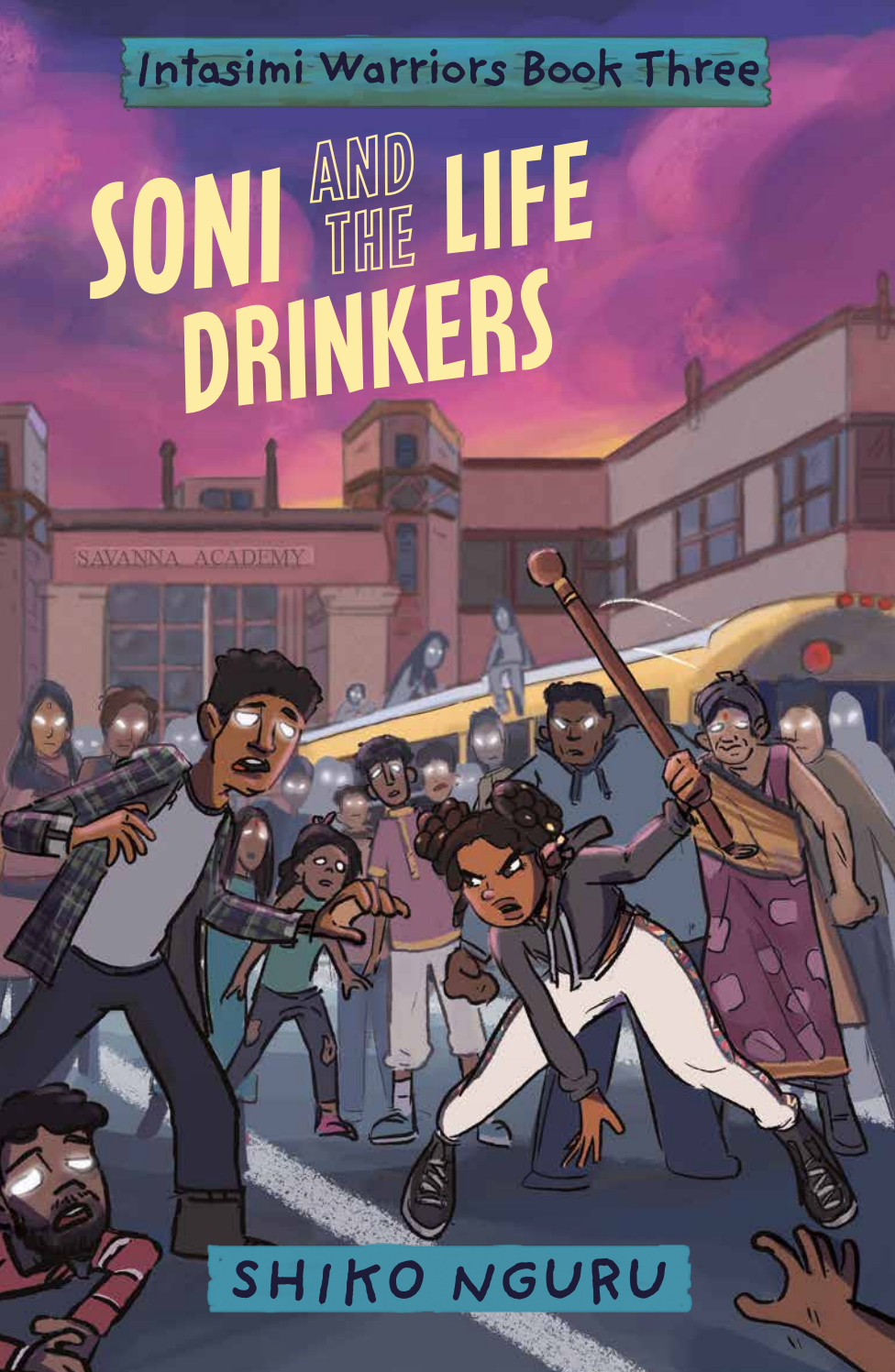
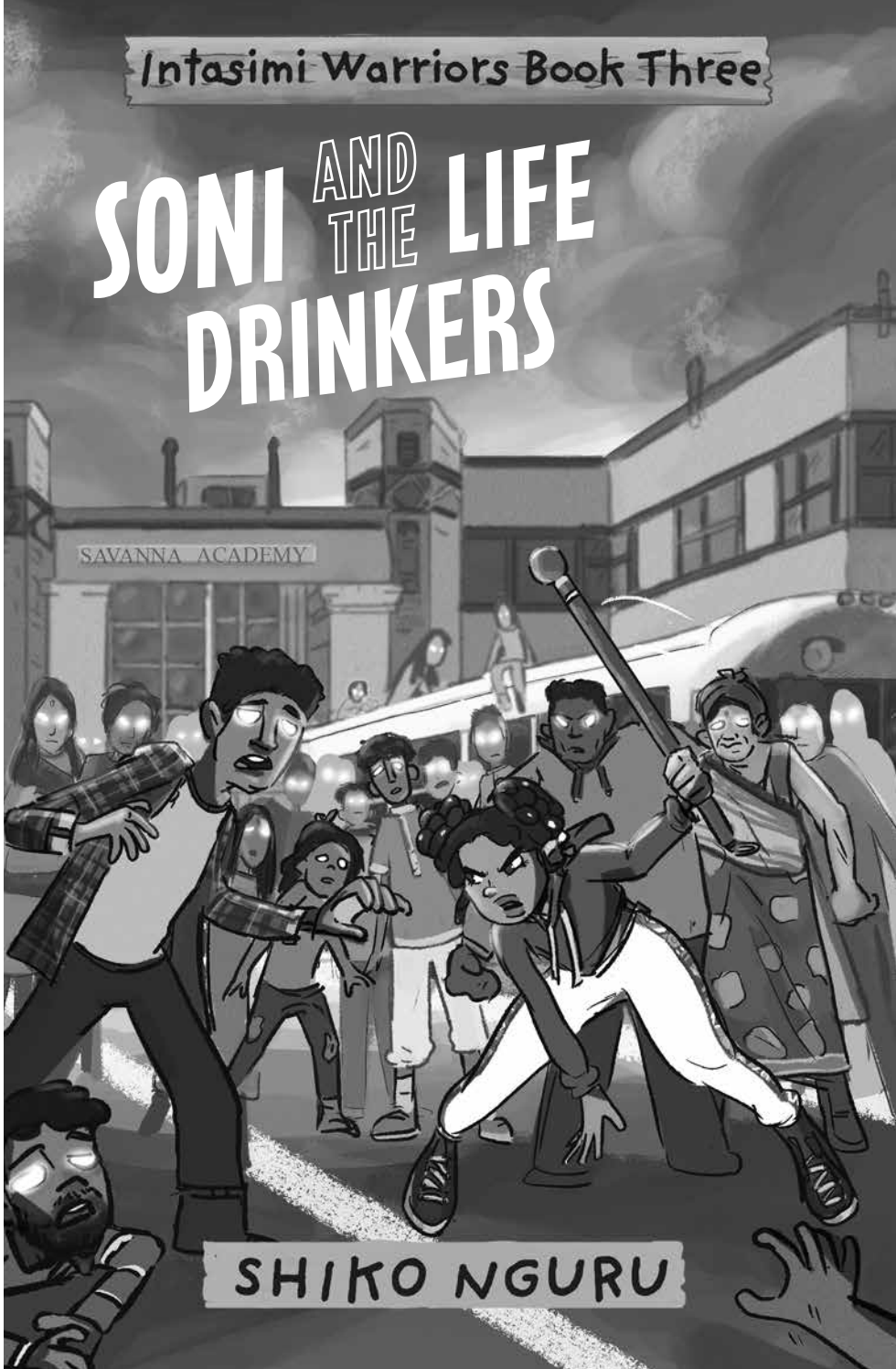
Intasimi Warriors Book Three

SONI AND THE LIFE DRINKERS



SHIKO NGURU


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For my husband, Mike Mondo,

who always pushes me
to reach for the stars



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All/Nothing

"One more time, from the top!" Soni ordered.

Beads of sweat streaked down the sides of her face as she jogged back to the starting position of their dance routine.

A wave of groans washed across the Savanna Academy studio. The dance team had been practising for hours, and every single one of them — except Soni, captain of the team — was exhausted.

"Again?" one of the girls in the front row wailed. "I'm so tired, my *tired is tired!*"

"Can't. Feel. My. Feet!" another girl panted, collapsing onto the floor dramatically.

Julie, deputy captain of the team, rushed forwards and whispered in Soni's ear. "We've gone through the entire routine three times now, Soni. Without making a single mistake! We're going to totally dominate Vunja Mifupa. Could we please end practice? Before all our legs give out?!"

Vunja Mifupa was an annual dance competition for middle schools in Kenya. The term was Swahili for

'Break Bones', and at the rate Dance Captain Soni was working her team, it felt like she was taking the phrase a bit too seriously.

"Plus," Julie continued, "it's Njoki's cousin's birthday. She's getting late for the party."

Soni spun around to face the rest of the dance squad. She was determined to get one more practice round in before they called it a day. "Guys, the competition is in two days! If we don't keep practising..." She paused. Every single girl on the team was sprawled across the studio floor, gasping for air. Their blue and white P.E. kits were completely drenched in sweat, even though the air conditioning was on full blast. Julie was right — Soni needed to end dance practice for the day. The squad was beyond worn out. Also, they had a strict rule that family came first. If one of the squad had a family party to go to, it wasn't fair to keep her there.

"Okay, we'll stop now," Soni sighed, giving in. "But I wanna see all of you here first thing Monday morning. Okay? And keep practising over the weekend! Remember the rule... Number two isn't a winner, and number three nobody remembers, so...?"

The girls finished her sentence in tired, sing-song voices. "We gotta be number one."

They flashed weary smiles at Soni as they dragged

themselves off the floor and out of the studio. Njoki gave her a hug and whispered a heartfelt "Thanks" in her ear as she left.

Of course, it didn't surprise any of them that their captain stayed behind to practise some more. They were used to Soni's intensity. The opening beats to the dance routine sounded off behind them for the umpteenth time as Soni shouted "And 5, 6, 7, 8!" As usual, she was going to continue practising long after they had left.

Alone in the studio, Soni blocked out everything around her except the music, until it felt like the traditional drum beats were thrumming in her bones. She closed her eyes, losing herself to the rhythm, moving with the ease of a child whose ancestor was one of the greatest dancers of all time.

When she was absolutely, positively, 100 percent sure she was all alone, with nobody anywhere near the studio, she let her ancestor's magic spring to life. Soni pumped her hands downwards to the beat, shooting powerful sonic blasts out through her open palms.

If anyone had seen her firing air balls out of her hands, they would probably have fainted or called the police. It's why she had waited until she was all alone to do it. Her superpower was a secret.

The supersonic sound waves rebounded off the

hardwood floor and shot her up into the air like a rocket. She repeated this over and over again, beaming with delight, looking like she was bouncing on a large, imaginary trampoline. She danced as she flew across the studio, stealing glimpses of herself in the surrounding mirrored walls. Her brown skin was glowing, the two buns in her hair holding, her dance moves flowing. Everything was...amazing!

There's no better feeling than this! Soni thought to herself. And even though sweat was splashing off her overworked muscles, she didn't stop, because dancing was her favourite thing in the whole world. It was the most important part of who she was. It was her link to the great Cierume — her supernaturally gifted ancestor. Dancing was their shared superpower. And her extraordinary dance skills, combined with her sonic blasting abilities, were proof that Soni wasn't just some twelve-year-old girl. She was much more than that. Soni was an Intasimi descendant and a member of the Intasimi Warriors — a team of four children who had inherited magical powers from their ancestors. Her and her three friends Mwikali, Odwar and Xirsi used their powers to save the world from evil.

Back in her day, her ancestor Cierume had used an enchanting style of dance fighting and a mighty dancing

stick to defeat her enemies. Hundreds of years later, her descendant Soni had her own special power — she could channel the rhythm of drum beats through her body and turn them into powerful sound vibrations that were released through her hands. These sonic waves were powerful enough to blast anyone and anything clear across a room.

It hadn't always been so easy for Soni to wield her power. When her supernatural gift had manifested earlier that year, she could barely control it. After hours and hours of relentless practice, she had nearly mastered it. Now, she even gave her friends, the other Intasimi Warriors, tips on how to better *their* powers.

She couldn't wait to show Mwikali, Odwar and Xirsi her new dance moves. *They're going to love this!* she thought, as she practised one of her favourites — the Ndumo dance, with a little Intasimi magic thrown in. She pumped a sound blast that sent her shooting up into the air, and on the way back down, hit one of the signature moves of the dance by rocking back and forth while making a scooping motion with her hands.

She was about to do the move again — but this time add a clap and a leg twist — when something stopped her dead in her routine.

Soni froze.

She had heard something. A heartbeat.

Ordinarily, there would have been nothing unusual about this. Part of Soni's superpowers made her hearing extremely sharp. She could tune into sounds from yards away, even heartbeats.

What made this different —what made Soni's blood run ice cold now — was the *type* of heartbeat she'd heard.

Regular human heartbeats went *thump...thump... thump...* But the heartbeat thundering in her ears — the one rattling her bones at that moment — went faster than that. It went *thumpthumpthump*.

Only one type of heartbeat was that fast. A non-human heart.

Soni recognised it in an instant. She knew without a doubt what creature that particular, quickened heartbeat belonged to.

That was the sound of a monster's heart.

That *thumpthumpthump* was the heartbeat of a *shiqq*.

Soni and the other Intasimi Warriors had run across shiqqs before. Mwikali, the only Intasimi Warrior who could see the true faces of these monsters, had described them as half-human and half-animal creatures with black bottomless pits for eyes.

Like all monsters of the underworld, shiqqs wanted nothing more than to unleash evil on humankind and

would have done so already if it wasn't for the Intasimi Warriors standing in their way.

If a shiqq was in the studio, Soni knew that it was there for one reason and one reason only: to harm her.

She took a deep breath in an attempt to steel herself. "Get a grip, girl," she gritted out, eyes swivelling. "There's nothing to be afraid of...except maybe for the half-human, half-beast monster that has you cornered in a deserted school and could *un-alive* you in a second." Soni gulped. "Yup. Nothing to be afraid of, at all."

School had ended several hours before and it was eerily quiet outside, getting darker by the minute. Nothing but the outlines of shadowy bushes could be seen from the studio windows.

Usually, Soni went to Mwikali's house after school and hung out there until her dad picked her up. But ever since the date for Vunja Mifupa had been announced, after-school dance practice had become an everyday thing. For the first time ever, Soni regretted staying on to practise after the rest of the squad had left.

"Dang it, sis! Why do you always have to do the most?" Soni whispered to herself. "You could have been safe and sound right now but *nooooo*, you just had to be extra."

Thumpthumpthump.

The sound wasn't growing any louder or getting any closer. It just...was. As if the shiqq was just standing. Watching. Waiting.

Soni raised her hands into a fighting stance. "I'm not scared of you!" she called out in a shaky voice.

Thumpthumpthump.

She clenched and unclenched her hands into fists to keep her fingers from trembling. "What do you want?! Show yourself!"

Something jumped out of the bushes outside.

Soni jerked and scrambled backwards until she was pressed against the wall of the studio.

For a few seconds, the two of them — her and the monster in the shadows — remained frozen in place.

From what she could make out, it was wearing dark jeans and a black hoodie that covered most of its face. It stood at average height, slightly slender build, and was only a tad bit bigger than she was. Size didn't really matter though because all monsters, big or small, were deathly dangerous.

The shiqq took a step towards the window.

"STOP!" Soni hollered. "I'm warning you! You better stop before I...I...I vaporise you!" She winced as soon as the words had left her mouth. Vaporise? She couldn't vaporise anybody! What was she even saying?!

She turned her palms outwards, ready to strike, barely hearing the *thumpthumpthump* of the shiqq's heartbeat amidst the deafening *THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!* of her own terrified one.

Suddenly, the beast made its move. It launched itself at the window.

"BOO!"

"*AHHHHHHHHH*!" Soni screamed.

The dark figure stopped, hesitated, and then disappeared back into the bushes.

Beside her, two little boys doubled over in hysterical giggles, clutching their sides as if they had just pulled the world's funniest prank.

"Gotcha!" Mwai, aged five and the younger of Soni's brothers, shrieked.

"You're such a *scaredy cat*," teased Mbiti, aged eight.

Soni remained wide-eyed, breathless and on high alert. Her eyes shot back and forth between her annoying little brothers and the window where, just a second ago, an actual shiqq had been.

"*Hellooooo*, earth to Soniiiiii!" Mbiti sang. "Let's go! Dad said you should hurry. It's already late and we're hungry."

Worrying thoughts streamed through her mind at a million miles per second. Was that an attempted attack?

Were monsters of the underworld getting impatient about moving the Intasimi Warriors out of their way? What if this was the first of many attacks on her and her friends? What if they were getting bolder because they knew that Mr Lemayian, the warriors' mentor, was weakened? What if the worst was yet to come?

The thought of Mr Lemayian and his poor health made Soni's tummy cramp up. He was the Savanna Academy headmaster and had been a mentor to her and her friends ever since they found out about their magical abilities. He had taught them everything they knew about being superheroes and about using their powers to protect the world from evil.

With his help, the Intasimi Warriors had defeated a host of monsters and saved the world from the brink of disaster multiple times. But that was before — Soni's heart cramped at the thought of it — before a creature called a Life Drinker had begun to feed on Mr Lemayian's youth, making him age faster than usual.

Life Drinkers were vile creatures that achieved their goal of immortality by stealing years of life from other beings. Mr Lemayian was a type of supernatural being himself — a long-lived human — who was already centuries old and would have had many more to go, had it not been for the Life Drinker. Now, it looked like he

had mere months and not centuries of life left.

Without their teacher and guide, the Intasimi Warriors would be lost. So it made total sense why, after having failed at defeating them directly, the monsters had decided to go after the one person who had made them as skilled as they were: Mr Lemayian.

"*Soniiiiiiiii*! Let's *goooooo*," Mwai moaned, tugging at her shirt.

Soni shook herself out of her thoughts, then turned her attention to the boys. "You shouldn't scare people like that," she scolded, shooting death glares at their cheeky faces.

They stuck their tongues out at her before racing back out to the car park. Soni followed, absentmindedly grabbing her backpack before zombie-walking to the revving car. She barely heard a word her dad said as she climbed into the passenger seat. All she could think about was how close she had come to having a one-on-one encounter with a shiqq.

"*Eiii*, Soni?" Dad called. "Did you even hear a word I said?"

Soni shivered back to reality. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said I have some bad news about Mr Lemayian," he repeated.

Soni's heart sprung to her throat. "What...what is it?" she choked out.

He adjusted his hands on the steering wheel and stole a few quick glances at her, as if he was unsure if she could handle what he was about to say.

She thought the worst with every second that passed. "What, Dad?! What's happened to Mr Lemayian?" she cried when she finally couldn't take the suspense anymore.

"Mr Lemayian has...taken a leave of absence from his duties at school," he said, finally.

Soni inhaled sharply. She could tell when grownups were sugarcoating the truth because they didn't want to scare or hurt kids. Her dad was avoiding eye contact, speaking a bit too softly, and gripping the steering wheel a bit too hard.

She reached for his forearm. "Dad, just tell me the truth. What's really going on? Is Mr Lemayian... Has he got worse?"

Dad sighed. "Yes."

"How much worse?" she asked in a small voice. But did she really want to know? Maybe adults were right to sugarcoat some things. Maybe she couldn't handle the absolute truth. Maybe this was one of those times when being a kid and *not* knowing everything was okay.

But Soni had never been that type of girl. She had to know. "How much worse, Dad?" she asked, louder this time.

"He's grown much weaker. He... He can barely sit up in bed now," her dad said.

Suddenly, it felt like the world around her was spinning. Mr Lemayian was running out of time! No wonder a shiqq had attempted such a bold attack!

Soni bit her bottom lip and wrapped her arms around herself. Things were getting worse. The monsters were going to keep coming at them, harder and harder.

The Intasimi Warriors had to find a way to save Mr Lemayian. They had to find out who was stealing the years from his life. They had to find out the true identity of the Life Drinker and put a stop to this once and for all.