

SUNDIATA

THE HUNGERING LION

Retold by Kenny Mann

Before You Read

The Scene: This story takes place in Mali on the continent of Africa in the 1100s.

The Characters: Balla Fasseke is the griot who tells the story of Sundiata. Sundiata is the Lion King of Mali. Sogolon and Maghan Kon Fatta are Sundiata's parents. Sassouma is the first wife of Maghan Kon Fatta. Sumanguru is a rival king.

The Plot: The Lion King of Mali, Sundiata, is denied the throne. Sundiata has to prove that he is the rightful king.

Vocabulary Preview

guardian: one who takes care of another person

infirmity: weakness

brewed: prepared by boiling

smiths: metalworkers

multitude: a great number of people

exile: period of time away from one's country

lance: a steel-tipped spear

Have you ever known someone who overcame obstacles to achieve great things? In this story, a young leader must learn to speak and walk in order to take control of his kingdom.



As You Read

Keep in mind that this story is a mixture of fact and legend. However, a king named Sundiata did conquer new lands and expand trade while he ruled the kingdom of Mali.



O people, hear my story! I am Balla Fasseke (bah•lah fah•SEE•kay) of Mali. I am a *griot*.¹ I am the guardian of the word. In my mind rest the stories of my people and the history of our land. O hear me and remember, for I speak the truth.

Long, long ago, the last king of Ghana fell to the sword of Sumanguru, the Sosso king; Sumanguru, the cruel warrior and mighty sorcerer; Sumanguru, who was to meet his fate at the hands of Sundiata, the Lion King of Mali.

I am Sundiata's *griot*. O hear me, for I speak the truth!

Sundiata was born of Sogolon, who married Maghan Kon Fatta, the ruler of Mali, whose totem² was the lion. Sogolon was brought to the king as a maiden, disfigured by a hunchback and ill looks. But she was said to possess the mighty spirit of a buffalo, strong and courageous. Her coming had been foretold to the king, and he took Sogolon as his wife and came to love her.

When Sundiata was born, the king rejoiced. The great royal drums carried the news all over the kingdom. But his first wife, Sassouma, was jealous. Her son should inherit the throne! What need had her husband of another son? She vowed that Sundiata would never become king.

¹**griot:** storyteller

²**totem:** animal or plant serving as the symbol of a family or clan

In time, Sassouma saw that she had nothing to fear, for Sundiata was stricken by a strange infirmity. He could neither speak nor walk! How great was Sogolon's sorrow! For seven long years, she tried to cure her son. She consulted with all the wise men of the kingdom and brewed herbs and potions, but to no avail.³ And Sundiata's father, King Maghan Kon Fatta, despaired. But his *griot*, who was my father, advised the king. "The young seed must endure the storm," he said. "And from this small seed shall spring a great tree."

One day, when the king felt death approach, he called the child to him. "I shall give you the gift each king gives to his heir," he said. And on that day, my people, the king gave me—Balla Fasseke—to Sundiata to be his *griot*, as my father had been the king's *griot*, and his father before that. And on that day, for the first time in his life, Sundiata spoke. "Balla, you shall be my *griot*," he said. And the king knew that his son—the son of the lion and the buffalo—was worthy to be king.

But when Maghan Kon Fatta died, the councilors ignored his wishes. It was the son of Sassouma who ascended the throne, and not Sundiata, the rightful heir. And Sassouma persecuted Sogolon and her son with evil hatred and banished them to a dark corner of the palace. Oh, how Sogolon's tears flowed in her unhappiness! When Sundiata saw his mother's despair, he looked at her calmly and said, "Today I will walk." Then he sent me, Balla Fasseke, to the royal forges.⁴ "Tell the smiths to make me the sturdiest iron rod possible," he ordered.

³**avail:** benefit

⁴**forges:** furnaces where metal is heated and shaped



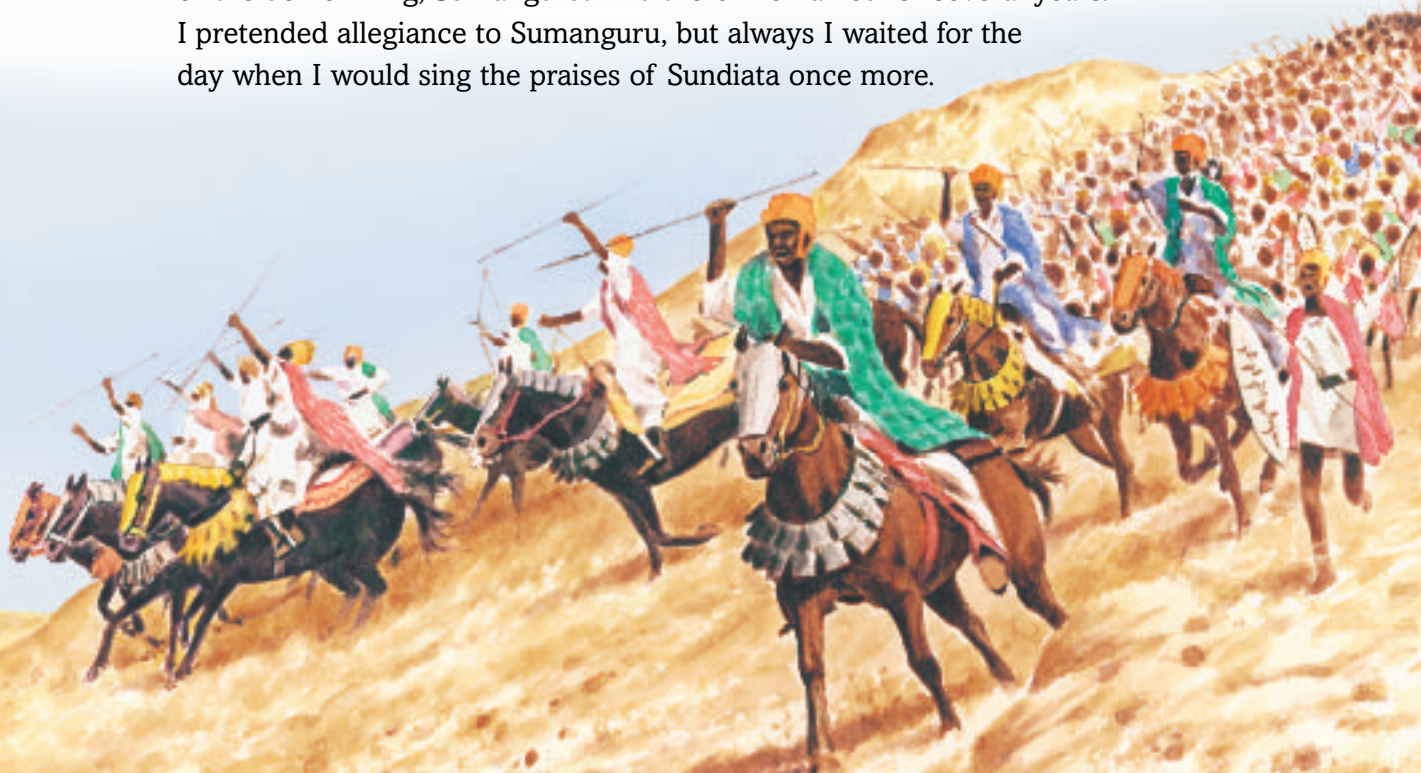
Six men were needed to carry the iron rod to Sogolon's house. They threw it on the ground before Sundiata. A huge multitude of people had gathered to see if Sundiata would walk. "Arise, young lion!" I commanded. "Roar, and may the land know that from henceforth, it has a master!"

Sundiata gripped the rod with his two hands and held it upright in the ground. Beads of sweat poured from his face. A deathly silence gripped the people. All at once, with a mighty thrust, Sundiata stood upright. The crowd gasped. The iron rod was bent like a bow. And Sogolon, who had been dumb with amazement, suddenly burst into song:

*Oh day, oh beautiful day,
Oh day, day of joy,
Allah Almighty, this is the finest
day you have created,
My son is going to walk!
Hear me, people, for I speak the truth!*

Sundiata threw away the rod, and his first steps were those of a giant.

From that day on, Sundiata grew in strength. He became a fine hunter and was much loved by all the people. But Sassouma, whose son was now king, feared Sundiata's growing power. Her plots to kill him failed. And she knew that I would perform any deed to bring Sundiata to the throne. So, to separate us, Sassouma sent me far away to the court of the demon king, Sumanguru. And there I remained for several years. I pretended allegiance to Sumanguru, but always I waited for the day when I would sing the praises of Sundiata once more.



Sogolon fled the palace and took Sundiata far from Sassouma's hatred. For seven years they lived in exile, finding food and shelter wherever they could. At last, they came to the city of Mema. Here they met with good luck, for the king of Mema took a liking to Sundiata and treated him like a son. He admired Sundiata's courage and leadership. This king decided to make the young boy his heir and teach him the arts of government and war. And thus, Sundiata grew to manhood.

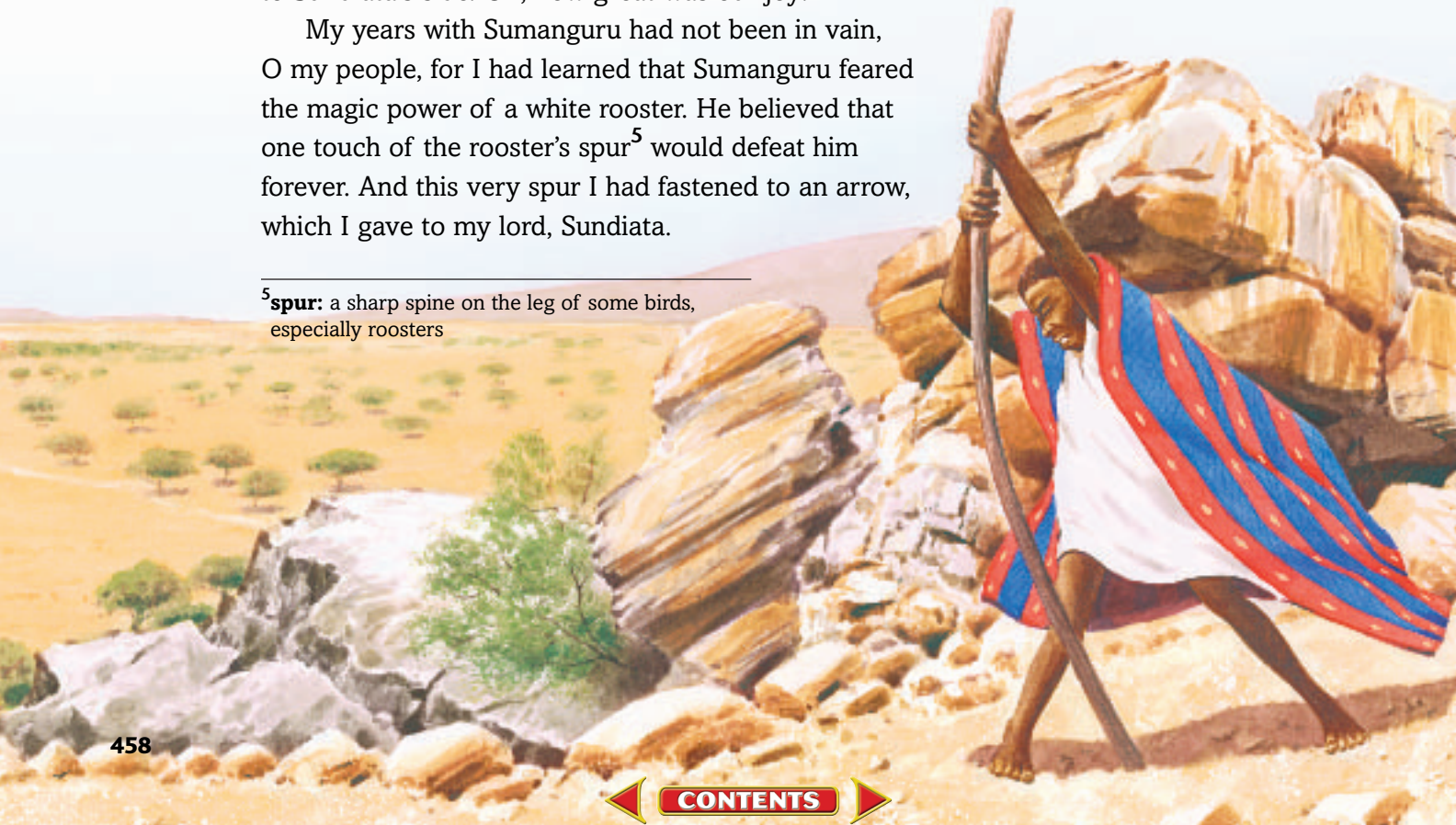
One day, messengers came running to Sundiata. "Sumanguru has invaded Mali!" they cried. "The king and his mother, Sassouma, have fled. Only you can save our people. Return, young lion, and reclaim your throne!"

This, O people, was the moment of Sundiata's destiny. The king of Mema gave him half his forces. And as Sundiata rode at their head, more and more men joined him until a great army thundered across the plains. And from far-distant Mali, Sumanguru, too, raced to meet his destiny. And I, O my people, I followed, for I knew that soon I would be reunited with Sundiata, my Lion King.

And so it was. Sundiata led his army from Mema, and Sumanguru came from Mali. The two great armies met in battle on the plains of Kirina. I took my chance and escaped at last from Sumanguru. Through the thick clouds of dust and the battle cries of the warriors, I galloped to Sundiata's side. Oh, how great was our joy!

My years with Sumanguru had not been in vain, O my people, for I had learned that Sumanguru feared the magic power of a white rooster. He believed that one touch of the rooster's spur⁵ would defeat him forever. And this very spur I had fastened to an arrow, which I gave to my lord, Sundiata.

⁵**spur:** a sharp spine on the leg of some birds, especially roosters



With deadly aim, Sundiata sent the arrow speeding across the battlefield toward Sumanguru. True as a hawk in flight, it met its mark, grazing the sorcerer's shoulder. With a great scream of fear, Sumanguru turned on his horse and fled.

Far away he rode, to the caves of Mount Koulikoro. There we saw Sumanguru, the demon king, fall to his knees and turn to stone. His soldiers, discouraged by his flight, ceased to fight and were defeated.

And so Sundiata returned to Mali to reclaim his throne, and I, Balla Fasseke, went with him to sing of his glory. There waited the twelve kings who had helped Sundiata in exile. Each thrust his lance into the earth before Sundiata. "We shall be united!" they proclaimed. "You have restored peace to our lands. We give you our kingdoms to rule in your great wisdom!" The drums beat out the news. The warriors danced in a joyous frenzy. And the crowd sent a mighty cry to the heavens: "Wassa, Wassa, Ayé!"

And thus did I bear witness to the birth of the great kingdom of Mali. And thus did I see Sundiata become its first emperor.

So listen, O my people, and remember, for I speak the truth. May you live to tell this story to your children, that the name of Sundiata—the Lion King—shall live forever.



Responding to the Reading

1. Why did the king give Sundiata a griot?
2. Foreshadowing is when a storyteller gives you hints of something to come later. This story contains many suggestions that foreshadow Sundiata's successful reign as king. Identify three such hints in the first six paragraphs.
3. **Predict** How might the story be different if Balla Fasseke had not been sent to the court of Sumanguru?
4. **Analyze** Why do you think Sundiata did not walk after receiving his mother's treatments but *did* walk when his half-brother was made king?
5. **Reading** **Read to Write** Suppose you are Sundiata's father. Write a brief speech stating your reasons for choosing Sundiata to be the next king.