

Chapter 1

"There is nothing I can do for you."

Those words bore the darkness of the night sky.

"Please Elume, Our daughter is all we have. I would give you all the silk in my store, please save my child."

Never has he pleaded for anything in his life. He had told himself all those years back, at the sight of his father kneeling before the moneylender, that he would never beg any man for anything. He saw begging as something that only brought misery, just as it did for his father.

Many years had passed, and he has managed to live within his means, doing anything to provide for himself and his family. Never did he know a time like this would come, when he would feel as miserable as his father.

"Zamuru, your daughter's illness is too severe that none of your cheap silk can be used for payment. What I demanded for is 30 gold coins, get that and your daughter will be as good as new."

"From where do I get 30 gold coins? Even if I sold all the silk in my store, I would not get up to 5 gold coins. Those silks are weighed in silver. Please Elume, have pity on this poor soul, save my child."

"Pity is no possession of mine, it cannot be purchased so I do not have it. Go Zamuru, the fate of your child lies on you. I cannot do anything for you if you do not make the necessary payment. This is the rules that were in place way before I became the Elume. I have other guests to attend to please."

"Physician, don't chase us away, please start the treatment. We will rally round to get the fee but first start the treatment." Zamuru's wife spoke up, her eyes glazed with unshed tears.

"Who are you woman that to speak while men speak? Don't you know your duty?"

"What is duty when one is faced with death? My only duty now is my daughter, and I plead for you to save her."

"With what do you plead? Empty hands?"

What can we give you Elume?" Her voice held the scent of hope. Her eyes raised in search for answers on the face of the physician. But what answer could she find? His face bore no expression, the dark lines that ran across his cheek were only made profound by the way he lowered his gaze, his eyes resting on the swell of her bosom.

"What you can give me no can only secure the medicine for today. If you had been younger it would have secured enough for a down payment. But your husband has sapped the sweetness in you, though your beauty still radiates like the sun, your breast will offer me less satisfaction now as it no longer stands atop but sweeps the crevice of your belly. I do often wonder, why you chose the arms of an ordinary silk maker, your beauty is one fit for a Physician or a King. In your next life, ask the creators to make you the wife of a King or a physician, then your sweetness will forever remain."

"Elume, are you asking my wife to bed you?"

"Am not asking, Zamuru. If you want your daughter to live a little longer than a week, this is what has to be done. You are the one pleading, you even said you will empty your storehouse. What's the difference here?"

"Arh..." Zamuru groaned in pain rolling himself on the bare floor like a crazy man. "Arh, Zamuru, this is what you have become, a miserable soul. What power do you have? You can't even save your own. Arh...gods, is this the fate you had in store for me?"

"My husband, shed no tear for me, my husband. The life of our child is more important to me than my own life. If he was to ask for my life, I would give it gladly that she may live. Is anything too big for our own child?"

"Nokoria, I weep not for you, but for myself. What use is a man if he can do nothing while another man speaks so boldly to his wife. What can I do? My helplessness and weakness is before me today. I can not save my daughter and neither can I save my wife. Am I a man, Nokoria?"

She held him by the knee, helping him to sit up. She cleaned his body from the dust of the ground and smiled at him.

"My husband, you are a man. Have you forgotten, in your youth you were a great wrestler. That is how we met, have you forgotten? Do not let the troubles of life make you question yourself. You are a strong man and a strong man does what he has to do for his family, even if his life is at stake. Let's buy time for her, while we go in search of the gold coin.' She let go of his knee and faced Elume. "As you said, am still as beautiful as the sun, and though my breast no longer stands atop, my womanhood can offer you the best pleasure you ever had. My hands will give your groin the pleasure only the woman of Aziki can give, and my bosom, the one which you said sweeps along my crevice, a taste of it, and you will want for no other. All these, I will give

you, in exchange for my daughter's medicine for three days. Three days and you will get your 30 gold pieces."

The Elume was silent, he looked at her, then slowly walked up to her and grabbed her backside in a very provocative manner. She gasped, the same time Zamuru yelled.

"your husband might die from this before your daughter do." he whispered to her ear. She looked to her husband and pleaded with her eyes, it was either this or they lose their daughter. Their Zanifa.

"Elume," Zamuru called. "It is clear my wife has been all you wanted. It is a shame, that a man like you will bare the title of Elume. The gods must have made a mistake. You have no honor or human sympathy."

"Be thankful I received you in my den, be thankful I am giving you a chance. Ordinary men like you do not deserve to be treated by the Elume, much less your daughter. But it I because you have gone all around, and discovered that I alone can cure your daughter, and because of the mercy of my heart that I gave you audience. Don't in-cure more wrath from the gods. I accept your wife's offer. You can either stay and watch or go look for the gold. The more time you waste the more time your daughter's life is put in danger. It is unfortunate that your wife is much smarter than you for she has bargained and gotten three days for your daughter, how many days have you bargained for?" He turned away from them and went into another room.

"Nokoria, I am sorry. I can not bare look at you for I have failed you. But I promise your sacrifice will not be in vain. I will go now, and look for the gold coins, anything I have to do I will do. But please my wife, do not forget your husband. It is clear to me now that a man with no power or wealth is prone to lose those he loves because he can't protect them. I am supposed to protect you but here I am, throwing you to the dungeon. Do not use this inadequacy against me. Come home, and let's continue to find what we need to save our daughter, I promise that when all this is done and our daughter is well, we will leave this village, and start anew somewhere else"

"I will come home my husband. The gods be with you."

Chapter 2

He fastened his pace, even though he had no place in mind. Where could he go? None of his friends has any gold coin to spare, his relatives; they only ply him with words of encouragement, but what can encouragement do for him in a situation like this. His eyes was fixed right ahead that he had not seen the lump of wood placed beside the road, and was only aware of it after his toe came crashing with it, a jab of pain surged through him, and like a child in pain he burst into tears. He couldn't tell what caused his pain, he only knew that he has once been hit by a machete and not tear came from him. So why now? With such a minute thing like a lump of wood. Has he become so weak? Why?

"Eh, eh, ehee... what makes a grown man cry on the road path like a child? Don't you fear that the little children might see you and make a song out of it?"

He looked up to see the man speaking. He looked familiar but Zamuru could not really recognize him. He met a lot of people on a daily basis because of his business.

"Are you not Zamuru the silk seller?' the man continued. "What could be so bad that you could not hold yourself like a man?"

"Does being a man means I have to take every pain? Must the world be too harsh because am a man?" Zamuru asked still letting the tears flow. He could not describe the pain in his chest, neither could he suppress it.

"Arh, Arh, my friend. Do not do this to yourself. Now come with me. Whatever must have brought out this weakness in you is not something to be discussed on the road path. Follow me my friend."

He followed the man to his house, where he was offered a bowl of water to wash his face, and a plate of food was served to him but Zamuru could not eat. He only drank water, but despite the appetizing way the food looked he could not bring himself to taste it.

"My friend, tell me, what is the problem?" the man asked.

"I realized today, how much of a weakling I am. Of what mouth can I use to eat when I can not protect the lives of my family."

"Hmm...you speak in strange words my friend, make it plain for me so I can understand, for I might be of help to you."

Zamuru told him everything that happened, how his daughter fell ill, and no other physician apart from the Elume could cure her. He told him about the hefty price the Elume charged for

her healing and lastly how his wife had sacrificed herself just so they could buy 3 days of medicine.

When he had finished speaking, he felt somewhat relieved, though his problem was not over.

"Men are wicked to themselves. What would it take away from the Elume if he treated your daughter, while you rally around for the money, but because a man's heart is filled with evil, he decided to take from you that which you hold dear. It is well my friend. This should not make you down hearted, you need strength to weather the storm."

"But how? I have asked friends and relative but none can help."

"then you do it yourself my friend. You do anything to protect your family. I know you Zamuru, during our youth you were among the best wrestlers, you can do it again."

"You want me to wrestle? Of what use would it be?"

"Haven't you heard?" the man lowered his voice to a whisper. "the Iguda ordered for a wrestling match, the winner gets a 2 bags of gold coins, and you know that one bag contains 50 gold coins. "

Zamuru eyes brightened. This was a good opportunity handed to him.

"I have 10 pieces here, you can use that to buy another 3 days for your daughter, while you prepare for the match. Your daughter will survive, believe it, My friend."

"Why do you do all this for me?"

"I do nothing my friend. I have known you to be a good man, you never take what isn't yours and you do not cheat your customers. I remember a time I came to buy silk from you, I had mistakenly forgotten the silvers at home, but you still gave me the silk. It touched my heart; your kindness, because the truth was that I needed that silk that day for my daughter's marriage. You are a good man Zamuru and I will help you out of this problem in the way I can."

"Thank you so much..."

"Kali, my name is Kali, I am the messenger of Iguda."

"Arh... it is an honor messenger of Iguda, thank you. Now I have to go, to prepare for the wrestling match."

They both stood, Kali walked Zamuru to the entrance of his house.

"Take care my friend, I will see you soon."

Sleep that night was far from Zamuru's eyes. The moon was getting shrouded by the dark clouds and his wife was yet to be back. His heart ached for what he feared had come upon him. It was a dreadful night more dreadful than that of years ago when his father had drank poison because he could not pay his debt.

That time, he had not shed a tear neither was he fearful, the only thought he had was never to be like his father. It was a good thing that no one knew the cause of his father's death except him. Many believed it was misery that killed him and truly misery and pain of failing his family had led to his rash decision of poison.

Could it be the failure of his father had caught up with him? Was he not able to overcome this blow of life? He was a man who never meddled in others' affairs but had focused on his family, yet he could not escape this curse.

"You come back to me Zamuru not like the warrior I knew you to be but like a man the world has defeated. Are you still a champion Zamuru or has being a silk seller made you ordinary?"

Those were the words Nkula had said to him; his former trainer had looked disappointed seeing him that afternoon.

Zamuru had gone to meet him after his conversation with Kali about the wrestling match.

"I know about the match, I have someone I am training already but your situation begs for attention. I shall train you, but winning is all on you. You might have once been a great wrestler but things have changed, you need to rekindle the strength of a wrestler and do away with the heart of a silk seller. To survive now you have to be brutal."

"I can do anything now Nkula, I have got much to lose if I fail to win."

The thought of that remained with him to the next morning when he went back to the den of Elume. He found his wife lying beside his daughter on a brown looking mat.

"Nokoria," he called, tapping her gently on the shoulder.

"My husband", she jerked from the bed making sure she did not disturb the child. "my husband tears ran down her eyes as she embraced him. He was taken aback for he had not expected such reception. He knew his wife loved him but what woman will not be swayed by wealth?"

"you did not come home last night." he said basking in her embrace.

"I could not. Zanifa was reacting to the medicine Elume gave to her so I had to sleep by her side. She asked of you when she woke up before dawn."

He let out a sigh relieved that Elume had done just as he said he would.

"My husband,' Nokoria called again holding his hand in hers. "I am sorry for what I have done, I only thought of our daughter and failed to think of you."

"Nokoria, it is I who is sorry. I have failed you and our daughter and am sorry for it." He then told her about the wrestling match.

"Are you sure you can do this my husband. It has been long time since you wrestled."

"If you could give yourself for our child, what is wrestling that I can not do. Don't worry my wife. I will win and get us out of this problem."

"May the god's be with you then?"

"Just promise me one thing my wife,"

"Anything my husband."

"Don't ever give yourself to any man again. It weakens me more than the situation our daughter is in to see you do that."

"I will never again do that." she promised, caressing him softly on the cheek.

It pained him to leave her there again with Elume but someone has to stay with their daughter, so he chose to trust his wife's promise.

Chapter 3

The sound of the drum brought with it the feeling of nostalgia. Zamuru stood between the road to the wrestling ground and the road to Elume's hut. He had to remind himself, why he was doing this. The training with Nkula had shown him how much years has passed since he took a blow from someone or at someone. The question in his heart raged on, 'was he truly ready for this?'

"It is time Zamuru, you can't back down now. No great warrior backs down from a fight he has committed himself to."

"I won't back down." He said to Nkula, twisting the heavy band that was placed on his hand. Even in his youth, he never liked the bands, they were a source of distraction. But Nkula had said he would not be allowed to the fighting arena without the band.

"One more thing Zamuru, " Nkula said, resting his hand on his shoulder. "Focus on the reason you are doing this. Many of them out there are fighting for different cause mostly fame and money. You are fighting to save your family. Keeping the thought in your mind will fuel your strength. Now go."

A shove at the back and Zamuru ran towards the wrestling ground. The place was almost just as he had left it. A dirt ground with wooden fence, with the only difference being the spectators stand. The watchers no longer stood round the fences, but sat on a wooden constructed pavement. The Iguda sat there too, with his chiefs and guards. He was a lanky old man, not exactly what Zamuru expected of a ruler. You could only tell his age by the number of white hairs that appeared on his head.

"Hey my friend," it was Kali. "It is so good to see you, am glad you took this chance."

"It is only because of your kindness Kali, thank you again."

"Oh no no my friend, how is your daughter? Hope she is fine? And the wife? Are you okay?"

Zamuru let out a sigh, "What can a man like me do Kali? My daughter is getting better that is all that matters."

"Yes my friend, let's think on that. Here take this." He handed him a beaded necklace. "It was made by my mother, it is for your protection."

"protection Kali, it's just a fight."

"No my friend, it is not. Things have changed. Every wrestler you see here has something they carry for protection, as well as something to cause harm. You do not carry anyone, so you should at least protect yourself. Put it around your neck. Off I go now eh."

"Thank you my friend." Zamuru called out as he watched him walk to the spectators stand.

He was glad to notice that despite not being a youth anymore, he was not the oldest man there. He would say he was in-between the road of a youth, and an elderly man, because his breasts still danced to the rhythm of the drum, and his fist could still throw a swift punch that knocked off an opponent in one go.

The thrill and shouts of the crowd fueled his adrenaline, he was ready for more, and was fighting like it was his last fight on earth. He had thought the crowd didn't know him, yet they all hailed him, voices raised to the air, colluding with the sound from the drums, his heart raced like wildfire, and he seems to have lost his breath. His knee weakened but he knew he could not afford to go down. He had to keep going. He held it on, until it was just him in the ring, with the ragged looking Agida, the reigning champion. How ironic, he thought, to be left with a man fighting to retain his power and title as the champion of Aziki.

Their eyes collided, and the race began. It was like that of the mountain lion chasing after its prey and trying to devour it. But Zamuru was relentless, landing blow for blow, grappling and pinning where he could. It was like a never ending charade. His eyes hurt, he could barely hear the sound of the crowd or the rhythmic beats of the drum, he was falling, yet he knew he couldn't fall, the face of his wife flashed through him, no he could not afford such disgrace again.

He was caught by a fresh wave of anger, remembering the hand of the Elume gripping his wife's backside like she belonged to no one. Caught in the rage of it all, he attacked Agida like he was the cause of his pain until the man fell to the ground.

His ankle hurt, so does every part of him, but the roar of the crowd blurred it all. He could see Kali, jumping and clasping his hands together. Nkula stood by one corner, a huge grin plastered to his face. Yes, he did it. He thought, letting the feeling of victory wash over him.

"My people, the match has come to an end," It was Iguda. "and as we can all see there is a new champion in our midst. Young man, what do we call you?"

"Nokoria." Zamuru answered with no hesitation, for it was her face that gave him the boost to win.

"Nokoria?" he asked, "Alright, if you say so. My people, here is our champion, Nokoria!!!"

The crowd continued to hail and shout. Later that evening, Zamuru was told to come collect his price the next day. He was overjoyed, and wanted to go to the den of Elume, to share his joy with his family but his body pained him, and Nkula had instructed that he lay down so that the medicine he had given him for the pain will be more effective. He was in that state when he heard footsteps.

"Who walks so late at night?" He asked, sitting up to get a view of the person.

"My husband, it is I my husband, it is Nokoria."

"Arh arh, my beautiful wife, we are indeed one soul for I was just thinking of you, a while ago."

They both embraced, and sitting down, Nokoria unwrapped two pieces of rice balls and handed it to him.

"I wasn't sure if you had eaten so I wrapped this up for you."

He looked at it and let out a deep sigh. "Well, am glad you are eating well there, I was worried you were not."

"I had pleaded to the servants to give me extra, normally they only serve me one with a bowl of soup."

"Hmmm...it will be alright my wife. Everything is going to be fine now. Tomorrow I will collect the price money and we will pay Elume his remaining fee, and once our daughter is okay, we will leave this place, and start anew."

"Yes my husband, that will be nice. When I heard that you won, I was overjoyed. Now we can finally put all these ahead of us."

"Yes my dear. The moon is out,"

"Yes, so bright."

"Do you remember those days during our courtship? Under the moon-light."

Nokoria giggle suddenly covering her face with her hands.

"What?" Zamuru asked chuckling.

"Nothing my husband, age haven't changed your naughty mind."

Zamuru burst into laughter then drew his wife closer to his chest. "Neither has it changed my strength."

They both fell to the bed, their laughter mixing with the chirping of the night bird.