that she had failed miserably by not giving him the sons that he had so much looked forward to. But she also knew it was still not too late. God could still favour her with a son or two. And now that she had gone back to the home of the gods of motherhood, she was going to join the rest of Nasila women in their ancestral prayer, song and praise- *Enkai Aomon Entomono* - a prayer exhorting God to open women's wombs.

She turned and looked at her daughters. They were full of animation as they walked hurriedly down the road that led to the gate. That made her happy. She was even happier to see Resian who was often a pessimist, looking exuberant that afternoon. She hoped they would always be that happy. But she knew things had not been easy for them. At that delicate stage of their

lives, she knew relocation to an extremely harsh environment devoid of their friends and all that they had known throughout their lives was not only trying, but cruel. But she feared even a worse looming scenario. Poor innocent things! How she wished she could shield and protect them. But could she? She knew Nasila people were extremely intolerant of those who ignored their cherished cultural sensibilities. And the case of her daughters was no exception.

Mama Milanoi was so engrossed in her thoughts that she hardly noticed that they had arrived at the gate of their new home. Her husband's voice jolted her back to reality.

"Lanoo-ai-nayorr," the endearing diminutive that he only used in the most intimate of circumstances, stopped her in her tracks. She straightened up and her eyes widened. "This is the home that I have always dreamed I would one day build for you and my beloved daughters," he said emotionally and dramatically dipped his hand into his coat-pocket removing a key. For a brief moment, the air around them was expectantly taut. The girls stood breathless, staring fixedly at the gate.

The whole episode seemed magical. And like a magician, Ole Kaelo stood there beaming ecstatically, his hands ready to unveil the object of his magic. He inserted the key into the keyhole, turned it and as it clicked open, he swung the gate open to reveal a home that was so breathtakingly beautiful that they could have only imagined it in a fantastic dream. They were stunned.

"Father of all creation!" Mama Milanoi exclaimed loudly. "This is but a dream."

"It is magnificent!" enthused Taiyo in an ecstasy of delight, "*Enkai supat.*"

"I have not seen anything like it!" completed Resian, enthralled, "*Eitu aikata ado! ...*"

The air of excitement that danced about the Kaelo family was so exhilarating. And for a long moment none of them moved. Their eyes were glued to the exquisite house before them.

Ole Kaelo ushered them into the sprawling homestead with its lush well-tended lawn. Here and there were squat robust *ilopon* trees. Clusters of *oleleshua*, *osinoni* and *olkirpanyany* bushes dotted the compound, while beyond the house, hanging on the stone perimeter wall, was a blaze of bougainvillea climbers in red, cream and purple.

When they got to the front of the house, they could hardly believe their eyes! Truly, their new house was a dream come true. Resian looked about her with fascinated eyes while Taiyo, itching to enter and see for herself, took the lead and proceeded to mount the graceful sweep of steps, before reaching the front door. And when their father opened the door, they were breathless.

They filed through into a spacious hallway that led to a large living room lavishly furnished with familiar furniture. The girls ran from room to room curiously trying to find their orientation. Surprisingly, the house looked familiar. What they did not know was that all the rooms were a replica of their former house in Nakuru. It was not easy to distinguish it from the Nakuru flat.

Back in the living room, Taiyo, Resian and their mother began to speak at once. They spoke of its size, convenience and the furniture fitting.

After a hurriedly prepared dinner, the girls retired to their bedroom to arrange and tidy it up. Cartons of their clothes, bedding, books and other personal effects were still piled up on their unmade bed. Curtains were yet to be hung as were their pictures and decorations. Taiyo removed her cardigan and immediately swung into action. She loosened the ropes that tied cartons, emptied their contents onto the floor and sorted them. After some time, the large room that held their big bed was in shambles. Shoes lay strewn all over, books were stacked in heaps on the floor and clothes and bedding were scattered on the bed. Exhausted, she straightened up and stood, hands on her hips, eyeing in growing exasperation her sister who sat on a chair at one corner of the room reading a book.

"Surely, Resian," she complained to her sharply. "Is this the time to read a book with all this mess around us?"

"Do your bit now and I will do mine tomorrow," Resian replied with a nonchalant carelessness. "I insist that you get up right now and get to work" Taiyo raised her voice. "We need to arrange this room before we get to bed."

Resian grunted. She reluctantly laid the book down and went to work.

They reviewed the events of the last two days as they tried to bring order to the room.

"There is such a contrast between Nakuru and this place," said Taiyo quietly. "It is so quiet and tranquil here."

"I don't know, but I feel an oppressive silence," Resian said defiantly. "A little noise is not all that bad." "Don't befuddle me with your weird kind of reasoning," said Taiyo getting impatient. "Do you prefer the Nakuru bus stage to this serene atmosphere?"

"No, not at all." Resian said seriously. "I would rather live in the most noisy place on earth, than live anywhere near a vagabond who would accost me in the most quiet and serene atmosphere with the intention of mutilating my sexuality!"

"Of course I also don't care whether I am counted among *intoiye nemengalana*," an embarrassed Taiyo said as she began to fold clothes, not looking at her sister. "What I know is that my body belongs to me. I belong to myself." She picked a pillow, tossed it onto the bed, plumbed it up and looking around said fiercely, "only when I am dead would anybody mutilate my body."

"Don't you think they can force us to undergo the ritual?" Resian asked fearfully. "What do you think will happen to us if *Papaai* is forced by his clansmen to embrace the archaic culture that would require us to get the cut?"

"Resian-e-yeiyo, I hope nothing of that sort happens, for if it does ... " she shrugged her shoulders and pulled an expressive face. "I don't know what would happen to us."

"That's why it's imperative that you persuade *Papaai* to allow us go back to Nakuru and enroll at the university," said Resian vehemently as she threw herself

onto the bed, her arms behind her head. "We must beat them to it. We must convince him to let us go before they prevail upon him to embrace outdated and archaic traditions."

"I'll do that soonest, dear sister," said Taiyo thoughtfully. "I'll try to persuade him to see our way."

"How soon is soonest?" Resian cried out resignedly and added petulantly, "I would never want to be confronted again by a deranged vagabond in this wild and frightening jungle that *Papaai* has thrown us into."

"Hush little sister, please don't cry," Taiyo cooed soothingly as if singing a lullaby to a crying baby. "Your big sister will make sure that no harm comes your way and that you get what you yearn for. Just wait and see."

Taiyo stood by the bed for a while watching her sister who lay forlorn, staring through the window into the brightly moonlit sky outside. Then she sat on the bed beside her and reassuringly touched Resian's cheek gently with the back of her hand. Ever since they were young, attending nursery school, she had been fiercely devoted to her sister. When they went to primary school, Resian clung to her for protection from bigger girls who wanted to bully her. And in their growing years, even at secondary school, Taiyo always sensed her sister's yearning.

She had made it her duty to mop her younger sister's tears, sooth her anger and gently reassure her when she was badly shaken; as often happened after the frequent tongue lashing from their father. For reasons she did not understand, she had always found their father strangely and harshly impatient towards Resian. She was sure it was that inexplicable attitude of her father

towards Resian that had contributed to her tempestuous disposition. Even stranger was their mother's failure to come to Resian's defense. It was as if her motherly instincts could not extend her protective wings to cover Resian.

And so, in the absence of their mother's protection and in the face of their father's constant provocation and intimidation, Resian's dependence on Taiyo strengthened. And Taiyo would have been irked by her sister's ever present nagging complaints had she not been so deeply aware of her never ending unhappiness.

Although Resian had a lot to complain and grumble about life in their new environment, Taiyo found it tolerable. For instance, she gladly discovered that mornings at their new home began with a lively chatter of birds in the trees surrounding their house. That gave the home an atmosphere of tranquility and peace. However, one of the unpleasant aspects that the girls had to live with was the constant violation of their privacy. In Nasila, they soon discovered, the home belonged to all clan members. It was not an unusual thing to get up in the morning to find the living room full of men and women who came that early, not for any tangible business, but simply to share a sumptuous breakfast with their kith and kin. Taiyo and Resian were soon to get used to hearing an urgent knock at the door very early in the morning.

On opening, they would invariably be met by a grinning group of men and women who would unashamedly ask them what they were doing in bed that late in the morning. They would proceed to take seats in

the living room and order them to serve them with breakfast.

When they got used to what they first considered to be negative aspects of Nasila culture, Taiyo and Resian adjusted accordingly and soon they began to live harmoniously with the people. Their father was out of the homestead most of the time working at the shop and organising other business matters. His absence also meant the absence of his irksome and corrosive remarks that always heightened tension in the house. In his absence, the house was a continuous joy with comfort and conveniences, and the girls found it a pleasure to keep it clean and well arranged.

Mingling with the women folk, the girls learnt a great deal about the hilarious, the absurd and the weird aspects of Nasila culture. They also met a variety of women. Although most of the women who visited the Parsimei's home did so for entertainment purposes, others visited with definite purposes. A great number of them came to survey and get to know the girls well, so that they could have sufficient information on which to decide whether they were marriageable, and commendable to their husbands to be married as their *inkainito*. Others came looking for potential wives for their sons while *enkaitoyoni* and *enkamuratani* came to make acquaintance with potential clients.

So when their father announced one evening that he was planning a homecoming ceremony, the girls and especially Taiyo no longer felt like strangers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Parsimei Ole Kaelo planned his homecoming ceremony meticulously. He had wanted the occasion to be remarkably memorable, preferably taking the form of the traditional *enkang-o-ntalengo*. He, however, knew that having been away from Nasila for many years, he had lost touch with the cultural sensibilities of the people.

To re-establish the severed links, he enlisted the help of his brother Simiren and several senior elders of the community who were the custodians of his people's culture. He was prepared to get down to the bedrock and find out at which point he lost the way. He had known that *odomongi* and *orok-kiteng*, the legendary twin homesteads of the founder that begot the five clans of Nasila: Ilmolelian, Ilmakesen, Ilukumae, Ilaiser and Iltarrosero, were the cradle of the Nasila people.

He not only desired to reunite with Nasila people but also needed their blessings. He had, therefore, dispatched people to all corners of Nasila to invite representatives of all the five clans to the grand party, which was going to be his re-entry point into the cultural life of his people.

When he gave thought to the clans, Ole Kaelo could not help but laugh silently when he recalled the stereotyped anecdotes that used to be told when he was young. They were made up by rival groups with the intention of lowering the esteem of their adversaries. He recalled with amusement that his own clan of Ilmolelian was said to be made up of ludicrously generous men who would slaughter a bull and foolishly share out all the

meat to others leaving themselves without any. They would then happily and ridiculously raise up their arms to show to all and sundry that they had not hidden any meat under their armpits. But for the Ilmakesen clan, it was exactly the opposite. The clansmen were said to be so miserly stingy that they would deny a dog the afterbirth of a she-goat. It was said that they would opt to sleep hungry rather than share food they had in the house with a sojourner who dropped in unannounced. Interestingly, Ole Kaelo was a member of the supposedly generous Ilmolelian clan, and his wife Milanoi was the daughter of the close-fisted Ilmakesen clan.

When the party was finally thrown, it was nothing short of ostentatious. And true to the Ilmolelian spirit and tradition, Ole Kaelo held nothing back. He slaughtered a fattened ox, six rams and four he-goats. In the living room stood four long tables spread with the most astounding array of food Nasila had ever seen. There were large trays laden with huge chunks of boiled meat whose tantalizing aroma filled the room. Lamb chops grilled to a golden brown colour glistened appetisingly on chop-boards. Succulent pieces of pink-roasted liver lay arranged on leaves of *oloirepirepi* weed to preserve moisture and taste. Then there were other choice pieces of meat on skewers and others wrapped up in sacred *oloirien* leaves that were the preserve of the elders who were to bless the home of *intalengo*. It was only after such blessings that Nasila would receive back their son who had gone out to hunt for fortunes and returned safely. The elders would also bless the wife, children and property that he brought back and which

were all henceforth going to be the wealth of the Imolelian clan.

That day had began early for Ole Kaelo. He had left his bed at cock crow, the time that was known in Nasila as *tolakira-lole-Kasaale*. He was to see to it that every detail about the impending homecoming ceremony was taken care of without exception and absolutely nothing was to be left to chance. There was little for him to do that morning though, for all preparations and arrangements had earlier been made, systems had been set, and all that was left to be done was to implement what had been agreed upon.

Days earlier, with the help of his brother Simiren and his wives, he had gathered a retinue of young men and women from his Imolelian clan and charged them with the responsibility of organising the activities and chores of the ceremonial day. And true to their calling, the young men and women immediately swung into a variety of activities with zest. Those who belonged to the sub-clan of Iloorasha-kineji, to which Ole Kaelo also belonged, felt that the responsibility to have the occasion succeed rested on their shoulders. Led by a young local primary school music teacher called Joseph Parmuat, they took charge of the entire ceremony. Members of the other sub-clan of *lelema* graciously accepted the leadership of Joseph Parmuat and their other cousins and all worked harmoniously and tirelessly to bring about the success that was already evident that morning.

From the verandah of his house, Ole Kaelo surveyed with utter satisfaction all that was happening in his homestead. He was most grateful and felt humbled by the fact that, in that ancestral land to which he had

finally returned and to which he belonged (body and soul); honour, brotherhood and selflessness were still virtues. In Nakuru, only the promise of monetary payment would have induced such a large number of young men and women to turn up. With trembling lips and tears welling in his eyes, he swore under his breath that never again in his life, would he ever abandon the culture of his people or live outside his clan; Ilmolelian. Its twin sub-clans of Iloorasha-kineji and lelema, would always be like two chambers of his heart that incessantly pumped the blood that sustained him. Regaining his composure, he walked back into the house.

Mama Milanoi was at the tables ensuring that the trays that came out of the kitchen laden with meat delicacies, were sorted out and arranged appropriately. Taiyo was busy slicing chunks of oxtongue into manageable pieces, a job she did with dexterous fingers. When their father opened the door to let himself into the living room, Resian was busy transferring glasses from the sideboard onto a nearby table. The moment she saw him enter, her fingers became clumsy and she nearly dropped a glass.

"Would you ever do anything right, child?" her father reprimanded her severely. "I hope you have not broken any glasses this morning."

"I am terribly sorry, *Papaai*," Resian said remorsefully, her eyes downcast, "but I have not broken any." But sensing that her father's eyes were still upon her, she became more nervous. Just then, her braided hair fell free of their pins and over her face. She tried to tuck a strand behind her ear, but in the process lost the grip of the two glasses dropping them on the floor. Her

father winced, grimaced and struggled to control his temper. This that was not a day to get angry. But all the same, he wondered where in the world they fetched that awkward, overblown, stupid child. Her gracelessness appalled him. And the very look in her eyes, half- fearful, half-defiant and wholly troubled, was always enough to raise his temper to the highest pitch. He clicked his tongue irritably and quickly left the room.

At noon, Ole Kaelo's spacious homestead was nearly full to capacity. There was pomp all over and a carnival atmosphere resonant with song and dance hung in the air. A bevy of beautiful, young women stepped forward, their necks bedecked with layer after layer of exquisite multicoloured bead ornaments. The bright-coloured *lesos* they wore over their shoulders fluttered in the windy afternoon air as they moved sedately, heads poised, chests heaving forwards and backwards, knees bobbing, voices raised melodiously, as they glided smoothly into an exciting traditional dance.

Two young men out of a group of about twenty began to sing in their light melodic voices. The rest joined in, their deep guttural voices mingling with those of the young women. The moment the voices mingled and fused, the dance changed subtly. The men's group broke into two, each with a light, springy jump. They skipped away as they skirted the compound, and joined again into one group amidst shrieks of excitement. The young women repeated their dance. Their light steps sedate, their backs and shoulders held straight and their heads haughty and graceful. And as they sang, the young men leapt to the centre. They jumped high into the air each one of them vying to outdo the other.

Taiyo and Resian who had joined the throng of spectators were ecstatic. Their eyes were glued to the handsome, arrogant athletic figures of the *morans*. One particular young man caught Taiyo's eye. He was lithe, tall and dark-haired in red *shukas*, who leapt higher with more grace than the rest. She involuntarily gasped, her gaze still riveted upon his handsome face.

"Look at that young man," Taiyo told her sister, excitedly pointing at him. "Isn't he handsome?"

Resian followed her sister's gaze. "Yes, he is," she said trying to scrutinize his face from that distance. "He is undoubtedly good-looking."

Even as they gazed at the young man, he broke out of the group and walked out of the gate. Moments later he came back leading a group of uniformed school children, boys and girls who he quickly arranged into four short lines, one following the other. Soon the air was resonant with their vibrant voices as they sang an exciting heart-lifting song, whose words had been carefully selected to commemorate Ole Kaelo's return.

Teninining iltualan loo nkishu ang, - If you listen to the tinkling bells of our cattle,

Niyolou tenaa naapuo linka ashu nar ukunye ang.
- You will know whether the cattle are going out to pastures, or on their way back home.

Tenaa napuo linka, shomo taanyu tenaituyupaki -
If they are on their way to the pastures, wait for them, at the hills of Naituyupaki

Tenaa narukunye ang, taanyu te kishomi Ole Kaelo. - If they are streaming back home, wait for them at the homestead of Ole Kaelo.

Oiye kuldo murrān lolmolelian, - You young men of Ilmolelian,

Enchom entanangare olungani linyi olotu ang - Go out and meet your returning hero.

Entoboinu inkishu enyenak metijinga kishomi - Direct his cattle to enter his homestead,

Eniningo iltualan loonkishu Ole Kaelo - Listen to the tinkling bells of the cattle of Ole Kaelo.

Eterewa apa ole Kaelo inkishu enyenak linka, - Ole Kaelo took his cattle out to the pastures,

Nenyaaka areu pookin ang elulunga - And brought them back home

Tenininig iltualan loonkishu enyenal; - without losing any.

Niyolou ego iltualan loonkishu narukufnye ang - If you listen to the tinkling bells of his cattle, You will know it is the sound of cattle coming back home

Then the children broke into a quick exciting dance. The boys formed a semicircle while the girls formed a line. They wove into an intricate pattern, hands touching and dropping, their eyes demurely downcast. The boys chanted and sang a refrain while the girls moved with a grace that brought instant applaud from all those present, their tiny steps gliding smoothly like ducks upon water.

Then the boys changed their dance style. They leapt, one by one, into the centre of the circle they had formed and amidst shrieks and chants, jumped high in the air, while whirling, spinning and clicking their heels. The girls responded by singing a melodious praise song. As they sang, they gyrated their hips creating a certain

rippling movement of their abdomens that was seductive and pleasant to watch.

From the children's performance, it was evident that the cherished Nasila traditional dance would stand the test of time. Those in the compound came closer to watch. Several began to clap in time to the music as the tempo of the girls' gyration speeded up.

Taiyo was stupefied. She clapped until her hands hurt. And all along she was lost in thought. The sight of those young school children singing and dancing so joyfully brought back the memories of her high school days. Her heart warmed up when she recalled the numerous occasions when she excelled in music festivals and was awarded and garlanded. Broadcasting stations recognised her talent and encouraged her to take music as a career. She had taken for granted that her parents who on several occasions applauded her when she won trophies on account of her performance, would not have any objection if she pursued the desire of her heart as her future career. An EM Radio Station that had for a long time followed her music development keenly, offered her a chance to discover and explore the worth of her talent by sponsoring her to attend a music extravaganza in Mombasa. Thereafter, she was to attend a short course after which her abilities were to be gauged.

When she broke the news, which she thought would delight her parents, her father was furious. He curtly refused to grant her permission and angrily disallowed any further discussion on the matter, effectively crushing any hopes she may have developed of making music her career. He stated categorically that no daughter of Ole Kaelo would so demean herself and

her family as to perform in public in exchange of monetary gain. It was one thing to perform in a school festival, he reasoned, but to perform to a public gallery was one short step to harlotry. No amount of persuasion would change her father's mind.

She knew without any doubt in her heart that she still loved music. It was in her blood. How she wished she would meet that young man who coached those young children to sing and perform so well.

It was not until three in the afternoon that the carnival mood that had been getting merrier by the hour, exploded into a frenzied celebration. The exultant crowd in the homestead broke into an exciting rhythm of song and dance. Taiyo and Resian, who by then had retreated into the shadow of a spreading *oloponi* tree, from where they watched the colourful movement of the throng of dancers, could not resist the urge to join them. They quickly stepped into the crowd and began to dance. And so did their mother who, tugging their aunt, *Yeyoo-botorr* also joined other dancers who were already heaving their chests forward and backward as they chanted the refrain. Before long, they spotted their three other aunts who too were amongst the crowd of dancers. Uncle Simiren was there too, dancing, his bald head shining like a piece of iron sheet in the afternoon sun. Then they saw their father.

"Look at *Papaai!*, said Taiyo giggling as she pointed out their father amidst a group of dancing elders.

"He doesn't seem to know how to dance," commented Resian jokingly and then added mischievously. "He should ask uncle Simiren to coach him."

They laughed heartily hiding their faces behind other dancers so that they did not come face to face with him lest they embarrassed him.

Just then, a shadowy figure appeared and swiftly walked past them. They simultaneously looked up and saw a man stare piercingly at them. He sneered at them contemptuously then quickly walked past the dancers and disappeared out of the gate. But that was not before they positively recognised him as the young man who accosted them on their first day in Nasila. They were shocked and suddenly, all the happiness and serenity that had pervaded their hearts dissipated. They now felt angry, terrified and isolated even when they were in the midst of the happy throng of revelers that was oblivious of what had befallen them.

It was at five o'clock when Simiren charmingly invited all those present to savour his brother's lavish hospitality. The elders and their wives were ushered into Ole Kaelo's spacious living room while the young men, young women and the children mingled happily in the lush, sprawling well-tended lawn.

Soon, the ever dutiful daughters of Ilmolelian moved to and fro among the chattering throng with trays heavily laden with pieces of meat that the revellers ate ravenously to their fill. When beverages had been distributed all round and everyone had had their share, the young people departed having acknowledged that a true descendant of Ilmolelian had finally arrived and taken his rightful position in the clan.

At seven o'clock in the evening after the lights had been put on, and the traditional *esuguroi* drink had been served in generous measures, tongues loosened and

hearts gladdened. Soon after, the party gathered momentum and voices rose. Within no time, one could hardly be heard over the hubbub of talk and laughter. And as the pleasurable and lively celebration progressed, voices became animated; hands and arms gesticulated vigorously while heads turned more often. Eyes searched out acquaintances within the throng of revelers.

And it was all pomp and gaiety as ivory adorned and bejeweled fingers fluttered; bare shoulders gleamed in the light; multi-coloured bead ornaments glittered upon elaborately bedecked necks; pendulous *ilmiintoni* of all colours dangled loosely down extended ear-lobes; and the bright colours of *lesos*, *kangas*, red *shukas* and multicolored blankets, all turned the Ole Kaelo living room into a kaleidoscope of shifting light and colour.

That evening, Mama Milanoi, the perfect hostess, was a woman with glamour. She was resplendently dressed in purple silk and moved happily from one group to the other talking cheerfully: her laughter ringing out pleasantly. That was her home and that was her evening. She had to make sure that no one present in that living room would leave with any shred of doubt in his or her heart as to who was the *enopeny enkang* of the Ole Kaelo homestead.

Taiyo was watching with amusement as her mother moved from one group of revellers to another when suddenly her eye caught sight of a tall man who was advancing across the room towards her direction. She recognised him and her heart missed a beat. Momentarily, his bright eyes met hers. They were perfectly set on a young and handsome face that was above an equally impressive attire of red *shukas*.

Across the room, maternal instincts directed Mama Milanoi to look at the direction of her daughter, Taiyo, in time to see two events happening simultaneously: a handsome young man striding towards her daughter and her husband sending a seemingly corrosive glance in the direction of his daughter.

One can never tell with Ole Kaelo, Mama Milanoi thought aloud. He can be the most dreadful spoilsport.

Ole Kaelo, however, did not interfere and Mama Milanoi watched from across the room, smiling a little, as the two young people met. How lovely Taiyo looked that night! She thought she was her very image when she was at her age. She watched the two as they exchanged greetings and their smiles as their eyes met. Then he seemed to ask her a question and she, with downcast eyes, gave him a demure smile. For a moment, Mama Milanoi stood there allowing a ridiculous small blade of envy cut through her heart. She let her heart wander and wondered what might have happened had she met a handsome young man such as the one her daughter was speaking with, fallen in love and got married. If she had had such an opportunity, what might her life have been? Maybe she would not have been joined at the hip with a bully like

"Do you know that young man your daughter is talking to?" It was her brother-in-law Simiren standing beside her. "She needs to be informed immediately."

"Is he a bad boy?" Mama Milanoi asked urgently fearing for her daughter.

"Far from it," Simiren answered reassuringly. "In fact he is one of the finest and dependable young men that we have in Nasila."

"What's Taiyo to be informed about him, then?" Mama Milanoi asked, puzzled. "Or is he married and has a vicious wife?"

"You are wrong again," Simiren said smiling broadly. "It is simply this, the young man whose name is Joseph Parmuat is a brother to your daughter. Parmuat, his father is of the clan of Ilmolelian of Iloorasha-kineji sub-clan, like ourselves. It is, therefore, not only a great abomination if we were to allow their ignorance to desecrate Nasila cultural values, but their illicit contact would be a taboo that is bound to have untold consequences on us all."

From the corner where she stood watching the noisy events in the living room, Resian saw the meeting of her sister and the lithe young man who she had earlier in the day said was handsome. For some strange reason, she felt alarmed. Was it jealousy consuming her? But why should she be jealous of her sister? No it was not jealousy. It was fear. It was the fear of losing Taiyo. Taiyo was hers. She was her only sister, her only friend and her only ally. She could not dare lose her or share her love with anybody. Never! When she gave thought to the possibility, her young heart nearly stopped beating. For a brief, almost frightening moment, she allowed the negative emotions take the better of her. She swore - *inkilani-e-papaa* - she would hate anyone, who came between her and her sister.

Taiyo saw her sister come and she thought how timely her arrival was, for she had wanted to share that

moment of joy and ecstasy with someone close to her. She smiled dazzlingly as she introduced the two to each other. Resian was rewarded by a twinkle in the young man's eyes as he shook her delicate soft hand. There followed a brief, slightly awkward silence. Around them, the talk and the laughter of the revellers rose and fell like the sound of waves beating upon flooded river banks. Before they had time to say another word, uncle Simiren and their mother stood beside them. It chagrined Taiyo greatly to be told of her clan's relations with the young man she had just met.

Then the time finally came. It was the time to formally receive Parsimei Ole Kaelo and his family back into the Ilmolelian fold and into the larger family of the Nasila people and offer blessings for his family's well being.

To conduct the sacred ceremony was an old man who had been sitting in the company of other two old men at a corner of the living room. He was sagging with age and his face was splodged with a maze of wrinkles. His lips had collapsed on his toothless gums while his scalp showed patches of white skin through his thin grey hair.

Earlier in the evening Taiyo had looked at the old man with a piteous face as he sat with his elbows on the table, holding a joint of mutton in both hands and, trying to gnaw on it. Seeing how much he struggled, obviously with very little success, she had sympathised with him. She had gone into the kitchen fetched a plateful of rice, peas, beans and potatoes and handed it to him. The old

man received the food with gratitude, while the other two elders eyed him with envy.

"Thank you very much, my dear child," the old man had said and then asked curiously. "May I know whose daughter you are, my child?"

"I am Ole Kaelo's daughter," answered Taiyo impatiently not wanting to prolong the discussion with the decrepit old man.

Later, Taiyo was surprised to see that the seemingly helpless and toothless old man, was one of the most revered elders in the community. She saw him get up from where he sat with the other two old men, and leaning heavily on his walking stick, moved to the centre of the living room. His pace was dignified as he walked with his chin up and his mouth set in a hard straight line. That was the time that Taiyo observed his heavily wrinkled face. There was a haughty set to his features. For a moment, Taiyo felt as if he had fastened his eyes on her and that his gaze was like a physically oppressive force upon her. She suddenly felt much in awe of him.

When he began to speak, his voice boomed and its resonance filled the crowded room. He introduced himself as old Ole Musanka, a member of the Ilmakesen clan and of Ilterito age-set. He said Nasila was a Maa house and anybody born of Maa, was entitled to its shelter. Maa culture was the blood and marrow that gave sustenance to the body. And the body was the collective masses of Maa. Ole Kaelo, he said, was a tiny strand of hair that had been blown away from its owner's head by a gust of wind. The same wind that had blown it away had blown the strand back onto its owner's head. He said the head could not refuse to receive back the returning

strand. But the onus was upon the strand to attach and coil itself back onto the rest of the hair on the head and blend with it. If it did not, he warned, it would drop and get trampled upon the ground. He advised Ole Kaelo to re-assimilate himself into his people's culture.

"Those of us who have been listening to the sound of our cattle bells," he said quoting the children's song, "know that the Ole Kaelo's cattle are home-bound. They were bound to come, for the founder said when a rat begins to smell, it returns to its mother's home."

"And home is never far from one who is still alive," one of the elders interjected.

"And speaking of home," Ole Musanka said candidly, "Ole Kaelo must be told, home is not this house however magnificent it may be. Home is Maa, home is Nasila, home is family and home is the children. Kill one of the four pillars, and there is no home to speak about. Sever yourself from the culture of your people and you effectively become *olkirikoi*, a man of no fixed abode, your elegant house notwithstanding. Where are the women of Maa? Embrace the wife and children of Ole Kaelo and bring them back into the Nasila fold. Where are the elders of Ilmolelian? There is your man. Cut him loose from the snares of alien cultures. I am through."

Then he had a parting shot for Taiyo and Resian. "Do not listen to crusaders of an alien culture that is being perpetrated by a certain Entangoroi called *Emakererei*. The wasp advocates that we maintain *intoiye nemengalana* amongst our daughters. *Taba!* May she go down with the setting sun!"

After that voluble curse, the old man blessed the Ole Kaelos. He had a special blessing for the daughter of Ole Kaelo who served him with a special dish that evening. He prophesied that she will be a mother of the next leader of Nasila and Maa.

When Parsimei Ole Kaelo later learnt that the daughter mentioned by the seer was Taiyo, he was elated. But Mama Milanoi was troubled. What she feared for her daughters was turning to be real Taiyo and Resian also felt troubled. They felt squeamish as they stood there, their downcast eyes riveted upon the floor, fear and hopelessness tormenting their young hearts. But who was that person, they wondered, who was referred to as a 'wasp' and who evoked so much virulent hatred amongst the people of Nasila?

CHAPTER FIVE

Confusion reigned supreme in the forlorn hearts of the two daughters of Ole Kaelo, immediately after the homecoming ceremony. Feelings of anger, panic, helplessness and hopelessness alternated in their minds.

Taiyo was the first to be overcome by lethargic feelings. She sluggishly left the now nearly empty living room for their bedroom. Resian remained behind for a moment helping their mother and other women gather and move utensils to the kitchen and tidy the room.

When she finally got to the bedroom, Resian found it half-lit and quiet. Only one lamp that Taiyo had left for her, still burned. Preparing for bed, she blundered about the darkened bedroom muttering to herself, her movements angrily sharp. Taiyo tensed a little as her sister slid into the bed beside her.

"Taiyo-e-yeiyo," she called huskily, as soon as she settled in bed, a thread of miserable anger discernible in her voice. "Taiyo-e-yeiyo, *doi*."

Taiyo did not answer and kept her breathing normal, feigning sleep. She wondered what her sister's grouse could be at that time, for she always had a grouse about something; if it was not mistreatment by their father, it was her failure to talk to their father to allow them go back to Nakuru to join the Egerton University. But she had no qualms that night about soothing her sister's sour mood.

It was true that she had promised to approach their father about their possibility of attending university, but it was equally true that an appropriate opportunity had not availed itself. She knew the importance her sister

attached to the subject and did not want, therefore, to rush it. She was aware too that, that afternoon, her attention had been drawn away from the narrow confines of her sister's troubles. Yes, even if it was for a brief moment, when she stood with Joseph Parmuat in their living room, she had felt justifiably separated from her sister. But was that natural? After all, they were not children any more, and very soon they would physically be separated. Each would have to fend for herself. Furthermore, that afternoon, when she listened to the children sing and watched them dance. When she later had an opportunity to talk to Joseph Parmuat about music, she became aware of a restlessness that she would have considered totally alien to her nature. It was as if she stood on the threshold of an unknown room, or on a mountain top, excitedly waiting for the sun to rise at dawn to reveal a breathtakingly beautiful scenery which she had not seen before.

Later that night, lying with her back to her sister, Taiyo allowed her mind to float fleetingly. Like a swift, light cherub, it glided into all directions opening, probing, and analysing recent events in their lives that had been most tormenting. Lying on her back beside her sister, Resian felt Taiyo's warmth and heard her steady breathing, as she stared grimly into the darkness, feeling unhappy, afraid and utterly alone. She too was troubled.

It was a long night for the two girls. The chirp of the insects, the croaking of the frogs and the mournful calls of the night birds, echoed through the dark house as they lay on their bed, each one of them awake but deep in thought.

"Away with the barbaric culture," cried Taiyo bitterly, "Away with the archaic way of life."

She wept until she had no more tears in her eyes, then she sobbed dryly. Was there no guarantee of justice in life? How could she come across the man who she thought would have filled the void in her heart so fittingly and instantly lose him to the ancient doubtful ancestral links? She was angry with everybody in Nasila, but more so with her uncle Simiren who she infuriatingly blamed for ruining her relationship with Joseph Parmuat.

The mere mention of Joseph Parmuat's name evoked delightful feelings that warmly excited her heart. She wondered whether he too could be sleepless at that very hour thinking of her. Did he know before that they were of the same clan and, therefore, forbidden to have any heterosexual links whatsoever? She thought the gross unfairness of the outdated culture was definitely a searing torment to her and to all others who were of progressive minds.

But not all was lost though, she reasoned, a flicker of hope lighting up her sorrowful heart. Within the few minutes they had stood there in the living room, Joseph Parmuat had made two promises: to visit her in their home the following day and if her parents agreed, he would coach her in the traditional music and dance she was so much interested in. And her mother who was then present had said, to her delight, that the young man was welcome to visit them the following day. But for the other request about coaching, her mother had categorically refused to be drawn into it, saying that it was Taiyo's father's territory.

Should Joseph Parmuat fulfill those two promises, she would be utterly satisfied. But all depended on her father.

Resian's situation grew worse. The moment she got beneath the blankets, tears began to run freely. Whether their cause lay in the inescapable loneliness that seemed to stalk her like a lost young leopard, or in the intolerable confusion caused by the ever present insecurity, she could not tell. All she knew was that her world was spinning. Even her bed seemed to be moving.

The pain in her heart was like the bruising aftermath of a blow. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then she exhaled slowly, forcing herself to face the shattering situation that threatened to destroy the world she had known until then. The threat of circumcision was becoming real. Old Ole Musanka had said they should undergo the rite.

She shuddered when she recalled the day the *enkamuratani* visited their house in the company of other village women. She was a thin old woman of about sixty years and of average height whose back and shoulders still stood straight. Unlike the other women who were dressed in traditional *shukas*, she wore a tee shirt that was much too large for her frame, and a heavy, shapeless skirt-like garment. Her gnarled, calloused feet were bare. When Taiyo, burning with curiosity, had asked her to show them her tools of trade, she had sprung up with the agility of a young woman and dashed swiftly to where she had left her bag on the table. After rummaging about among her things, she had fished out a dirty oilskin that she held aloft while she triumphantly, like one who had won a match, grinned and stared at them.

The most startling thing about her, was her eyes. They were clear, bright and inquisitive. They were, obviously, windows of an exceedingly alert mind. What sent shivers right deep into the pit of Resian's stomach, creating a permanent traumatic image in her mind, was the *olmurunya*. That was a bladelike tool shaped like a smoothing plane blade, that she unwrapped out of the oilskin. The *enkamuratani* brandished it aloft with her gnarled, withered claw-like hand. She demonstrated to them the dexterity of her fingers and showed the way she went about her profession of transforming young girls into young women through the cut of *olmurunya*.

Resian did not find it funny. When she thought of the barbaric operation, she felt scared and inched closer to Taiyo who lay there beside her. She thought of the aggressive young man who grinned impudently at them and kept reminding them that they were *intoiye nemengalana*. Would he one day grab them and drag them to *enkamuratani* and let her *olmurunya* transform them into decent women of Nasila? God forbid!

She declared that those withered claw-like hands would only touch her over her dead body! But the only escape route available to them was via her sister who lay there sleeping and breathing quietly. Yet, she had failed her. She was angry with Taiyo for she had trusted her to persuade their father to allow them return to Nakuru and enroll at the Egerton University, but she had not even tried. Nor had she seemed to listen to her fears on the possibility of being abducted and sent to *enkamuratani*.

She would press her sister even more. And with that promise, dawn came, and she rubbed her irritated

swollen red eyes, as the sunlight flooded in and lit all the dark and hidden corners of their bedroom. She stirred and struggled out of bed, grimly set about to begin another day.

Taiyo also stirred. She did not uncover her head, though. She was glad to have a few more minutes under the blankets to collect her thoughts and feelings before facing another day. For after an all but sleepless night in the dark hours, her emotions had alternated alarmingly between an overwhelming and indisputable reckless elation when she thought of Joseph Parmuat and anger, panic and bitterness borne of the disturbing recent events.

It was morning also in the master bedroom and Parsimei was waking up. He lazily turned in his bed, opened his eyes, and yawned: a mighty master's yawn. For a moment, he listened to the birds that chirruped away in the trees that surrounded his house and his heart gladdened. He sent a furtive glance at his wife who was still asleep beside him and smiled at her childlike face as she lay there peacefully. Oh, did he not have a wife there! He was elated. The previous day, she had played her role of hostess admirably. And that had pleased him greatly. He nudged her lightly and she turned and opened her eyes.

"Are you awake, Lanoo-ai?" he called her affectionately. "It's wake-up time, my dear."

"Already?" she asked and yawned sleepily. "That was the shortest night I have known in my life."

"It was because we were all very tired," he said listlessly. "Hosting that ceremony greatly sapped our energy."

"And what an exhausting day!" Mama Milanoi exclaimed yawning and stretching. "I am glad it is now behind us."

"You know, as much as I do, the demands of the culture we have now been ushered into," he said.

Mama Milanoi's mind became alert. Her eyes focused. She opened them wide and paid attention to what her husband was saying. She knew his words could completely change their lives and the lives of their two daughters.

In all those years they had lived in Nakuru and as they raised the girls to maturity, she had known that her husband was not a strict adherent of the Nasila traditions. He had insisted upon the outward observance of those traditions that he considered to be the hallmark of decency. But as he had said, she knew as much as he did the demands of the culture into which they had plunged themselves.

Born and brought up in that culture, she knew the extent of its tentacles. She was aware that as a family, they were already in breach of the tradition for keeping at home their grown up girls as *intoiye nemengalana* instead of transforming them from little girls into young women. That was what happened to her and that was what culture had expected her to do; to prepare her daughters, physically and mentally, to face the challenges of responsible womanhood and motherhood. But there was a dilemma: force the girls to undergo the rituals and lose their faith, love and confidence, or refuse to yield to the tradition and become a pariah in the Ilmolelian clan and Nasila society. It was like the legendary unenviable dilemma that faced a man called

Ole Nkipida who was chased into a deserted hut by a lion, just to be confronted by a hungry python at the door.

"Yes, I know how much is demanded of us, my husband," she said demurely, "but we have to think of the interest of our family first."

"What do you mean?" he asked, suddenly sitting up. "I hope you don't imply that our culture comes second. Do you?"

"Not really, my husband," she said ruefully, beating a hasty retreat. "Our culture is everything and it rules our lives."

"Good," he said authoritatively. "Now listen, you must immediately start counseling the girls to understand their roles as potential wives of the men of Nasila. Prepare them to appreciate and accept their future responsibilities as mothers and home builders."

"I'll do that, my husband," she said quietly.

"One other thing," he said evenly. "I'll ask Simiren to request that young teacher called Parmuat, who is of our clan and therefore a brother to the girls, to find time to teach them a few home truths. After that we shall call *enkamuratani* to play her part before we give them away."

Those were the words, whose utterance she so dreaded. And once uttered, she knew, the words instantly became an inviolable edict. Now that he had spoken, the pain was already harrowing and the torment in her heart unbearable. She was torn between her love for her daughters and her dutiful role of a faithful and obedient wife of Ole Kaelo. But in her culture there was no room for dissent, especially if the subject was in conformity

with the culture. Who would side with her if she were to oppose the cultural rituals?

Her only ally would be the woman the elders of Nasila contemptuously called *entangoroi* or the wasp. Those who honoured her called her *Emakererei*, for she was said to have attended Makerere University in Uganda, where she obtained her degree in Veterinary Science. Mama Milanoi knew her well. Her actual names were Minik ene Nkoitoi. Outside Nasila, she was respected and honoured. At thirty, she was already managing an expansive government sheep ranch reputed to hold hundreds of thousands of sheep, about one hundred kilometers away from Nasila. Under her were hundreds of employees who worked at the ranch.

In Nasila, however, she was regarded as the devil incarnate. She was hated and reviled for criticizing and campaigning vigorously against the traditions that she said abused the rights of the girl child namely girls' circumcision and early marriages. And that had put her in direct collision with the people of Nasila. If she aligned herself with a person who Nasila regarded as having such an obnoxious reputation, where would her marriage stand?

As she lay beside her husband, she gave thought to what they stood for as a family. What did they believe in? Were they traditionalists or were they modernists? In embracing the retrogressive cultural values, were they now progressing or regressing? Although Ole Kaelo had always been arrogant and impolite in his own way, she had discovered right from the time he married her that he had his own unique chivalrous qualities that neutralized his hubris.

However, ever since they returned to Nasila, a new Ole Kaelo was emerging. He was becoming a Nasilian very fast. And in the Nasilian society, women had no say. It was a patriarchal society where the *Emakererei* and her ilk were fighting to find relevance with little success. But what about herself, what was her position? Did she not support female genital mutilation that was prevalent among her people in Nasila? When she was a girl, girls' circumcision was relevant and cherished it. It was a rite of passage. In her days, there was hardly a girl who got pregnant before marriage. At the same time no girl got married before circumcision. And woe unto her who got pregnant before getting circumcised! She was derogatorily referred to as *entaapai*, and she and her family were always held in derision. She was often circumcised at the time of giving birth and married off to the oldest man in the village. Perhaps that was a deterrent to keep girls chaste in mind and body, she thought to herself.

She wondered what her daughters knew about F.G.M. She had never discussed the subject with them and she blamed herself for her failure to do so. But to be fair to herself she reasoned that before the retrenchment of her husband which caused their return to Nasila, F.G.M was a non-issue in her family. She had regarded the practice as an archaic rite that had been discarded and forgotten. But there it was now, rearing its ugly head and threatening to wreak havoc in the young innocent lives of her daughters.

She would have to broach the subject somehow and get to know what the girls had learned from their peers and other sources. One thing she was aware of was

that her daughters did not expect their parents to lead them back through a dark alley, to a retrogressive world of excruciating pain and turmoil. The last thing she would have wished on her daughters was mental torture. Although she knew how difficult it was to change her husband's mind, the least she could do for them was to prepare a soft landing against what appeared to be an inevitable eventuality.

When they finally got up and went to the living room, Mama Milanoi and her husband found a clean, tidy and well arranged room, far from its appearance the night before. Heavy velvet curtains fluttered lazily in the still fresh air of the morning. Taiyo was busy ferrying breakfast from the kitchen to the table, while Resian, fragile and pretty in her velvet and lace morning gown, slumped in an armchair, her nose as always buried in a book; reading.

"Look at that daughter of yours," Ole Kaelo told his wife irritably. "While Taiyo works herself to the bone, she lazes about like an over-fed lizard in the hot afternoon sun."

"Resian-ai," her mother called fondly. "Would you please ... "

"Would you sit up straight like a respectable girl," her father cut in sharply. "Look at the way you slouch and slump in that chair like a good for nothing lout! I'll not be surprised if you soon become a hunchback!"

"Do sit up straight child," her mother added, with a sudden sharp petulance. "Don't get your father angry early in the morning."

Resian scowled her displeasure for being berated but nevertheless closed her book and scurried back to their bedroom.

Later in the day, Ole Kaelo took his wife and daughters to Nasila stores, to show them their brand new business. They were impressed and instantly liked it. The shop had opened for business two days earlier and it was already full of customers.

It was splendid, large and well stocked. The decor was discreetly and fashionably done while taking into consideration the kind of customers that were expected. The mahogany and brass counters and display cases gleamed. The display boards on the walls carried all kinds of tools, accessories and fittings. The tiled floor was polished to a shiny sheen while beveled and etched glass and mirrors nailed on strategic pillars and walls reflected every image and glint of light with sparkling clarity. On a large float in the middle of the shop, a range of dairy equipment was exhibited with masterly craftsmanship; their superior quality complementing perfectly the surroundings that had been created to display them. There were milk pails, milk cans, buckets, and cream separators. Beside them were animal feeds and licks of all brands. Also displayed were herbicides, insecticides, acaricides and fungicides.

Resian, eyeing the splendor with a rather jaundiced eye, nudged her sister and whispered, "All these must have cost *Papaai* a fortune. Need he have done all this? I hope when you finally come round to asking him to send us to the university, he will not say he has spent all his money on this business premises and the stock."

"Surely, Resian, can't you see?" Taiyo whispered back exasperated. "It is important that the shop displays a certain measure of opulence. The customers that *Papaai* wants to attract would not want to shop in a place that resembles a junkyard. Do you remember the shop that *Papaai* took us to in Nakuru when he bought us those dresses and shoes? You loved the grandeur and splendor of the place, did you not? It made you feel special. Well, that is what *Papaai* is trying to create here. Should he say he has spent all his money here, I will understand. And I dare say, it is well spent!"

Resian looked around her. Satisfying customers, or creating a suitable ambience to attract future profits were, to her, much less important than her burning ambition to go to the university. She cast her eyes to the ceiling and then turned and once more looked around her and said nonchalantly. "Well, if you say so, big sister."

In one of the stores, they came across, a tall muscular man of about forty-five, bald-headed and amiable, who Ole Kaelo introduced as the manager. His name was Maison. Ole Kaelo left them in his hands and disappeared into yet another store. Maison, conducted them around, introducing them, with unconcealed pride and pleasure to his staff, who reverently bowed on learning that, that was the family of Ole Kaelo.

At last, Maison led them into a neat office where a young, beautiful secretary ushered them into a small, comfortable office. One wall was book-lined and another entirely taken up by a large metal filing cabinet, its drawers precisely labelled and lettered. The papers on the large oval desk were tidily stacked, as were the magazines on a nearby table upon which stood a framed

family colour photograph; taken when the girls were still young. Everything was neat and well-ordered. Without much explanation the girls knew it was their father's office.

It was while they were in Ole Kaelo's comfortable office that Mama Milanoi revealed their father's consent to Taiyo's request to be coached by Joseph Parmuat. Taiyo was enthralled.

That evening when they got home, Joseph Parmuat visited them. The moment he appeared at their door, the three Ole Kaelo women instantly liked him: his broad smile, his hearty chuckle, his uproarious rich pearls of laughter and his unbridled sense of humor were some of his most endearing qualities.

When Joseph Parmuat entered their house, she stood back and watched as he was immediately drawn into the small intimate circle of their mother's attention. The girls had always known that their mother had an adroitness that made any man who approached her a part of that charming world of hers. Seeing how their mother monopolized him Taiyo could not, for a moment, suppress a surge of envy. Of course she knew the envy was misplaced, for only recently, since the advent of her own womanhood, had she begun to understand her mother and herself. And even Resian, the ever gloomy pessimist of the Kaelo family, was laughing and talking excitedly beside their mother, looking up teasingly into the face of their newly acquired brother. It seemed as if the three Ole Kaelo women had hatched a female conspiracy, of which Joseph Parmuat seemed to be enjoying tremendously, as any man would.

They were about to settle in their seats when they heard a knock. A man they had not seen before entered and greeted them confidently. Without waiting to be invited, he proceeded to find a seat. But that was not queer for it was in line with the Nasilian hospitality where every house was open to all sojourners. The girls looked askance at the man they considered an intruder. He was a quiet, well-built man of thirty or so. He wore a brown pair of trousers and a blue shirt that was not particularly neat. Taiyo thought there was something impersonal about his offhand attitude.

Until he told them what he wanted, or what he was up to, Mama Milanoi and her daughters had to contend with accommodating two incompatible guests in their living room.

CHAPTER SIX

Whether it was by coincidence or by prior arrangement, the girls could not tell. But as soon as they had finished serving supper to Joseph Parmuat and the stranger, their father came into the house through the back door. He greeted the two men with little enthusiasm and proceeded to the living room. As was their habit, when their father came into the living room, the girls quickly gathered the dishes, tidied the table and instantly disappeared into the kitchen.

No sooner had they gone into the kitchen than their mother summoned them; their father wanted to speak to them. The girls immediately looked up at their mother enquiringly, apprehensive of the rare summon. Their father usually preferred talking to them through their mother. With trepidation, they trooped back to the living room, steeling themselves to hear whatever he had to say.

The father sat in his armchair facing the fireplace while their mother sat at the end of the sofa. The girls went to sit next to their mother. Joseph Parmuat sat in an armchair not very far from their father and the stranger had not left the dining table where he sat alone.

When he began to speak, their father did not address them directly. Instead he addressed Joseph Parmuat. The girls knew their father well. He liked to address issues and expound on them in order to impress points upon his audience. And he was always impressive when he made his speeches. When they lived in Nakuru, he often took them to official functions or special

occasions, and they loved to listen to his pompous speeches.

So after meandering and digressing, in the process telling Parmuat of the difficulties he encountered going to school and how he began to plan for his own future very early in his life, he finally came to the point.

"These children may not know," he said suddenly turning his attention to his daughters. "They may not know and I want to tell them now, that you are their brother. You are no lesser a brother to them than their own mother's son would have been. You are my son as much as their mother's son would have been my son. Perhaps their mother has already told them, and if she has not, she will tell them tonight that Parmuat's family and Kaelo's family are one. We are all of Ilmolelian clan, of Iloorasha-kineji sub-clan."

He told Joseph Parmuat that he had brought up his daughters well. They were well behaved and that he was proud of them. However, having been away from Nasila all their lives, they had missed out on the basic cultural values that harmonised the lives of Nasila people.

In addition to what they learnt at school or in addition to what they were yet to learn through books, he stressed, it was imperative that they learned habits, traditions and their culture that would make their parents and the Nasila people proud of them. He added that, although he considered the girls intelligent, there was need for them to develop into responsible mature women of the future. That was necessary, he said emphatically, because there was nothing better that parents looked forward to, than to see their children settle in their own homes. He had hastened to add that although, at their

age they might consider what he was saying as ridiculously irrelevant, he knew by experience that there was nothing better than beginning to plan for one's future early. He warned the girls that they might find a few cultural demands obnoxious but they would have to be stoic and accept them with the understanding that it was those not-too-pleasant traditions that nurtured and bound their people together. "And those families that had refused to rejoin their people," he added thoughtfully, "had been blasted into smithereens by alien cultures."

"It should never happen to us," he concluded dramatically.

When their mother spoke to them later, emphasising what their father had told them, they wore blank faces and deliberately concealed their reaction. She therefore, did not realise that they held extremely divergent views.

That was the most exciting news that Taiyo had received ever since they came to Nasila. She was exultant. Although their father never for once mentioned that Joseph Parmuat was to coach her in traditional music and dance, the fact that he had allowed them to interact with him filled her heart with joy. She could hardly hide her elation. Even the repeated assertion that Joseph Parmuat was their brother by virtue of their cultural links, failed to daunt her spirit. Was she simply infatuated with him? If she was, she hoped the feeling would soon simmer down. What pleased her most, however, was that she now had a confidant whom she could ask some of those embarrassing questions that she could not dare ask her mother or anybody else.

It was, however, different for Resian. Deep right into her heart she was seething with ire. It irked her terribly to have had to listen to their father as he prepared them for a journey that she thought was to lead them back to the stone-age era. She scornfully dismissed the cultural coaching that Joseph Parmuat was to undertake as worthless. She likened the whole saga to a grown-up person whose mind degenerated into an idiot and had to content with playing with mud. It was utter foolishness!

"It may not be as bad as you imagine, little sister," Taiyo said, trying to mollify her angry sister, "maybe by the time brother Parmuat is through with us, we shall be the wiser."

"Wiser indeed!" jeered Resian, "Yes, by the time he shall be through with us, we shall have been taught a great lesson in stoicism. We won't blink or wince even as *enkamuratani* mutilates our sexuality into smithereens!"

After they got to their bedroom, Taiyo poured tea from a flask that she carried from the kitchen, into two cups. She handed one to Resian who took it without raising her eyes. Taiyo was already aware of the tension between them. In all their lives, only twice had they had a serious quarrel. On each of those occasions, Taiyo recalled, the hurt had been exacerbated by the breaking of a bond that had always been so firm as to be unquestioned. But the two had a resilient character and no sooner had they quarreled than they were reconciled. The problem that time round was that they did not see things in the same light. Whereas she was also happy that they now had Joseph Parmuat as a brother who they would interact with and discuss some of the perplexing

questions that bedevilled them, Resian suspected that Taiyo would use her newly acquired acquaintance with him to marginalize her. And she was not ready to be abandoned by her sister.

Resian lay, much later in the night, fully clothed except for shoes and a jacket, listening to her sister's slight and delicate snores next to her underneath the blankets. She turned and took her by the shoulder and rocked her slightly.

"Taiyo-e-yeiyo, are you asleep?"

She heard Taiyo move and turn to face her. Then she dimly saw her as she lifted herself upon her elbow to level herself with her. And on her part, Resian leaned forward, speaking very softly. "I'm disturbed," she said. "I'm beginning to think it is disadvantageous being a woman in this society.

"For heaven's sake, Resian," exclaimed Taiyo, making a small sound, affectionate and exasperate. "Is it worth staying awake the whole night thinking of such mundane things?"

"Call them mundane," Resian pursued relentlessly. "But I keep wondering what would have happened had we been sons. Do you think father would have looked for a clan sister to coach us and take us through the dim cultural paths of Nasila?"

"Resian, honestly, I don't know any better than you. But, your guess is just as good as mine. Most likely we would have been let loose to romp about in the village and gather our experiences as we go along."

"Exactly!" Resian said bitterly. "Yes, because we are females, a male in the name of a clan brother is sought to come along and teach us the 'a b c d' of a good

Nasilian wife so that we shall please our future husbands. No, I refuse to be taught. I will either be taught at the university what is universally beneficial to all mankind or be taught nothing!"

The following afternoon, when Joseph Parmuat came to visit them, the mysterious stranger also came. He wore a shabby, black-woolen-suit and a clean but wrinkled white shirt. He had had a haircut and his previously bushy moustache had been trimmed. Even his muddy shoes had been cleaned and polished to a bright black sheen. He came carrying on his shoulder, a hindquarter of mutton wrapped up in a khaki brown paper. Mama Milanoi received the meat gratefully. That had become the man's habit. He would disappear only to saunter in like the owner of the house two days later, bringing with him either a bag of flour, a bag of sugar, a quarter of mutton or a large bundle of lamb chops. He would hand over his gifts to Mama Milanoi quietly and because the house was always frequented by visitors, any additional food stuff was always welcome.

Later the girls came to know that the stranger was known as Olarinkoi. Whether their father had known him before, they could not tell. What they came to acknowledge was that their father had accepted the strange man's presence in his home graciously. And soon the man made his stay useful and his services invaluable and indispensable. He would often come very early in the morning to tend the flower gardens and slash the grass on the lawn. By the time they gathered for breakfast, he would be sitting silently ready to eat with them as if he was a member of the family. And although the girls hardly ever spoke to him, they had, nevertheless,

become completely accustomed to his presence. They strangely counted him as one of them when preparing meals.

On his part, Olarinkoi acted almost indifferently towards Taiyo and Resian. He directed his attention to their parents. What perplexed the girls was his ever silent presence in their house. He was always there, sitting quietly and staring unblinkingly, like a leopard would while stealthily stalking an antelope.

Joseph Parmuat did not like Olarinkoi. The two hardly acknowledged one another's presence and most of the time they did not even exchange greetings. But when Joseph Parmuat discussed a subject with the girls, Olarinkoi would listen keenly to what he was telling them. Once in a while he would butt in and give his unsolicited advice or his own version of a story.

The following day at about eleven o'clock in the morning, Taiyo, Resian and their mother were in the kitchen peeling potatoes in preparation for lunch. They were joined by the girls' aunt, *yeyo-botorr*, who, after greetings, also took a knife and began peeling the potatoes with them. Even as they peeled potatoes, each girl had her own other assignment that went along simultaneously with what they were doing. Taiyo was cooking a meat stew. She took great care in its preparation, ensuring that all the necessary ingredients were in proper proportions. The heat was also regulated so that the meat fried gently in its own fat until it was deliciously golden brown, before adding chopped coriander, tomatoes, onions and a little bit of curry powder to make a tasty rich thick gravy. Any time she

added a little water, she threw in a pinch of salt and tasted the gravy to make sure that the taste was just right.

Resian had already cooked the rice that was now simmering slowly at one corner of the kitchen. She had already placed live charcoal on the lid of the *sufuria* so that the heat emanated from the top as well as from its bottom.

"What a diligent pair of workers you have here my *enkaini*," said *yeiyo-botorr* genuine praise of the girls, "and they are wonderful cooks too!"

"Whom would they take after if they are not good workers?" Mama Milanoi asked equally cheerful. "Their father is a diligent worker and so am I. When they eventually get married and are accused of laziness, or when their husbands complain that they can't prepare tasty meals, they will not blame us."

"No one can accuse us of laziness," cut in Taiyo happily, her spirit buoyed up by her aunt's praise. "And *yeiyo* here has been our ever resourceful teacher." "That is as it should be," *yeiyo-botorr* enthused, "We were taught by our mothers who were also taught by their mothers, and so on and on back to the time we ascended the Kerio Valley."

"I have no problem acquiring more knowledge, skills and even specialised experience," Resian said in a defiant tone that had Taiyo squirming with apprehension.

I have no problem at all and I thank *yeiyo* for her untiring effort in teaching us. But my question is: do we go to all these lengths to please some lazy bunch of busybodies who do nothing but lounge about in the living rooms, yawning and stretching, waiting for tasty food to land on the table before them? No, I refuse to be

taught to solely please male counterparts. They can also cook, and they can, and should also learn to please us females. Period!"

Yeiyo-botorr was shocked. Mama Milanoi was dumbfounded and was at a complete loss for words. Taiyo stared at her sister in consternation. "Resian-*siake*-!" pleaded Taiyo "Please give respect to *yeiyo botorr* and stop your uncalled for tirade.

"But surely, Resian," her mother said, regaining her composure. "Have you no respect for your father who is also male? What have gotten into you, child, lately?" Turning to the girl's aunt, she added "*enkaini, Yeiyo-botorr*, this child was not like this before we came here. I don't know what has gone wrong."

"Nothing is wrong with me," Resian retorted furiously. And pointing at the living room with her finger, she fiercely charged, "I have no quarrel with my father for whom, I have tremendous respect. It is the likes of Olarinkoi I am mad at, and all those other males who come here ordering us to do that or the other for them, simply because they are males. When women visit us, they give us the leeway to respond to their requests. But as we burn our fingers here, Mr. Olarinkoi is dozing off comfortably in our living room waiting for his lunch and possibly a little angry and impatient with us for delaying it."

"It is enough," cried *yeiyo-botorr* viciously. She instantly abandoned the peeling of potatoes and threw the knife into the pail that held the peeled potatoes. Supporting herself by holding onto a nearby wall, she painfully lifted her large, heavy body. "My *enkaini*, I agree with you that something is wrong with our child.

And I think I know what ails her. Come along with me and I will tell you what I think ails her."

"I'm not sick ... " Resian was saying when she was cut short by Taiyo.

"Even if you are not sick, you cannot argue with *yeiyo-botorr*," Taiyo told her sternly as soon as they were out of earshot of their mother and *yeiyo-botorr*, "there are things one has to learn on their own. One of them is that you cannot antagonise the older people by arguing with them, however, untenable their argument may be. That goes without saying, my dear little sister."

"I know what's wrong with your daughter," *yeiyo-botorr* told Mama Milanoi harshly as they walked out of the house, "Your daughter has *Olkuenyi*. You know what that is! It's a bad spirit. And it is in her blood. You can now see the danger of keeping *intoiye nemengalana* at home. It's not healthy and it is neither in the interest of the children nor their parents. To hide a boil that is under the armpit is unwise, for sooner or later it will burst and emit a foul smell. It is time to circumcise your daughters and get rid of *Olkuenyi*. It is that simple." And she was gone.

Resian's outburst troubled both her mother and her sister Taiyo. Mama Milanoi considered what her *enkaini* had said about the bad spirit called *olkuenyi* and she shuddered with apprehension. She knew what *olkuenyi* was.

In Nakuru, where she had been, the town people would have called it *kisirani*. It was always regarded as an ominous harbinger to a terrible thing. It was said to be contagious and, therefore, one with *olkuenyi* was shunned like the plague. The myth that by spilling blood

through circumcision the ill-spirit could be purged away, once and for all, was not new to her.

When she was young, a lot of diseases and especially those which could not be properly diagnosed were managed through a blood-letting treatment known as *angam*. In that practice, several nicks were made on the ailing sections of the body and the blood sucked out. She wondered whether she should tell her husband about her enkaini's diagnosis of their daughter's ailment. She would not be surprised if he summoned the enkamuratani the first thing the following morning with her *olmurunya*, and have the job done forthwith. If that happened, she knew it would terribly hurt the girls.

Although Taiyo did not like Olarinkoi, she did not hate him. She just did not care a hoot whether he ate or slept hungry. She wondered why her sister Resian hated him with such passion. And thinking of the man, she wondered who he was. Their father did not indicate that he was of their clan Ilmolelian, the way he told them about Joseph Parmuat. Who was he then? What was his background? And what was he doing in their home day in day out? Although he did odd jobs in their compound, Taiyo knew he was not an employee, and in fact when their father wanted a thorough job done at the compound, he always hired a man to do it. And obviously the occasional foodstuff that he brought into the house could not be the reason that made their father tolerate him. She knew their father was well-off and did not depend on the miserly bundles of food that Olarinkoi occasionally brought into their house. What was his mission in their home?

When Joseph Parmuat came in that afternoon, Taiyo enquired about Olarinkoi. In his usual jocular manner, he first roared with hearty laughter. Then he asked her whether any of them had fallen in love with him. Taiyo joined in the cheerful laughter interjecting to say it was much easier to fall in love with a creepy cold serpent than to fall for the likes of Olarinkoi, Joseph Parmuat said he knew two people who went by the name of Olarinkoi. He knew the person who sat in their sitting room and knew of another who went by that name who lived more than one hundred and fifty years before. "Which of the two do you want to know about?" he asked in his usually humorous way. "Don't ask me if they are related, for I have no idea."

"Tell me about the two," said Taiyo cheerfully, curiosity taking the better of her. "Hope the one who lived more than one hundred and fifty years ago did not have a tail and lived on trees like a monkey!"

"To the contrary, my dear sister," Joseph Parmuat chuckled, tickled by Taiyo's *comic* description. "The older fellow *is* more defined than the one we know physically."

"Tell me about the one we know physically," she said excitedly, her anticipation of an exciting story firing her curiosity, "and then you may tell me about the legendary one later."

He told her the much he knew about Olarinkoi, The man was a mystery. Nobody seemed to know him well. A man who thought he knew something about him said he was of Ilukumae clan and came from a place called Polonga, about two hundred kilometers from Nasila. Another who thought he knew him better

disagreed. He said he thought the man belonged to the Itaro-sero clan and that he came from a place called Enooloitikoishi, not far from where that woman who Nasila people demonized and called her a wasp, managed a government sheep ranch. A third person said he knew him very well and that he was of Ilmolelian clan but an Olkirikoi, a good for nothing wanderer who survived by ingratiating himself with the rich, offering to do odd jobs for them. A fourth person dismissed all the rest and described Olarinkoi as a useless sycophant who changed allegiance to clans as often as a chameleon changed its colour.

"Who do you think Olarinkoi, is then?" he asked Taiyo in jest amidst uproarious laughter. "Tell me, girl who is he?"

"He is the typical Nasilian gentleman," she said shaking with laughter. "Yes, a little of him is sprinkled upon the lives of all of you, Nasilian men!"

"I hope you are joking," he said seriously. "It's tragic if that is the way you judge all of us." "More or less," she answered jokingly. "But that is beside the point. Now that we have failed to place the present day Olarinkoi, tell me about the old Olarinkoi. Maybe by understanding the old we may come to know the present and possibly know the one who will emerge in future."

Taiyo sat quietly as Joseph Parmuat narrated the moving story of the legendary Olarinkoi.

The saga of the extremely brutal and despotic rule of Olarinkoi and his tyrannical warriors that were known as *Ilarinkon*, remained permanently etched in the collective psyche of the Maa people. Although it was

estimated that the infamous invasion took place between a hundred and fifty and two hundred years earlier, the Maa people were brutalized in such bestial cruelty that, after so many years men still burned with fury while women cried with shame when they were reminded of what befell their ancestors. And to ensure that the tragic history of that dark period was never forgotten, the oppression that was visited upon them by the tyrants was always vividly described, so that the struggle to free themselves from the yoke of that tyranny became a painful reminder of what can become of a people caught napping by the enemy.

The despot was said to have belonged to a splinter group of the Maa people that were left down Kerio Valley, when the ladder that they had used to scale the edge of the precipice broke halfway, sending those who had not ascended hurtling down the cliffs. It was not known when the Ilarinkon re-ascended, but it was thought to be not less than fifty years after the first ascension. They were said to have been so frustrated by their inability to ascend that when they finally managed to climb over the precipice, they were so stressed that they looked for anyone upon whom to redirect their frustration. By that time, their language had slightly changed and their warriors were heavily built on account of the daily exercises their bodies were subjected to as they built a new ladder, and scaled the edges of the cliff to put the ladder in place.

The spies that Olarinkoi had dispatched to gather intelligence on the Maa people immediately reported back to him that they found expansive land, lush with green grass, and luscious fruits of all kinds that hung

down fruit-trees ready to be plucked. Wild animals roamed the lands freely and thousands upon thousands of Maa people's cattle and sheep grazed lazily upon green pastures that stretched to the horizon. But of the people, only old men, women and children were living in the villages. No single moran was sighted.

They learnt that the Maa *morans* had gone to an *enjore* - a major raid that *morans* undertook from time to time, as an escapade meant to keep themselves fit for battle and at the same time to intimidate the neighbours. In such raids, they did not spare any young men they came across and they brought in all the cattle they could drive back.

It was after getting the report, that Olarinkoi and his men struck. Although they were met with little resistance, that did not deter them from visiting their frustration upon the people of Maa. The raid was executed with such lightning speed that within days they had subdued the entire countryside and caused such mayhem and destruction as had never been witnessed by the people of Maa; it was simply a blood bath. They slaughtered any male in their path, brutalised women and children and burnt down homesteads. Remnants of the male survivors were so intimidated that, nudged by survival instincts, they had to quickly lay strategies in order to save their lives. They discarded their male clothings and ornaments and put on women's wrap-ons called Olokesena and hang on their extended earlobes, ornamental coils of copper wire known as *isurutia* that were normally worn by old women or by circumcision initiates who were recuperating. That they did to

disguise their identities and pass as women instead of men in order to escape death.

Luck was not with the Maa warriors. For once, their *Oloiboni* who had always prophesied their success during the *enjore*, had guessed wrongly this time round. They were shocked to find the people they had gone to raid armed to the teeth waiting for them in the hills away from their villages. They engaged them in a fierce battle and many of the Maa warriors were killed and others injured. And those who returned did not drive back any cattle.

The Maa *morans* upon returning home were immediately confronted by the hostile, battle-hardened warriors of Olarinkoi. As they descended Iltepes hills, they could see files after files of the tall muscular Ilarinkon *morans*, resplendent in their red ochre-soaked *shukas*. Tall monkey-skin headgear swayed on their heads as they walked. They carried their heavy decorated shields, while their long spears gleamed in the shimmering hot afternoon sun. The jingles fastened onto their thighs made a terrifying clanging sound. This heightened the fearful foreboding that hung in the air.

It was obvious that the Maa warriors were disadvantaged. They had been demoralised by the recent defeat and weakened by the long trek back home. Some of them were nursing injuries, while all of them were hungry and thirsty. From where they were, they could see that they were terribly outnumbered by their adversaries. So when the two sides finally locked horns, the battle was brutal, brief and conclusive. The Maa

warriors were predictably defeated and resoundingly vanquished.

Buoyed up by their victory, the Ilarinkon warriors rounded up all the Maa people and assembled them on a hill so as to intimidate them and thereafter introduce them to their new ruler. It was then that Olarinkoi suddenly emerged from a nearby thicket. If his dramatic appearance was meant to shock the Maa people, then it more than did it! They were not only shocked by the towering giant that sauntered swaggeringly towards them, but his terrifying appearance sent shivers right down into their hearts.

The man was more of a monster than human. He was about eight feet tall and his entire body, save for the face, was hairy. The hair on his head, that was known as *oltaika*, that shimmered with oily red ochre, was thick and long and flowed flawlessly down to his shoulders. And his frame was so thick that three men standing behind him could not be visible to a person standing in front of him.

He demonstrated the strength of his large hands by grabbing two Maa men who stood shivering before him, and holding them by their necks, he forcibly squeezed their throats, instantly choking them. He then threw down their lifeless bodies onto the ground. He grinned with glee and glanced around him, his fierce, piercing, unsmiling eyes sending even more shivers to those he directed the beam. The women squirmed and gasped while the men ground their teeth with impotent fury.

The people were gripped by more fear when his spear, carried for him by two men, each holding it by

one end, was brought to him. It was about ten feet high and its blade was as wide as a machete. Its handle was as thick as the arm of an average man. He pointed it at the men and the women screamed with terror, pleading that he be merciful and spare their men. He relented. But it was his shield that was most scary. It was so huge that it was carried by four men. In the background thousands upon thousands of red *shuka-clad* and strong-bodied Ilarinkon warriors stood holding their weapons menacingly. Their sight alone, subdued the entire Maa population.

It was then that the man spoke. Making his demands, he emphatically told them he would brook no nonsense. He would wreak more havoc if they failed to fulfill and carry out his orders in full. From that day on, he ordered in a booming thunderous voice, that his men would be handed fifty bulls to slaughter every day. Ten cows out of every hundred that each family owned were to be brought to him immediately. Thereafter, one calf out of ten born, must be surrendered to him. All women who were of child bearing age were to make themselves available to entertain the Ilarinkon warriors when called upon to do so.

All the Maa were dumbfounded and at the same time bitter. They held meeting after meeting to find ways to resist the perplexing demands but they did not find any workable solution to counter them.

The women were most perturbed. They were forced to compose lewd songs which they had to perform in the most outrageous and indecent postures and styles. But what angered them most was that

mothers had to perform the offensive dances with their daughters.

On their part, the Ilarinkon warriors exploited their unassailable position to abuse the women. In their terribly obnoxious manners, they made bawdy jokes that demeaned the women. And they perplexed them when they teasingly provoked them knowing that they were not able to resist their natural instinctive desires, aroused by their immoral and repugnant suggestive moves made before them. And the women hated themselves for their apparent inability to refuse to give in to those desires that the ill-mannered Ilarinkon exploited with malicious hilarity.

The women held meetings all over the country searching for answers. After years of searching, one woman declared that she had located within herself, the source of that salacity that caused the involuntary gravitation towards men when provoked. After debating for long, the Maa women finally said they had found the answer to their perplexity. And when the solution was tried it worked perfectly. They then made a lasting resolution and celebrated its birth with song and dance. And it was from that resolution collectively made by women of Maa, that gave birth to *enkamuratani*. And her *olmurunya* was shaped, sharpened and handed to her. Many years later, after being subjected to all kinds of barbarities by the Ilarinkon, the Maa people eventually revolted and overthrew the Olarinkoi despotic rule. They killed Olarinkoi and liberated themselves, taking back the leadership of their country.

And long after the Olarinkoi and his warriors were gone, the institution that their misrule forced upon

the Maa women was still strong and kicking." Joseph Parmuat said triumphantly and ended his story.

"Oh God!" exclaimed Taiyo, shocked, "is that a true story?"

"It is a true story," Joseph Parmuat confirmed seriously. "And it has been handed down from generation to generation with very little added to it. If you want to know, that was the origin of the so called Female Genital Mutilation that the likes of *Emakererei* have devoted their lives to fight."

"Resian and I are soon joining her to fight the repugnant ritual," Taiyo said equally serious.

"I'll join you too," he said roaring with laughter. "But direct your fire at the right target. It is the women and not men who founded what eventually became a tradition. And it is only women who would end it if they so desired."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Resian was still waiting for her sister to speak to their father over their enrolment at the Egerton University. It had been a frustrating long wait, but she was still optimistic that sooner or later, her sister would catch their father in an agreeable mood. She had given up on her mother who, after several attempts to draw her into their scheme, had proved to be cleverly evasive.

On that particular day, Resian was overly optimistic. That morning, Taiyo had left for the shop in the company of their father. She had excitedly promised Resian that if all went well, she would definitely bring up the subject of their enrolment at Egerton University. So, as she worked with her mother in the kitchen, Resian's heart warmed up with pleasant expectations. She let her spirit float fleetingly into the fanciful world of beautiful things. That was the world of *yote yawezekana*, a popular song of the day that cooed to say, all things were possible. In her mind, she imagined herself already admitted at the university and walking majestically with other students into one of those awesome lecture theatres, while donning her academic regalia. Her reverie was, however, cut short by her mother's introduction of a subject she least expected her to broach.

"My daughter," she called unexpectedly, while stirring her pot of ugali. "Have you ever heard of something called F.G.M?"

"Female Genital Mutilation? Why, yes, not only have I heard of it," Resian replied her eyes wide open with surprise. "I know about it. Why do you ask?"

"In Nakuru, this was not a subject that concerned us much. But in Nasila, it is on every lip."

"Yes, that's very true," Resian said trying to entice her mother to say more. "The other day Taiyo learnt from Joseph Parmuat that female circumcision was initiated by women themselves about two hundred years earlier. And that it was as a result of sexual abuse and harassment by an invading despot called Olarinkoi and his warriors. Is that true, *Yeiyoy*? I thought it was one of those myths that were created by men to blame women for everything that works against them."

"What Joseph Parmuat told Taiyo is factually correct," her mother told her confidently. "It was the shame and anger that was provoked by Ilarinkon taunts, lewd teasing and provocative posturing that made the women do what they did to curtail those desires the worthless predators exploited to prey upon them." "That may have been true then;" Resian said looking directly into her mother's eyes. "But what is the reason for doing it today? Ilarinkon are no longer with us, or are they?"

"The original Ilarinkon may have gone," her mother said unconvincingly, "but other Ilarinkon are still with us."

"Exactly!" said Resian triumphantly. "Yes, it's the latter day Ilarinkon who are wreaking havoc on us women. Surely *Yeiyoy*, if one discovered a nasty but potent medicine that once taken cured an ailment, must they continue to swallow it every day - ten years down the line. I find that absurd. The sensible thing would be to discard the bitter medicine once people are cured. Period! Tell me *Yeiyoy*, what use is F.G.M to today's

woman?" "Are you suggesting that it is men who continue to perpetuate this cultural rite?" her mother asked perplexed by her daughter's argument.

"Yes, they are creators of the labyrinth that the women continue to meander around," she said philosophically. "Even if I am reluctantly convinced that it was women and not men who initiated that obnoxious ritual, who provoked the women to do so? The Ilarinkon who were purported to have pushed women into mutilating their sexuality were men. And the ancient Ilarinkon were no different from today's Ilarinkon. The ancient Ilarinkon were sadists and despotic. Today's Ilarinkon are worse. In addition to being despotic, they are oppressive tyrants; 'and one of their ways of oppressing us is to demand that F.G.M be perpetuated against us forever!"

A loud knock at the door disrupted their conversation. Before they could respond, there was another knock. Only this time, short urgent raps made in insistent quick succession followed.

"See who it is," her mother told her, happy to get rid of her. She rued the moment she introduced that explosive subject.

Although she had got used to people knocking at any time, that particular knock nearly angered Resian. Why should anybody butt in when she and her mother were carrying out a fruitful discussion? It was rare for her mother to open up to that extent and she would have wished to bring up other issues that required such frankness. Muttering under her breath, she quickly walked from the kitchen through the living room to the outer hall and opened the front door.

A man stood at the doorway, briefcase in hand. He was tall, broad-shouldered and he wore a blue business suit, white shirt and a light blue tie. The muscles of his arms bulged under the sleeves of his coat. His face, above his closely trimmed beard and moustache, was brown and leathery; possibly from exposure to the sun and wind. He had a wide mouth from which protruded two long upper teeth with a wide gap between them, making him look like a warthog. She did not like his long slanting eyes. His pierced and extended earlobes hang comically down his neck, each loop seeming to beg for something to be hooked over it. "Is this the home of Parsimei Ole Kaelo?" the man asked in a cold, sharp voice.

"Yes it is," answered Resian in a subdued voice, an ominous feeling creeping into her heart. "What can I do for you?"

"I have come to see him," he said authoritatively and took a step into the house. In an arrogantly confident manner, he asked, "is he in?"

"No he's not in at the moment," Resian answered also taking a step forward to block him. She hoped he would go away. She added impatiently. "He's probably at the shop in town."

"He's not there," the man said emphatically, shaking his head, "I have just come from there."

He peered at Resian. Those slanting black eyes had slid from her face and were now deliberately scanning her body. A creepy sensation sent shivers down her spine.

"Would you want to come back later when my father is back?" Resian asked hoping that the detestable

man would not stay. "No one knows what time he might come back."

"No, I'll rather wait," he said confidently. "I am very sure your father would be very happy to find me here." As if he had just remembered something, he cleared his throat and told her importantly, "By the way, my name is Oloisudori. Yes Mr. Edward Oloisudori Loonkiyaa." He waited for a moment, obviously expecting her to recognise those important names. Seeing that she did not react to the mention of the names, he said again insistently, "just wait until you see how happy Ole Kaelo will be when he finds me waiting for him in his house." Suddenly, his voice becoming softer and almost intimate, he whispered, "I'll be happy to tell him what a hospitable daughter he has." "Who else is here in the house?"

"My mother," Resian answered nonchalantly.

"Perhaps you will tell her that I am here to see your father."

"I'll do ..." Resian said impatiently as she stepped back. But before she could complete her statement, he had brushed past her in one swift movement that nearly caught her off-balance. In a flash, he had pushed his way into the living room and as he passed by her, she certainly felt the fingers of his lifted hand graze the fullness of her breast. With a surge of outraged embarrassment, she glared at him viciously. She muttered inaudibly, "what an ill-mannered devil this man is!" And as she fled to the kitchen she felt those black eyes, sharp and probing, moving like creepy fingers upon her back.

Her mother was stirring a vegetable stew when Resian entered, and she glanced abstractedly at her. "Who was that?" she asked.

"A man who says his name is Oloisudori," she said acidly. "He says he has come to see *Papaai*."

"Oloisudori? Let me see ... Oloisudori?" her mother said repeatedly, rolling her eyes to the ceiling as she tried to place the name. Failing to remember where she had heard that name, she shook her head, "No, I don't think I know a man by that name."

"Whoever he is, *Yeiyoy*" said Resian angrily, "he is a mannerless old man!"

"Check your tongue, child!" her mother rebuked her harshly. "Soon you are going to disgrace your father by the way you speak. Didn't you see the way you horrified your *yeiyoy-botorr* the other day when you spoke like one with a demented spirit? You must bridle your tongue. Be careful of what you say, otherwise you will soon be called *enadua-kutuk*."

"I am sorry, *Yeiyoy*" said Resian remorsefully. "But surely, *yeiyoy*, mustn't one mention the despicable character of an old man who behaves badly before a girl young enough to be his daughter?"

"However disreputable the man may be," her mother warned her, "be careful Resian. We don't know what connection the man has with your father and it would be catastrophic if your tongue would be the one to sever his relations with other men. Go to the living room and tell him I'm busy preparing lunch. Get him a cup of tea or something else to drink and make him comfortable before your father comes. I am sure he will be here soon."

Reluctantly, Resian took a flask that contained tea and a cup and slowly walked back to the living room. The moment she reappeared, Resian saw Oloisudori crane his neck, watching her. She quickly placed the flask and cup on the table and her hands automatically flew to the buttons of her blouse that she suddenly felt, from the look in his eyes, must have been unbuttoned. But she found them intact.

"It must have taken long for you to decide whether to give me a cup of tea?" he said sarcastically. The man's words shocked Resian and she backed away from him. In the process, she collided with a nearby coffee table and nearly lost her balance.

"Sorry," she said regaining her balance and composure. "But we always serve tea to our visitors even when our mother has not told us to do so."

"In that case, I must apologize for my mistaken thought," Oloisudori said as he took the cup of tea. He let a small suggestive silence grow between them before saying, "I'm indeed sorry, pretty lady." Then he smiled at her; a demonic and intrusive smile.

For the very few minutes she stood before him, she felt his black languorous eyes move up and down her face and body with a relentless intimacy that nearly immobilized her with embarrassment. She felt as if his hands were all over her body caressing her against her will. She even felt angry with herself, when she reasoned that by standing there she was encouraging him to humiliate her. But somehow, it was as if he had hypnotized her, for as much as she had wanted to flee, she found her feet rooted to the spot. As inexperienced as she was in the way men behaved, she could tell from

his smile his pleasure in her obvious fear and confusion. And instinctively, she sensed cruelty in him. Sweat trickled down her stomach, broke out on her face, before becoming clammy on her cheeks. She shook her head as if to check whether she was really awake.

"*Yeiy*o told me to tell you," she said, like one who was awakening from sleep, "she's busy preparing lunch. She asks that you make yourself comfortable and wait for *Papaai*. He is about to come."

"Very well," he said authoritatively and then added quickly in a changed soft voice. "By the way, you haven't told me your name."

"Resian," she whispered.

"What a beautiful name," he said once more in his intimate voice, his huge, slanting eyes probing her, stripping her naked, assessing her, shaming her and judging her. "Resian *ene* Kaelo," he added.

Just then, Resian heard her father talking to someone outside. She all but ran to the kitchen to announce to her mother that her *Papaai* had come then she rushed back across the living room, down along the corridor that led to the small hall, to the door. She clumsily threw the door open and collided head on with her father.

"Have you run amok, child?" her father asked irritably aghast at Resian's queer behaviour. "Why do you run like one who has seen an apparition?"

"I'm sorry, *Papaai*," she said with utter embarrassment.

"There's a man in our living room who has come to see you."

"Is he a cannibal that you have to run away from him so recklessly?" he asked sarcastically and then

added acidly, "sometimes your behaviour borders on imbecility. Who is he?"

"He says his name is Oloisudori," she said in a subdued voice, her eyes downcast.

"Oh, my God!" her father exclaimed under his breath, straightening up, his eyes suddenly dilating widely. "Oloisudori of all people! Oh my God! I wonder what has gone wrong for him to come looking for me!"

"I don't know, *Papaa*," Resian said concernedly, worried at the turn of events. "He was saying ..."

Her father ignored her. Brushing past her, he strode briskly into the living room with both his arms outstretched in front of him, ready to embrace his visitor.

"Oloisudori Loonkiyaa!" he called out loudly, laughing in feigned excitement. "What an unexpected pleasure to have you in my house. I hope all is well, my dear brother."

"The pleasure is mutual, brother Ole Kaelo," Oloisudori said importantly, struggling to stand in order to receive Ole Kaelo's hug. "I assure you all things are under control."

It was then that Resian, who had followed her father to the living room noted that the two men were of the same height and possibly of the same age. But what greatly perturbed her, was to hear a slight tremor in her father's voice as he addressed Oloisudori. She certainly detected a measure of desperation and fear in him. She noticed a faint sheen of perspiration on his face and Oloisudori took advantage of her father's discomfiture to grin at her, as if to gleefully tell her "you see, what did I tell you?"

"Where is your mother?" Ole Kaelo suddenly asked turning to Resian. But before she could answer, he was already calling her out loudly using her formal maternal name, "*Ngoto Taiyo*."

"Yes," answered Resian's mother from the kitchen.

"Come here at once," he ordered in a panic-stricken voice. Turning to Resian once more he snapped irritably. "Resian, for heaven's sake, what are you still doing here? Go to the kitchen at once and make yourself useful!"

"Yes, *Papaai*," Resian answered demurely. But before she disappeared, Oloisudori detained her for a moment with a wave of his hand to say, "Brother Ole Kaelo, you have a wonderful daughter here. In your absence, she received and entertained me in the most delightful manner." Ole Kaelo snorted and grunted but said nothing.

When Mama Milanoi appeared, her husband introduced her to Oloisudori. He then became quite lyrical about Oloisudori's pivotal role that gave them the financial stability they were now enjoying in Nasila. He mentioned the contracts that he had assisted him to win and others that were still in the pipeline. "This man is more than a brother to me," he said emotionally "There's nothing, and I repeat, nothing that he ought to be denied in this home."

Resian shut the door behind her and effectively cut off her father's effusive praise of the man she loathed. She walked through the kitchen to the back door. Opening it slowly she got out, shut it behind her, and leaned against it; grateful for the clean cool air. She

shuddered when she thought of those shamelessly questing eyes. Was there no better man that her father could find to do business with? Then she remembered her sister Taiyo and the promise to speak to their father. "Oh, my God," she exclaimed to herself excitedly, "I'm standing here foolishly thinking of Oloisudori's stupid antics, while I could actually be on my way to the university!" She felt sure Taiyo had spoken to their father and possibly he had already consented. She stood quite still for a moment. She was enthralled. Then she quickly walked round the house and got back to the front.

As she walked to the gate, she saw her sister sitting on a log next to Joseph Parmuat. One look at her sister's face, and Resian was sure things did not click. She hoped that her father had not rejected Taiyo's proposal to take them to the university. She wanted to remain hopeful Her fear was to have the door shut permanently on them.

Taiyo knew her sister's expectation. As soon as Resian got to where they were seated, she explained to her, how she tried, without success, to talk to their father. She had hoped to find him alone and in an agreeable mood, but all that had proven difficult.

Strangely, for the first time, she found Resian understanding. Instead of getting sulky, as she often did, she said she had appreciated her sister's effort and that she was happy the door was still open. She was sure an opportune time would offer itself, and at that time, she believed, divine powers would have prevailed upon their father. She was that optimistic.

"*Papaai* has a monster for a visitor this afternoon," Resian said, effectively changing the subject. "You should see him to believe me when I say he's ugly and mean. He is an absolutely horrible man with deplorable manners. I can't imagine what business *Papaai* would be transacting with such a person! He is simply *olbitirr*."

Taiyo exploded into an uproarious laughter at the man's description, while Joseph Parmuat's dark eyebrows shot up almost to his hairline, eyes gleaming with surprised amusement.

"Honestly, Resian, what a thing to say about a human being!" Taiyo said still in stitches. "Only a man out of this world would look that horrible!" "And for some reasons, *Papaai* seems terrified of him." "*Papaai*, of all people, terrified?" Taiyo said wide-eyed with incredulity. "I have never seen him terrified." "Did you get to know the name of the monster?" Joseph Parmuat asked perceiving that the girls were overly amazed rather than being over anxious about their father's discomfiture.

"He announced importantly that his name is Mr. Edward Oloisudori Loonkiyaa," Resian said mimicking him while roaring with laughter.

"Did you say Oloisudori? Of all people!" Joseph Parmuat exclaimed to the consternation of the girls. "That man is bad news! He is a monster in the true sense of the word."

"Who is he?" the girls asked simultaneously. "What kind of person is he?"

Oloisudori was a feared man not only in Nasila but far and wide. If there was anything obnoxious that

Nasila had ever exported to other parts of the country, apart from the ancient infamous cattle raids and the services of the *enkamuratani* it was the notorious criminality of Oloisudori. Just as his name implied, he was a shadowy figure. Nobody seemed to know his exact business. He liked to refer to himself as a jack-of-all-trade, which was true because he had his fingers on agriculture, finance, tourism, import and export, mining and motor trade. He was also known to be a poacher, smuggler and robber. But what he perfected skillfully was being an extortionist. That went hand in hand with his other specialised role of a hired assassin. He did not play all those roles alone as his gang of collaborators and agents worked under his direct supervision.

Little was known of Oloisudori's background. Those older than him said he came to Nasila when he was a boy of ten. It was said he was adopted by the family of Loonkiyaa who brought him up alongside their other sons. He was circumcised with the rest of the sons and became a valorous *moran*. But after his stint as a *moran*, he turned into a hardcore criminal who had been jailed on numerous occasions. He was now said to be incorrigible and the fact that he was often successful in his criminal forays, however devious they were, often portrayed a wrong image to the youth who thought he offered an alternative route to wealth and riches.

It was as an extortionist that Oloisudori excelled. In most cases he enticed his victims by loaning them large sums of money or organising for them to clinch and sign lucrative contracts with big organisations or win attractive contracts to supply agricultural inputs to large parastatals. Once his victims were deeply involved in the

business, he would turn up to make ridiculous demands and threaten to withdraw the contracts. In many cases, his victims were left with little options but to play to his own rules. The consequences of not playing the game as he wished, were always brutal and unpalatable.

By the time Joseph Parmuat was through with the monster's history, the girls were near tears. They feared for their father and for themselves. They wondered why their father had got himself involved with that monster's murky business. Was the house they were living in and the business that their father had founded, financed by the monster? Resian was even more fearful when she recalled the anxiety that was evident in their father's face when he found Oloisudori in their house. When she recalled the condescension that Oloisudori had displayed while in their living room, she was in no doubt that their father had fallen victim of the demonic extortionist.

But Taiyo looked at things from a brighter perspective. She was convinced that their father could not be that naive as to get involved with such an evil man. She reasoned that there must have been another explanation for the monster's visit to their home. But the three agreed on one thing: Oloisudori was a bad, bad man.

After sitting on the log chatting for a while, Joseph Parmuat departed. The girls then proceeded slowly to their house, talking.

"Guess what, Taiyo-eyeiyo," Resian said excitedly. "Yeiyo, this afternoon shocked me by voluntarily talking about F.G.M."

"No, Resian, that's not true," Taiyo answered, her eyes dilating with surprise, and stopping so as to give

serious attention to what her sister was saying. "Yeiyō talking about F.G.M on her own accord? Unless she was preparing ground for shocking news. By the way, I hope she did not tell you that there are plans to drag and take us soon to *enkamuratani*?"

"No, not at all," Resian said vehemently. "You know if she did, we would not be here saying what we are now saying."

"Anyway, tell me," Taiyō pursued the subject relentlessly. "What did she say about F.G.M.?"

"She asked me what I knew about it," Resian said gesticulating wildly to emphasize her words. "And I told her not only what I knew about F.G.M but I added that it was certainly a tool of oppression used by men to put women down. I also told her that, that story about F.G.M having been introduced by women who had been harassed and sexually abused by Ilarinkon invaders centuries earlier, was not convincing. Had the practice been introduced by the women of the time, to stem the Ilarinkon lewd excesses, I argued, then it should have become extinct with their departure."

"Did you ask her whether she supported F.G.M.?" Taiyō asked tongue in her cheek. "And did you find out whether there was a plan to have us conform with the obnoxious Nasila ritual?"

"That was what I was going to find out when the monster came knocking," Resian said as they resumed their walk towards the house.

"We must find out that this evening," Taiyō said seriously. "To be forewarned is to be forearmed."

They climbed the steps slowly and as they reached the front door, it opened to reveal Ole Kaelo and

his visitor. Taiyo and Resian stepped back to allow Oloisudori through. He greeted Taiyo politely and smiled at Resian confidently as if to suggest that a bond between them had been established and their familiarity was now a matter of mutual understanding. Resian dropped her gaze to the floor.

"There goes the monster," Resian hissed angrily through clenched teeth, as her father and Oloisudori walked down the steps. "He's the devil incarnate!" Bearing in mind what Joseph Parmuat told us about him, Taiyo said nonchalantly. "Olosudori could very easily pass as just another innocent Nasila elder."

"God forbid," Resian hissed, her lips tightening dangerously. Just the sight of Oloisudori had revived the loathing she had for him. "I pray that God will never give him a chance to pass as an innocent Nasila elder."

Just then, their father returned. Resian looked at him and perceived something queer about him. She was alarmed. Did she imagine it or was there something unnatural about him? She wondered. And what was it? Her father looked at her and quickly averted his eyes and looked elsewhere. She noticed that something was amiss. She felt very certain there was something awful in the air.

"Resian, go to the kitchen and help your mother prepare supper," her father said sharply. "And make it snappy!" The look on her father's face immobilized her. She glanced at him curiously. He was watching her too, his wrinkled face unsmiling. She then regained her composure and was about to go when once again something in his face made her hesitate for a moment, thinking he was about to say something more to her.

"What are you waiting for?" he thundered angrily. "Go to the kitchen this instant."

Taiyo was by then busy closing windows and drawing curtains. Standing by one window that faced the west, she looked through it for a long moment, lost in thought. Then she walked into the living room where her father sat rigidly on an armchair, his right elbow planted on his right knee while his right cupped hand supported his chin. He was staring without blinking at the fireplace, his thoughts obviously not in that house.

"*Papaai*," Taiyo called her father, looking at him with reverence. "Is something wrong?"

"What? Oh no," her father said confusedly, turning unfocused eyes upon her. "Nothing is wrong my dear daughter."

"Brother Joseph Parmuat told us," she said taking utmost care not to upset him, "that the gentleman who has just left is a reputable financier and that wherever you see him, great business transactions are in the offing, is that right, *Papaai*?"

"Yes, yes, that's right," he stammered fidgeting uncomfortably in his seat. "Yes, he is certainly a reputable businessman and truly a great business transaction is in the offing."

"And all is well, *Papaai*?" Taiyo insisted relentlessly.

"Yes, yes, I have said," he said smiling sheepishly, while avoiding her eyes, "everything is fine. It is just ..." he hesitated for a moment, and then scratched his head absent-mindedly. "... just that we are going to do a few things here at home a little bit differently. A few changes here and there affecting all of

us. Other than those little changes, everything else is just fine."

"What are those little things, *Papaai*?" asked Taiyo inquisitively, her eyes staring at him fixedly.

"Nothing serious," he said getting impatient. "And whatever they are, know that your father is in control. Now join your mother and Resian in the kitchen and make sure food is ready soon. I would like to retire to bed early today."

When the girls went to the kitchen they were surprised by their mother's aloofness. Her absent-mindedness that evening had already made her burn and ruin the rice that was to be their evening meal. Her daughters tried to charm her, tease her, prod her, provoke her without much success. Had her taciturnity anything to do with Oloisudori's visit? If that was the case, they reasoned, then, the demonic extortionist's visit was outrageously ruinous.