

The Olaja and The Omoba

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I had worked for the Ologbostere for fourteen years. I had dreams of becoming a teacher but the gods had other designs for me. I would never teach the way I wanted in Ere so I left and my journey took me to Okere.

Despite our shared ancestry Okere was different, strange even. The people of Okere did not take too kindly to strangers, their eyes followed you as you walked by, their whispers not quiet enough for you not to know they were talking about you. More so, they did not have work for my kind of talents and eventually referred me to the palace. But seeking an audience with anyone in there was impossible.

I tried to seek an audience but the guards refused to let me in. And so, on the fourth day of my visits, I sat outside the gates waiting for anyone who would listen to me. I almost gave up, wondering if the money in my pockets would be enough to take me to the next land, and then he appeared before me.

“Boko?” He asked, greeting me.

“Ara ni.” I replied and turned away. Even though I did not feel well, I said I was, after all I did not know where this man came from, I would not pay him anymore mind.

“What is your name young woman? How may I help you?” I was taken aback, my youthful air had long since disappeared, I was miserable and tired, looking for work. Perhaps he presumed me to be a low courtesan and was trying to use flattery to sway me. I turned away from him.

“The guards tell me you have been coming here for four days now, who would you like to seek audience with, I may be of assistance?” He was being polite to a stranger. I turned to look at him again. He reminded me of Okwo-Neko Emiko. It was not a physical resemblance but they exuded the same scholarly spirit. He would have made a great teacher in Ere, unlike me.

“Let me help you. What is your name?” I could only bring out and hand him the letter I brought with me from Ere. He looked at me and took the letter. His expression did not change while he read it.

“I see. Ebrohimi, would you like to work for me?”

He was looking for an instructor for his daughter, Omoba Toju. I was willing to do the work, there were no schools in Okere, and I was probably never going to get a better offer, than this.

When I first met Toju, she was a shy and quiet girl who hid behind her father’s legs while mumbling her greetings. I did not know a princess could be so normal. She was just like any other child, she picked at her food, and ran after her father whenever he was around, reading scrolls and asking questions, trying to mimic him.

Those were better times, the Ologbostere was happier then, he fondly called her Dodo because that was all she wanted to eat. She was the reason he had the plantain plantation, the reason why many in Warri and the displaced villagers from Jakpa had livelihoods. A little child’s whim.

I raised the Omoba and I did a fine job. She became much more confident, more outspoken, a true child of her father. She knew her place and you could not take it from her. I also watched Toju fall in love. I felt like a mother watching her daughter, it also broke my heart when Toju’s engagement was cancelled. The prince from Ewoton-Ere no longer wished for the marriage to take place and like that, it ended.

At first, she refused to cry, but soon the tears began to flow, I worried they would never cease, I did not want the Ologbostere to return and meet her in such a state.

“Himi, he told me he loved me.” Toju said.

“I gave him my heart and now he no longer wants me. All the things he whispered in my ear meant nothing after all. How does one lose love overnight?”

Nothing I said could console her, the Prince’s change did seem like it came out of nowhere. Everything seemed fine during his last visit, and a mere four moons later he had sent a letter to the Ologbostere that their marriage would no longer happen.

Omoba Toju only received the news from a letter sent by her father, the Prince did not even have any final words for her.

I could hear the sound of a carriage coming up the hill. The Ologbostere must be returning. I went to the entrance to receive him.

He came down, his face was contoured into a frown, it had been so long since I had seen him smile. He looked lost in thought and barely registered my presence.

“*Erubo* Olaja.” The sound of my voice brought him back.

“Ah Himi, *Boko*?”

“*Ara ni* Olaja. How was the journey?”

“The journey back home felt longer than usual. There are so many things on my mind. Hmm, how is Toju? Where is she?”

“Omoba Toju has retired for the night, she has not taken Omoba Jolomi’s news well.”

“I expected as much. Her pride must be hurt. I did send word to the Ewoṭon-Ere palace for an explanation, there is nothing that can be done to salvage the situation. I have also had to leave word for Ginuwa, as Okere’s representative he needs to be aware.”

“But what reason did they give for calling off the engagement? They were both on good terms since his last visit.”

“Ah, it is a juju accident. You know he left to undergo training with his father’s people. Turns out the training did not go well. Jolomi is no longer the person we knew.”

“Juju! But he was very skilled!”

“You would know better than I the workings of juju, but I guess even the most skilled juju users can be met with such terrible fates.”

“Omoba Toju would be devastated to hear the news, will you tell her?”

“I am considering whether or not it is necessary to mention. I will go to my study, I have some work from the palace I did not finish.”

“Shall I bring your meal in there?”

“Yes, thank you.”

I watched the Ologbostere walk down the hall and pause in front of his study, he was staring down the hall that led to the Toju’s sleeping quarters. I wished he would go in and talk to her, but he opened the study door and walked in. I made my way to the kitchen to fetch his meal, he deserved to eat some hot starch.

I dreamt of my younger days in Ojo-Ubowe, when I still wanted to be a temple maiden. That sort of life was difficult for one born without juju. My father was yelling at my mother again, asking her where I came from, he could never have sired a juju-less child like me, a useless child like me.

There was a knock on my door

“Himi.” Someone was calling for me, but the voice did not sound like my mother’s, neither did it sound like my father’s.

“Himi” Who was calling me?

“Himi, are you awake or has sleep taken you?” It was the Ologbostere. My eyes sprang open, he never calls once I have retired. Something must have happened.

“Himi?”

“Sorry Olaja, I am awake. How may I help you?”

“We have a guest, bring some water and kpokpo garri to the study. I would need you to stay by the door and ensure no one comes in.”

“Yes Olaja, I will be there soon.”

I started to wear my clothes, what kind of visitor comes at the dead of night, whose problems would the Ologbostere fix tonight. They all came to him for everything and anything. If their barn burnt down or their children were wayward everyone in Warri came to see him.

Perhaps it is because he studied at Beju, people in this area thought the Ologbostere had all the answers.

I carried a tray with a gourd of water, two cups, kpokpo garri sprinkled with pepper and dried fish towards the study.

I knocked once and stated my business

“Olaja, it is Himi, I have brought what you requested.”

“Enter.” He responded

I opened the door, ready to steal a glance at the late night visitor.

“*Odejuma.*” I said my greetings while looking up to meet the eyes of the guest and froze. I would recognise the colour of his skin from anywhere. The regent was the one who had come calling. I wondered if his face twitched in annoyance when he heard me refer to the Ologbostere as Olaja.

“Place the tray on the table and go to your post.”

I did as I was directed and walked out of the room, closing the door behind me.

I took my place beside the door and I waited. I was not sure if the Ologbostere was aware that his study, while filled with books was not soundproof, especially at this time of the night. The stillness made their voices even clearer.

“Tunoka, how could you leave a message like that and just return to Warri?”

“I was not aware that I needed to stay.”

“Toritseju’s engagement was called off from Ewoton-Ere’s side, that was all your note said. I need further explanation.”

“I see, I did not think you would be concerned with such a personal matter.”

“She and whomever she marries will be the future of Okere, it is not personal business, it concerns the crown. What exactly happened?”

“Omoba Jolomi was met with a grave accident while undergoing his juju training.”

“I thought they boasted him one of the best? Such a person can suffer a grave accident? Is he maimed? Did he lose a limb?”

“Maimed yes. He was a Diden juju user. His training was to make him a master empath but it seemed he failed to reach the tranquil state and entered an apathetic one instead.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning the Prince no longer feels a thing, he cannot process physical or emotional pain. He does not value relationships or connections. His own mother is struggling to prove her worth to him. Toju cannot go through that for damaged goods.”

“Damaged though he may be now, you speak of the boy like he were mere property. A means to an end.”

“Ginuwa you said it yourself, Toju and whomever she marries would be Okere’s future. He was a means to an end. It was fortunate that they developed a strong connection, to make their marriage a lot easier but now all that work was for nothing. She will have to marry another of the princes.”

“Hmm.” Ginuwa said, he seemed to be working up the courage to say something.

“You made a valid point about the importance of them building a connection before their marriage. I think it would be better if she were married to someone she knew, not a stranger.”

“That would be ideal but Toju and Jolomi started courting from a young age, she does not have such a connection with any other Prince.”

“She does with Erejuwa.”

“Your son Erejuwa?”

“Why not? They have known each other since she was five! That is all the connection they need!”

“We have spoken at length about this, your son is lacking.”

“He is just hot headed! Toritseju balances him out.”

“He is arrogant and proud and does not know his place. You had a duty to raise him right. To ensure he knows that he lives on borrowed time in that palace. You needed to raise your children right but you failed. That boy prances around like the seat of the Ogiame is his!”

“He is but a boy, there is still time for him to change, room for him to grow. My children have lived their whole life in the palace, imagine how they would feel if one day that was all taken from them.”

“You cannot be surprised when something that was never yours is returned to its rightful owner.”

“You fault me for their upbringing but you never ascended the throne. How long will I serve as regent?”

“Ha ha ha, your father, Ikenwoli would have had my head if I tried to take the throne, you and I both know that.”

“My father died many years ago, perhaps while he lived your life was at stake, but since his death you have been free.”

“You speak like you have forgotten about the blood pact. We were to atone for the mistakes of our fathers and raise our children to do right. That throne is Toju’s, not mine. I did my part, have you?”

“Do not speak of the blood pact so openly! People do not take kindly to things like that around here!”

“You are the one yelling, besides, I trust my people, yours are the ones with loose lips perhaps. Anyway, Erejuwa is not an option.”

“But he is! He is the best option you have. His grandfather loved him, should he and Toju wed the royal lineage of Okere shall become one. Ikenwoli’s faction would be absorbed and there would be no more infighting, at least not for a few twenty or so years.”

“You make a point.” Tunoka said after a long pause, letting out a sigh

“So will you consider it?”

“While your point holds water, I cannot help but feel that you are pushing for this because you cannot bring yourself to remove your family from the palace.”

“Both things can be true at once little brother.”

“With the work that has been piled on me, I look like the older one.” Tunoka replied.

There was a pause before Gina replied solemnly

“I will still die before you, your frown lines are just signs of wisdom. By the way, how did Toritseju take the news about Jolomi?”

“I have not told her the full details, I plan to do so when the day breaks. I will also broach the topic of Erejuwa as a suitor and see how she takes it. If she does not resist, I will send word to the palace.”

“So the decision is in her hands?”

“It is hers to make.”

“Thank you. We are doing what is best for Okere, do not doubt it for a second.” Ginuwa said, getting up to leave.

“Will you make the journey back tonight? Why not stay?”

“No, no, Jumi awaits me. I promised I would return and so I must.”

“As you wish. Send my greetings to Lady Jumi.”

“I will look forward to a favourable response from you. *Odeguma*”

“*Odeguma.*” With that the two men exited the study. Himi was still standing by the door, nothing about her demeanour or face showed that she had heard their full conversation. She watched the men make their way towards the carriages. The Olaja and the Omoba, but which was which?