A WARRIOR'S LOVE

Amadi, the strongest man in the village of Okorocha, was a figure both revered and feared. His reputation as a formidable warrior had spread far and wide. Towering above most in the village, he possessed a physique that could rival the tallest trees, his broad chest and brawny muscles giving him an imposing presence. His face bore the marks of countless battles, etched with scars and bruises, a testament to the ferocity with which he had defended his honour and his people. His eyes, however, revealed a hidden depth, a longing for something that had eluded him for years—love. To give and to receive love, a feeling that he craved for as long as time.

Amadi's journey into the world of solitude and strength began at a tender age. The war with the Ogidi fighters had claimed the lives of his family, leaving him an orphan. Since then, he had been a solitary figure, forced to fend for himself in a world where only the strong survived. Yet, amidst his reputation as a fearless warrior, there was an ache in his heart, a yearning for the warmth of companionship. Due to his sturdy appearance, approaching such emotion and reacting accordingly seemed impossible. In his single room crowded with raggedy clothes and a mirror, he attempted to practice his skill in making advances, and it never agreed with the mentality that people had about him and the perspective of himself.

In the heart of Okorocha, two sisters stood out like radiant stars against the night sky. Oluchi, the younger of the two, possessed an otherworldly beauty that left everyone awestruck. Her crystal-clear eyes seemed to hold the secrets of the universe, and her coarse black hair shimmered like the midnight sky. Her curves were a work of art, the envy of women and the desire of men, casting a spell on all who gazed upon her. Amaka, the older one of both, was shaped as an hourglass, coated in caramel skin, eyes in the shape of the modern cat-eye, however quite fierce and intolerant to nonsense.

Amaka and her younger sister, Oluchi, were the daughters of the late Chief Mbaka, the village's revered herbalist and native doctor. Tragedy had struck their family twice, first with their father's demise from a terrible ailment and later with their mother's banishment for committing adultery, a shadowy figure who had vanished into obscurity.

The bond between Amaka and Oluchi was unbreakable, a testament to the love and support they provided each other in the face of adversity. Yet, even within the sanctuary of their sisterly love, they could not escape the pervasive fear that

gripped the village—the fear of Amadi. His presence loomed over them like a dark cloud, a constant reminder of the fragility of their world.

Amadi's heart, however, beat for Oluchi. He had watched her from afar, admiring her beauty and grace, but his reputation had cast a shadow over any hope of approaching her. Each time he mustered the courage to speak to her, she would flee to the protective embrace of Amaka, trembling with fear. In Amaka's arms, Oluchi found solace, a refuge from the terror that Amadi instilled in her. Amaka had organised the youth to sound a clear warning to this village monster, to stay away from his sister, but would that stop him?

Meanwhile, Ifunanya, known affectionately as Ifu by her friends in the village, had returned from "Obodo ibo," the land of opportunities, where she had undergone rigorous training to become part of the military force. News of the fearsome warrior Amadi had reached her ears, and she was determined to test her mettle against him. Ifu had inherited the martial prowess of her late father, Odinaya, the indestructible; honing her skills in the hallowed halls of the Den of Fighters. Her resolve was unyielding; she aimed to challenge Amadi in the upcoming Abali festival, a test of strength, skill, and courage.

Ifu's audacious decision to enter the male-dominated world of the Abali festival stirred a whirlwind of emotions in the village. Many were incredulous, scoffing at the idea of a woman challenging the mightiest warrior in Okorocha. But Ifu, undeterred by the skepticism and mockery, believed that strength was not confined by gender, and she was determined to shatter the glass ceiling of tradition.

Curiously, many men in the village rallied behind Ifu, for they too yearned to break free from the shackles of Amadi's overwhelming presence. Their families had long compared them unfavourably to the village champion, burdening them with insults like "That is a real man, all you do is eat, eat, eat," "You are a weakling, a disgrace," and "Big for nothing." Among these men was Akan, a man of quiet intelligence and astuteness, whose humility and kindness contrasted sharply with Amadi's brash demeanour. He avoided chaos and was always on the side of peace but with much pestering from his wife, he was forced to show his strength in the upcoming fight contest to prove his masculinity. A challenge he could escape from if he had the slightest opportunity.

Amaka's encounter with Ifu on a dewy morning during her routine farm work marked the beginning of a significant bond. As they exchanged stories and shared

their perceptions of Amadi, their friendship deepened. Over time, they would break bread together and recount their unique experiences, their conversations stretching into the late hours of the night, discussions about the villagers, their laws, and the Abali, night of war.

Ifu gradually confided in Amaka about her audacious plan to challenge Amadi in the Abali festival especially after it was revealed to her that he had eyes for Oluchi. She was determined to use his weakness against him by inviting Oluchi to the battlefield and forcing him to surrender otherwise threaten him with his love interest. Despite Amaka's reservations about the life-threatening nature of the event and vehemently refusing her sister's presence at such, she couldn't dissuade her new friend from her daring mission, worry was worn all over her face, and as much as she tried to discourage her friend, warning her of the deadly implications, it fell on deaf ears. Ifu swore on her life that she would protect Oluchi and after much persuasion, Oluchi was convinced to help Ifu but with utmost reluctance. The sisters were left with no other option but to support their friend with raging fear in their hearts.

Simultaneously, Oluchi found herself increasingly drawn to Amadi. In his own enigmatic way, Amadi began showering her with gifts, each token a silent declaration of his affection. He uprooted cassava, cut down plantain branches, tapped palm wine, and presented her with rare and exquisite beads from neighbouring villages. Their connection deepened, with stolen glances and unspoken words forging a bond between them.

One fateful day, Oluchi gathered the courage to approach Amadi, her trembling hand reaching out to touch his rugged face. The moment their skin met, an electric current seemed to pass between them, a spark of connection that transcended fear and reputation. Amadi, usually stoic and fierce, found himself strangely moved by this simple act of affection. It was as if a long-dormant ember within him had been reignited, kindling a flame of profound emotion. Their eyes met and although she couldn't explain the feeling, their hearts connected. He smirked as she held him, and butterflies loudly rumbled in her tummy even amidst the rustling of the trees.

Ifu had personal training sessions and on a random day while she was preparing, she met a devastated Akan, worried about the challenge. They spoke for hours, and she might have hint him about her plans. She further encouraged him to flee the battlefield if he didn't feel up to the task. A beam of hope swelled on his face, and he decided to check-out of the fight.

The Abali festival, a grand spectacle of strength and valour, approached with fervour. The entire village awaited the momentous event, dressed in dark-coloured attire that symbolized war and resilience. The women carried calabashes on their heads, some hitting tambourines and the older men held long sticks as the tradition demanded. Some adorned themselves with horizontal strips of tree leaves between their teeth, while others bore coal marks across their faces. The drummers played with such vigour that it seemed the very drums themselves might shatter. Singers kept screaming a monotonous screeching sound as the dancers performed calisthenic to the tune of the music.

In the midst of the anticipation, the King of Okorocha sat regally on his throne, his stern countenance overseeing the gathering holding the staff of honour. His wife sat on a similar throne right beside him, they were surrounded with guards and maidens of the palace. Far across his left, a line of 25 burly men, their chests heaving with anticipation, vibrated with nervous energy, cracking their necks and emitting silent growls. Amadi stood opposite them, regarded with a mix of disdain and reluctant respect by the villagers. While some resented him, others admired his prowess.

Behind this formidable line of contenders stood Ifunanya, an average-sized woman with her hair tied up in dreadlocks. She wore black shorts, a t-shirt, and fighting gloves, defying convention as the sole female participant. Murmurs and jeers rippled through the crowd, but Ifu remained resolute, ready to challenge the status quo.

The fight was deadly. You either win or die. It has been a form of entertainment and unnecessary terror for the villagers over the past ten years to challenge the energy of the strongest man at that time. For other families that have successfully won the contest, they are offered a ton of gifts, being feared by all and sundry as that was the ultimate sign of authority. They only partook of this contest after undergoing series of rigorous training that included punching tree trunks, breaking massive stones with their bare hands, holding their breath underwater for long hours, attempting to fight forest animals and fortifying themselves with native charms.

As the festival commenced with a resounding horn blow and thunderous drumming, the first challenger, Odigo, stepped into the arena to face Amadi. The battle was fierce, with Odigo making the first move by targeting Amadi's eyes. Yet, Amadi effortlessly countered, twisting Odigo's arm as if in a playful sibling tussle. He followed up with a devastating kick to Odigo's knee, sending him

sprawling to the ground. With two swift movements, Amadi dispatched his opponent, and the village guards rushed to remove Odigo's lifeless body from the arena.

Kachum, a lanky giant standing at 6 feet 6 inches, was the next to challenge Amadi. He aimed for Amadi's knees but missed his mark by a wide margin. In a swift, brutal manoeuvre, Amadi seized Kachum by the neck, bending him as if to tie him into a bow. The sickening sound of Kachum's back cracking echoed through the square. Amadi then delivered a powerful elbow strike to the middle of his spine, leaving Kachum bleeding from every orifice. The crowd roared with laughter when Amadi whimsically suggested skipping with Kachum's lifeless body.

With each successive fight, Amadi maintained his dominance, his eyes occasionally straying in Oluchi's direction. She blushed each time their gazes met, and Amaka couldn't help but notice the secret exchange of glances between the two. Suspicion gnawed at her, and she resolved to confront her sister about the hidden affection blossoming before her eyes.

Amaka's anger boiled over as she dragged Oluchi aside. Her voice thundered, cutting through the cacophony of the festival. "Are you crazy? What is this madness you're showing here? When did this nonsense start?" She demanded answers, determined to unravel the mystery of her sister's affection for Amadi. Oluchi stammered; her words barely coherent. "Sister, I...I...I like him, and he likes me too, a lot," she finally confessed, her eyes cast downward in a mixture of shame and longing.

Amaka's rage flared at the revelation, she was tempted to hit her sister but held herself together, irritatingly stared at her from top to bottom and stormed off, leaving Oluchi behind, her heart torn between love and loyalty.

Oluchi, left to her own thoughts, adjusted her position and watched as Amadi continued to conquer his challengers. He would occasionally signal her with a subtle wave and smile, igniting the curiosity of more villagers who noticed the unspoken connection between them.

When Amadi faced his 24th opponent, he was visibly fatigued from the relentless battles. Despite his weariness, he summoned the last reserves of his strength and emerged victorious.

Ifu as planned invited Oluchi to the ground, “You all underestimate the power of a woman. Oluchi come to this center now” Ifunanya shouted. Oluchi reluctantly came because of the agreement they previously had. Amadi became evidently uneasy, “She should not be here, this is not safe for her” For the first time, Amadi was shaking, if the area was silent, one could probably hear his heart pounding so hard, that he lost his focus and Ifu sensed his disorientation. “Oh, so you can be this weak? Poor man” Oluchi stood in the middle of both of them confused and terrified. She looked at Ifunanya who whispered to her that she would be fine and wouldn’t get hurt, and then she looked over to Amadi who told her to relax and she was safe.

Just when she calmed down a bit, tragedy struck in the most shocking way, an arrow from the crowd found its mark, striking Oluchi in the forehead. The crowd erupted in chaos as Oluchi fell lifeless to the ground. Panic and grief swept through the village as the guards rushed to find the perpetrator. Amadi, wracked with guilt and despair, blamed Ifunanya for Oluchi's presence on the battlefield. The atmosphere was charged with tension, and the entire village mourned the untimely loss of a beloved young woman.

The question of who had killed Oluchi haunted the villagers, leaving a cloud of uncertainty hanging over Okorocha. Ifunanya refrained from visiting Amaka who surprisingly didn't feign an atom of grief, because she was consumed by guilt and convinced that her presence had led to Oluchi's death. Amadi, once a fearsome warrior, wept openly for the first time, his heart shattered by the loss of the woman he had secretly loved.

Days turned into weeks, and the mystery of Oluchi's death remained unsolved. The village convened a town gathering, where villagers swore to unveil the killer's identity, their lives hanging in the balance if they lied. The solemn ritual commenced, each villager taking their turn to declare their innocence. Yet, despite the collective oath, the truth remained elusive.

As hope waned and the gathering neared its end, a sudden disturbance shattered the silence. A villager, seemingly driven to madness, confessed to the crime. He revealed a chilling plot to exploit Amadi's weakness and had executed Oluchi's death with calculated precision. With his confession, the guilty man fell lifeless, his guilt consuming him. The killer was Akan.