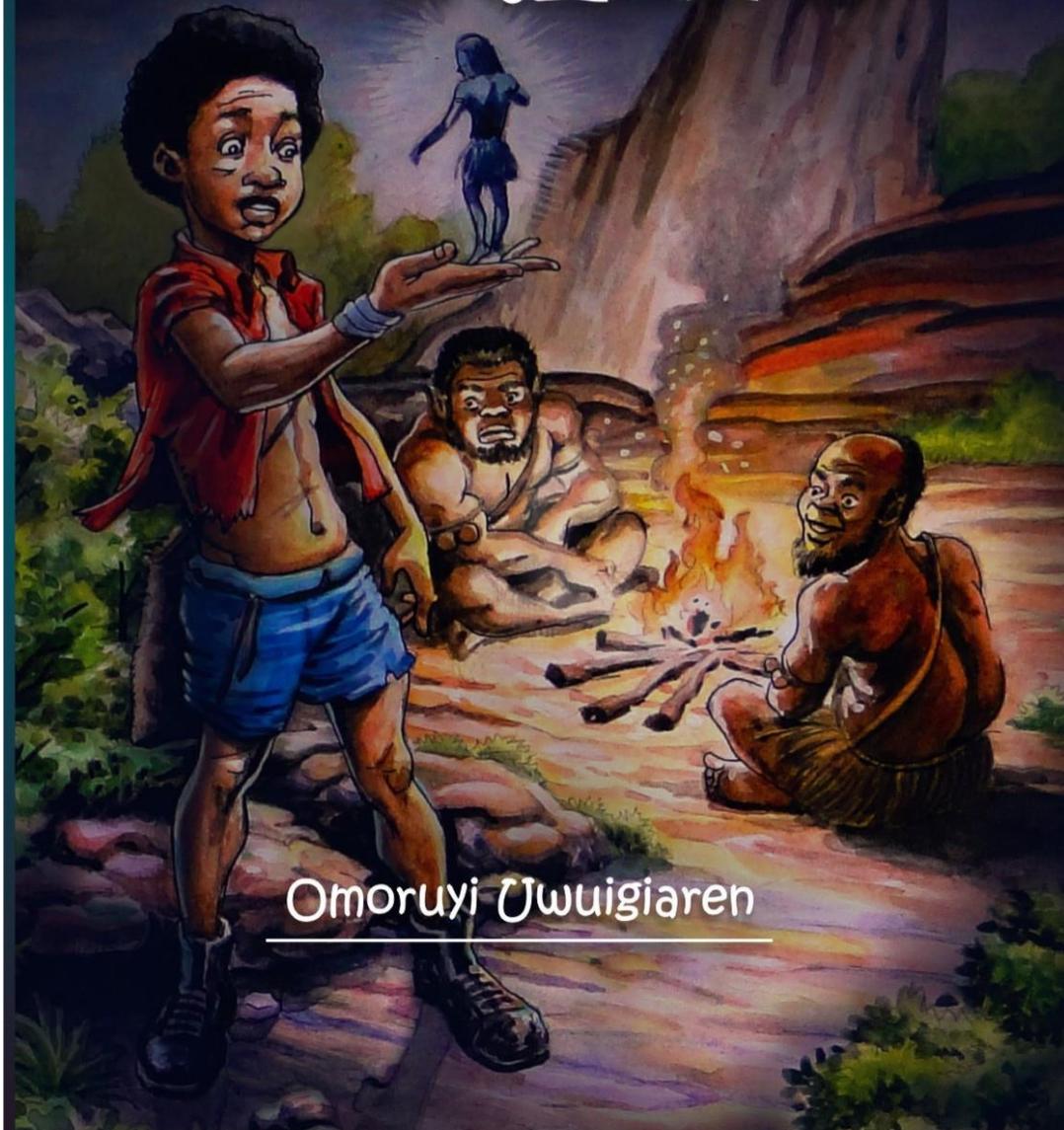


THE Adventures OF **NIHU**



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The Adventures of Nihu

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CHAPTER ONE

THE LONELY FOREST

As the evening gradually took her place in the scheme of things, farmers observed it was rather too late to continue their ambitions on the hillside. Thus, they began to journey back to their proud heritage—the countryside that they called home. As they walked, the bush paths felt their coming, and their wild hits of feet wrote frustration on the face of old Earth. Rickety legs would do no harm to such a hard Earth—she would laugh if such feet would keep treading all day.

Gubado also had his share of a good day and was returning home -- pride hung from his neck like an Olympic medal. Those who knew what pride could do also assumed that his high mindedness was because he was going to be given a piece of land that set him apart from his brother, Goudonas, the father of Nihu. This transfer of property would render Nihu's father as one of the poorest in the family.

As the farmers reached their various destinations, Nihu, a young hunter who was known for playing flute in his local district, was out that evening with bow and arrows. It all began well for him, for an opportunity came his way immediately. As he advanced into the forest, he ran into an antelope that was busy grazing near a bush path void of human activity. Nihu squinted his eyes and took aim, but his shot went wide and the arrow stuck into a tree. Meanwhile, the antelope rose, noticing the action that was against its poor soul, and faded safely into the nearby bush. As for Nihu, he

did not go to recover the arrow that struck the tree. He drew another arrow from his quiver and went another way, still in search of an animal for the night. When all effort to get one failed, he retreated home to grab his dinner and put the day behind him.

After Nihu had gone, a robber, who had seen the shot to the antelope, was lying in ambush, awaiting his prey of the evening. He got hold of Nihu's arrow to use as a weapon if, eventually, he ran into anyone. Like any thief that would never want to be caught or seen, he took cover like a militia in the woods, knowing that his prey would be along shortly.

When Gubado emerged from the evening's shadows, the pride of a champion was still alive within him. One could see the high look standing far taller than the pair of legs that carried him. That pair of rickety legs could provoke laughter in a congregation of people with dark conscience. Laughter would reign gloriously on their faces because of what nature made out of him.

Pride and fulfillment walked on the most precious streets of Gubado's heart. Perhaps an orator had sold the new look to him. The glory within the noble farmer did not encourage him to take a careful look here and there. Maybe Gubado would have seen the robber when he came out briefly to see if a victim was on his way.

As Gubado got close, the robber fell upon him. They had a fair struggle. Gubado fought back with the cutlass he hung around his neck, but his blow came late as the robber had already driven the arrow into Gubado's chest. As he staggered, his cutlass fell to the ground and he began to battle very hard to overcome the cruel hand of death that gradually enveloped him. The robber got hold of the cutlass that was lying somewhere in the dirt and zapped off Gubado's head.

The deal was done. Gubado's body rested peacefully on the bare chest of the Earth as his head rolled unto the edge of the bush path. Quietly, the thief collected all that was on the severed countryman. Rings, beads and all his belongings were placed in his pockets. A future of plenty emerged from just a few minutes of assault. The robber fled into the night, carefully looking to every side to make sure that no one saw him carry out such an evil act.

A few days later, Gubado's body was found. The massacre had tongues wagging in the countryside. The arrow that stood in his left chest was still there and the severed head invited flies and ravenous animals to have their share of the free meal. Before the bald vultures could eat what the robber had served them, the people began to cry for justice to take its due course.

The news reached the King who sent his soldiers to get the body for proper examination. Gubado's corpse was brought to the palace, Nihu's arrow still sticking in his chest. A farmer, one who had seen Nihu shooting arrows in the forest, visited the palace to report the incident. With this confirmation, the King and his council of elders concluded that Nihu was the murderer. He must have done it so that his father, Goudonas would finally be in possession of the land that had set brother against brother.

In the midst of the trouble, Goudonas and his son were summoned before the many eyes that were begging justice to fall upon Nihu. The King's court was flush with nobles and commoners who took their respective seats as their standings in the community implied. Angry looks hung on the faces of the observers who raised a roar immediately Goudonas and his accused son walked into the court. "Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!" The cry went like splitting rocks. "Hang the owl, Your Majesty!" a

section of the crowd chanted. As the crowd booed, about three hundred eyes waited anxiously, while others sat in perpetual anger in the sockets of the faces that bore them.

Their looks were begging for justice that they felt was timely for a man so full of courage and bravery. Gubado's love had prevailed everywhere. With a wave of his bejeweled hand, the King signaled stillness. The roar ceased. The murmurings slowly quieted as the King cleared his throat and said, "Nihu, come forward."

Nihu did so and bowed in obeisance, as was the custom. But the king sneered, "Don't bow to me. Eat your regard. Just let me know now. Did you kill Gubado or not?"

The King's baritone voice filled the air as everyone nodded, and some shouted, "Yes! Yes! Good question for the spoiled brat!"

"I did not do any harm to my uncle," Nihu replied.

"Then who did it? Your arrow was found driven into his chest. How would you prove to me and the people that you did not have a hand in the death of your uncle, Nihu?"

"My lord, it was true that I shot an arrow in the forest, but it was an antelope I intended to hit but missed. The arrow struck on a tree and not in the chest of my uncle as you have said, Your Majesty."

"You are a liar. Your arrow sent him to the silent world. If as you claim, your arrow struck a tree, why then did we find Gubado dead?"

"I don't know. Someone else must have done that."

The king spoke nonchalantly. "Were I in a festive mood, I would have ordered your neck right away. But I do not see fit to take your life today. You will be banished for thirty years. Moreover, it is to no other place other than the Lonely Forest. Go and prove your innocence in the forest! If you

survive, you survive. But if you die, it is your own evil that will have killed you. And as for that piece of land that must have prompted you to commit such treachery, it shall be given to Gubado's children."

The king turned to his guards and ordered, "Let him take a parting gift!" Then he went into his chamber.

The guards pounced on Nihu and carried him upon their shoulders like a sacrificial lamb. The crowd chanted victory songs and cast stones at his father who tasted confusion and frustration as his meal for the day. With his legs kicking the air, Nihu was carried to the field where he was tied to a stake. One of the hefty guards, as dark as the midnight, drew his whip and laid it forty times across Nihu's back. With every stroke, the boy yelled like a farmer from the bush tribe suffering a dismal turn at the wake of a bountiful harvest. His fellow farmers paraded smiles over their faces.

When the guard was finished with the breathtaking exercise, he threw the whip away and washed his hands in a bowl of salt water. His colleagues did likewise as if it was an abomination to see a person in agony. One of them carried the bowl of water and emptied it on Nihu who was already covered in a pool of his own blood. He wept as a hungry baby for the salt water tormented his battered flesh. He rested on the stake like a frustrated man reduced by the dreadful sting of his fishwife. The guard, who had flogged him, brought out a knife and cut the ropes that held Nihu to the stake. Set free, he fell as the guards left the scene, one after the other leaving trails of huge doubt of a better destiny for Nihu.

After some time, Nihu's mother rushed to the field to see her son battered and slipping in and out of consciousness. Seeing what the guards had done to her boy, she wept bitterly and began to clean Nihu's body with the edge of her wrapper. She ran home to get a clean cloth, Nihu's

rucksack, and flute. When she got to the field, she dressed Nihu in the clean cloth and gave him a pain reliever as well. Since it was an abomination for anyone to be seen with a condemned murderer, his mother had to sneak away before anyone noticed. Before sunset, Nihu found his feet. He got hold of his rucksack and left the village to confront a destiny he did not want to imagine.

Leaves cracked helplessly under his old pair of boots as he forged ahead. A humble serenity reigned in the forest making it seem like an under world, a lost world where evening devils are always ready to make anyone a meal. Behind the tall trees standing like Rocks of Gibraltar, the scorching sun was apparently defeated and could not leave its trademark on the ground. It was forced to stay on the mountaintops, plains, and treetops without penetrating down to rob the Earth of its cool shade. Yet the sun still happily made itself felt, sending reflected rays around the coast, as the streams and rivers waited to receive its glow. They received what the sun threw at them with much humility. The sun lay low like one with a dismal past who had not plucked up his spirit to confront the challenges. A light wind blew and trees bowed gently as a few gleams of sunshine lit up the gloomy afternoon. An underworld, the den of evening devils, was what came to mind in the quiet forest.

The trip-trap, trip-trap of Nihu's feet displaced dry leaves. More were pressed under the crushing steps of his old boots. A few fell a distance away as if receiving a blow from an enemy. Nihu barely raised his feet off the ground, though they descended like wreckage on the heart of the Earth.

Fruit bats made the forest and her fruits their heaven in the night. In bitter nights, when bats come from nowhere and fill the air, dark powers send appropriate meals to hell. Many fruits were not thoroughly eaten and

rotted in the litter, leaving a trail of waste. Nihu's boots slipped on one such black pool, lifting the boy from the forest floor. As he was descending to be received by the open arms of Earth, the old baobab tree behind was all that was needed for him to adjust to vertical. Even a tree can have an existential purpose. Nihu crashed and yelled aloud. As soon as he realized that he was not injured after all, he threw the incident behind him.

Slowly, he got back on his feet, picked up the rucksack that had slipped off his hand onto the ground. After he slammed the bag on his back, he turned around. Perhaps someone was lurking in the creepy environment, but there was no real threat to his life yet.

Confusion settled on his face and frustration too. The beauty of the environment was a deafening silence. This kind of stillness provokes not only curiosity, but also prompts the heart to skip a beat. Fear of the unknown creates anxiety that can set the legs in different directions, encouraging uncoordinated steps, successfully setting the mind in total disarray.

Dead woods, limbs, and climbing shrubs slowed his feet and added to Nihu's uncertainty in the twilight. Any rational person prefers to steal along in order to avert a miserable hit from an unknown. Nihu held his bag firmly, supporting his frame with his left hand that he rested at intervals on the trees separated from each other sometimes by yards and sometimes by inches. Every now and then, his thirst beckoned, begging for an attention that only water could help. At intervals, he would break forth and grab his water bottle a true companion from which he could drink.

No named destination guided his feet and soon they began to make demands of their own. Luckily, his mother had thought to include provisions in his rucksack. As quickly as he could work his mouth around the walnuts

from the sack, he sent them much needed refreshment. The sun retired gradually from the busy torment of the world it was ordered to serve since creation. Nihu, too, had his own share of the diminishing return that is like plague when it is taking its toll. His shoulders sagged as much as his legs that were already too difficult for him to deliberately maneuver. Finally, the sun rested on the bed of sudden death somewhere in the sky, and then was gone to find its own peace.

There were few stars in the bare chest of the sky. They happily gave their lights near the moon. When darkness began to tread the sun's old path, Nihu knew that going further would be a dangerous choice in a creepy kind of place like this. He found succor under a tree and rested on his rucksack that he made into a pillow. As the twilight continued to ride on the wings of the evening, the glowing insects and crickets began to inhabit their world and Nihu's eyes stumbled on the full moon. The trees would bow gently to the natural hand at work, revealing the beauty of the sky that sustained the moon in the face of the dull evening.

The night crept in and thoughts began to crowd in Nihu's head. First, he thought of a beast that could ravage him as he lay under the foot of the tree. He quickly sat up and gave a careful look at every side of the night. No devil yet, but glowing multitudes of insects were like the eyes of a wild cat with the utmost desire to feast on prey right away. A ravenous look alone could kill a dove. Unsure of what he was seeing, perceiving that the lights from the insects could be what he most feared, Nihu jumped to his feet. He quickly climbed a nearby baobab tree and found comfort on one of the branches. That became his retreat as long as the night continued to have its way. At least, he was now safe from what the night might bring

against him. Perhaps formidable rodents, whose bites stung dreadfully and could, send a body to hell.

The comfort was good and timely. Nihu was yet to find sleep when he heard a roar a few poles away. He raised his head and stared in the direction of the sound, humble fright written on his face. But the night hindered him from seeing what was beyond so that he could know the devil behind such a heartbreaking roar. Everything, including the light from the glowing insects was misleading. The roar persisted, disrupting his comfort as he held tightly to the tree branch that held him. A slip could eventually rob him of his life if he fell on the path of a beast that would not spare him a breath before he would make a meal out of him.

The ground was as dark as the night and Nihu's efforts to see the source of the roar hit a brick wall. He would need at least a lamp before he could see beyond his nose. In spite of the many glowing insects hanging here and there among the leaves, the boy could see nothing. The insects were having fun in the tense night, chasing each other from one end of the tree to the other. Nihu feared everything that was happening around him as the roaring of wild animals grew by the second. He reached for his torch inside his rucksack. He lit it, punched it towards the direction of the roar and received a heavy fright in return. His heart skipped a beat, knocking hard inside his chest when he saw that the sound belonged to an old lion. In less than a second, he switched off the torch. The darkness mounted on the wings of the evening as the lion went near the tree and smelled the ground as if he were tracking an antelope. When it could not find anything, the lion hastened away to another place where it would find a meal for the night. Nihu heaved a sigh of relief that could have felled many trees.

Finally, he bowed to the demand of the night and slept on the branch, the tree at last bringing temporary relief to his worn out body.

CHAPTER TWO

NIHU MEETS OLD PHIL

At daybreak, the forest walked briskly into brightness. Alive for the right reasons, it carried on its inevitable duty, to give light to the world. Happy birds sung aloud a morning song. One might be carried away, thinking there are some instrumentalists having a field day with their keyboards a little distance away. Nihu thought this as he sat up and yawned a million times. The beauty of the morning was like a bed of roses. Still comfortable in his apartment on the tree branch, the activities of the birds had stolen away the urge to sleep. When he looked quietly on every side, his eyes fell upon some monkeys, which prompted a beautiful excitement to overwhelm him. They had their eyes on him as they swooped from one tree to the other as if inviting Nihu to join them.

As he watched the fun, Nihu was struck by thirst. He reached for his water bottle so he could continue to observe the antics that lifted his spirits.

There was nothing left. Thirst made watching the continuing monkey-sports difficult. He had to get water. Just one drink and he could be happy again.

He got down from the tree, and embarked on a journey to put his thirst under control. Knowing how he could be reduced by it, he slammed his rucksack on his back and traveled northward. As he proceeded further, he ran into a tree stained with blood. Flies hovered around it like bees in their hive. Nihu slowed down. He quietly went close to see the kind of insects that were on the tree. When he was considerably close, he noticed a hollow in the tree gushing out blood, which the insects were happily working on. Nihu's head snapped back. Gradually, he went backwards to find safety before the unknown could ravage him. As he tried to find his way, a big movement under the leaves, set his mind in disarray. He looked towards the direction; all he could see was bloodstains on the ground. He began to fight with his thoughts, pondering over what must be going on in this strange forest. *This is strange. Blood is everywhere. Maybe a wild animal just finished feasting on a prey*, he thought. *No, it cannot be. It must be something else.*

The tree gushing out blood reminded Nihu of the ancient Iroko tree, the home of witches and wizards. The tree looked like the last Iroko that had been felled by over fifty able-bodied men with the assistance of some spiritual people whose families and children had been casualties of the powers that be in the countryside. Blood gushed from the tree the day it was brought down.

After the tree fell, hosts of people in the village died. They were those who met at the tree to donate blood and flesh of whomever they wished to send to hell. It was after the fall of the Iroko tree that the people realized they had been living in the midst of devils. But this tree was different. The

stain was continuous, as if something had been dragged to the spot from somewhere else. Nihu followed the stains in the direction it came from as if they were precious things that could prompt a gold seeker to give away his hand to gain a piece of diamond ring.

He found himself in a traditional shrine where human heads and that of animals are sometimes used to appease the gods. As he fixed his eyes on the shrine, he remembered his trip to the stream with his father many years ago.

* * *

The place was a long way from their home. The goddess Ijokpa, a demon that reared livestock and kept her fortress as clean as any well-bred village woman keep, ruled the land. As Nihu and his father headed up the hill that lead to the stream to get the water, which was believed to be medicinal, and could cure all sorts of stomach related ailments, Nihu broke the long silence that had reigned between them.

“Father, who owns these fowls?”

“Sssh. We do not talk too loud here. If you do, she could push you out of her territory. That is the least she would do to an ignorant person.”

“Who is she? Whom are you talking about?”

“Ijokpa. She has existed before our ancestors were born. She owns everything here.”

“What an old crone! What does she do with these hens, cockerels and goats? Does she sell them?”

“I don’t know. Not even our forefathers can tell why she is so delighted in keeping them.”

“Then she must be rearing them for a thief. Or what do you think Father?”

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