

THE RISING LEGEND

a novel

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PART I:
THE ARRIVAL

Chapter One

They came from the south. Azu heard the sound of heavy hammer thuds scattering through the night, as he laid down a yam tuber in the wet soil. Azu was carefully placing the tuber in the ground, making sure that the nodules on the outer skin faced upwards, when his ears rung in the alarming commotion. The sounds were so thunderous; they felt like an earthquake to the hunched, older man. Azu had dark tough skin with fierce deep brown eyes. His eyes roamed the darkness trying to pinpoint the direction of the sound. He shook his head, doubting his hearing and turned back to his crops. However, approaching footsteps got closer and closer and stopped. Azu stood very still, even fearful of breathing. Every fiber of his being was alert. Uncertainty washed over him in cold waves. He began murmuring prayers under his quieted breath.

Up until that night, nothing particularly interesting had happened in Azu's life in Umulu, Edegelem, one of the villages located in Igbo-Etche. Looking forward to the rains and tending crops was a daily guarantee and he looked forward to the mundane corseted routine. The yam tuber was his specialty. During harvest season, he managed to save every tuber of yam from the vine. Many farmers were

known for their impatience and dented the yams in their haste, making them semi-worthless for trading at the market. Due to his penchant for yam harvesting, Azu was often called *ikwaono*. He was last year's *ikwaji* and had produced the largest amount of yams that year. Azu had a carefully groomed method. First, he isolated the ground around the yams, and then he poured water on the vines to reveal the position of the tubers underneath the soil. It was very beautiful seeing his perfect yam tubers, ready for harvesting after a seven-month wait. However, being an *ikwaji* was the last thing on his mind as he hunched down behind some leaves and coiled himself like a snake, poised for attack. The footsteps resumed and his breath quickened with fear. The heavy thuds felt like giant pendulums hitting the earth. Azu finally raised his head and peered through the leaves. He saw a flash of blinding light. Suddenly, the shiny image disappeared round the corner. Azu collapsed on the ground in relief. He clutched his heart in panic and tried to catch his breath. For a man who believed in *juju*, this was one of his greatest fears come to life. Five minutes later, with his breath regained, Azu stood up and started running.

All of this was reported to Chief Ibekam, the wisest Chief in the village, who scratched his beard as he thought carefully of the unprecedented event. The village of Umulu in Edegelem was located in Igbo-Etche, a forested village ensconced in southern Nigeria. It was rural and vastly spacious. There were reports that Umulu's *alaoji* soil

produced crops at a rapid rate. The *alaoji* carried the village through some of the food droughts that plagued the rest of the state. As a result, stories spread through the region of the magnificence of Umulu's fertile soil. The stories also tried to pinpoint the possibilities of the *alaoji's* origin. The most prevalent story focused on the appearance of a giant *oku* circle over the Otamiri River, which enflamed the surrounding village and granted magic-like qualities to the soil.

In Umulu, dirt roads with scattered pebbles paved the main village path down the inches of the village squares. Every family whose lineal heritage could be traced to the original settlers of the land had a right to inherit a parcel of land, firmly grounded in the village's rules regarding birthright. As a result, most of the villagers were able to make a living by farming crops such as yam, cassava, cocoyam, melon leaf and bright red peppers on their gifted land. Hence Umulu's residential division was not accidental, but deliberate, not scattered but focused - with an eye on fiercely protecting lineal rights. The residential huts lined with dried palm fronds, were not coincidental in their placement, but strategically located.

After Chief Ibekam heard Azu's recount, they glanced at each other. Without speaking, Azu and Chief Ibekam ran down the dusty Igbo Road to Kenu's house. As they ran, little billows of dust circled around them like the creeping steam of a volcano and followed their footsteps. The two men believed in *juju* and did not think to question the

ebeleke that silently surrounded them on their journey. Azu knew the order of the houses that lined the street and muttered the names under his breath. Chief Ibekam let Azu take the lead. Chief Ibekam was relieved that Azu, like most people from Umulu, knew the residential delineations by heart. His memory had failed him more than he would have liked to admit. He also needed to think before they arrived at Kenu's house.

As he ran, Azu looked back occasionally at Chief Ibekam. Chief Ibekam was slightly overweight and clumsy and moved slowly. As he glanced back, Azu noticed that Chief Ibekam eyes were filled with fear as his deep black eyes burrowed into an abyss of darkness. He suddenly thought of something else in a flash. He remembered that the image glittered as it thundered past his farm. He knew the myth about the *Igbus*, but never believed that the story of the shining men was real. Up close, the skin of the men was lucent and piercing as lightning coming from an open sky. Azu shuddered at the memory. A dove flew above the sky as the two hurried quickly in the warm humid air.

Azu was embarrassed by his display of cowardice when they rode past him and trampled on his newly prepared soil. If he had been more courageous, he would have gotten a closer look at the animals that accompanied the men. The village of Umulu had never seen anything so forceful. The only animals that tinkled through the village were goats and chickens that were given as gifts or saved for the special meal on holidays. Every holiday season, goats

were slaughtered and live chickens were gifted to families as the village celebrated the arrival of their favorite time of year. However, Azu had never seen such majestic looming animals. He looked up and realized that they had reached their destination.

Azu and Chief Ibekam pounded their fists on door. Hearts racing, they listened frantically for the pitter-patter of footsteps to approach the door to tell them something was coming to calm their fears. Kenu was a rumored descendant of the Ekenulo family. The Ekenulo family had bred two strong generations of wrestlers - unofficial soldiers of the village and indirect guardians of custom. Although the Ekenlous were not soldiers in the literal sense, their physical prowess was a powerful force in the village. Moreover, their physical features were uncompounded - the clearly defined cheekbones and handsomely rugged faces were unique in the village of Umulu.

Kenu was born different. He loomed slightly above six feet, six inches over most men in the village. He had a deep voice but a very infectious laughter, which hinted at a warm and welcoming nature. Kenu's mother was quiet about her pregnancy and refused to disclose Kenu's father's identity to the village. During her pregnancy, rumors spread that Kenu's father was the great wrestler who had famously protected Umulu's farmlands from invaders. The whispered rumors claimed that Ekenulo had denounced Kenu as his son - a huge taboo since ancestry was the foundation of Umulu culture. The people of Umulu despised illegitimacy

- illegitimate children were viewed as disloyal to the tribe. A person's origin was extremely important in Umulu - important decisions regarding marriage and land divisions were based on a person's ancestry. Thus, Kenu's illegitimacy was a source of contention in the village. However, the villagers did not know that Ekenulo's denouncement of Kenu was strategic. Ekenulo was obsessed with finding out the truth behind the mythical *oku* circle that created the *alaoji*. The Chiefs were indignant at his inquisition into Umulu's origin and banished him from Edegelem. After he was banished, Ekenulo was afraid of the potential of the Chiefs' future wrath on Kenu. He decided to denounce Kenu as his son to save his life.

Although rumors traced Kenu's ancestry to his father, the Chiefs allowed Kenu to live, but he was closely monitored. Kenu considered himself lucky - the rumored strength of his family subtly overrode the stigma associated with his illegitimacy. Kenu had never been defeated at anything, even when there were unanticipated attacks on his compound by people who disliked his illegitimacy.

Azu and Chief Ibekam had thought of Kenu because he just won the highly coveted post of *Okalangba* in the annual wrestling match. Starting in November and extending to late December, the whole village gathered at the *Ama* of Edegelem for the annual wrestling competition. Each village in Edegelem offered up their strongest wrestlers to compete for the title of *Okalangba*. Winning the title was not an easy feat. It carried tremendous power

and prestige through out the village. The title of *Okalangba* conferred a special privilege to the title bearer as the strongest man in the region.

The wrestling match was the culmination of a weeklong festival. The festival started on Monday, preceding the Saturday event, and continued till the celebration at the end of the week. Visitors flocked to Edegelem to celebrate the arrival of the annual competition. The wrestling match was held at the *Ama* of Edegelem. For most of the year, it was deserted and children took advantage of the desertion and played games in the square. However, by the end of the year, the *Ama* had turned to a well-decorated wrestling ring with banners and colorful fabrics lining the artificially constructed fences. For the Saturday wrestling ceremony, the *Ama* had a white oval entrance that was lined with *adima* and *abiglo* dancers in beaded garments and bared bellies dancing and chanting the wrestlers on during their fight. Poles were erected and shielded with red and yellow sheets that looked like paint splashes from the sky to cover the village elders who made an appearance to watch for the crowning of a potential future leader.

The tables were lined with *ngwo*, *kai kai* and *guinnesse*. The *guinnesse* was only served at the annual event and were mostly favored by the *adima* dancers. Children were drawn to the festive event and gathered around the *Ama* eating snacks like *chin-chin*, guavas and *udaras* and waiting for the ceremony to begin. Women flocked to watch the wrestlers

and giggled behind raised fans and pattered pouts as they gossiped about the potential winner. The wrestling match was never formally announced or set at a specific time; the winds let everyone know when to head to the *Ama*. By the time the sun had gone to bed, the *Ama* was filled with hundreds of men and women decked in colorful attires, hungry for the match and cheering at the potential crowning of a new phenomenon.

On that day, Kenu was one of the last wrestlers to arrive at the match. He exuded a quiet demeanor that surprised the guests. Most wrestlers swaggered around the ring chanting *juju* phrases and pumping their fists in the air. Kenu glanced at the wrestlers and walked silently to his canopy. Everyone had heard of Kenu's wrestling skills before he appeared that Saturday. Prior to the wrestling match, the aspiring wrestlers practiced with each other, and sometimes, the previous *Okalangba* would appear at a practice. Kenu had heard that Nebu, the previous year's *Okalangba*, was scheduled to make an appearance at the Wednesday practice session. He had attended the practice and watched Nebu defeat his opponents. When it was his turn, he tackled him to the ground in minutes. After that, Kenu withdrew from the weeklong festivities and there were speculations surrounding his participation on Saturday. As Kenu walked to his seat, some people glanced at him, remembering rumors of his tackle at the Wednesday practice. However, most people dismissed his presence and turned their eyes to the chanting wrestlers.

Kenu was poised and composed as he took his seat, after bowing low at the waist to greet the Chiefs. They glanced at him lazily and resumed watching the forming crowd. Kenu picked up a cup of water and shielded his eyes with his hands as his eyes roamed the *Ama* surveying his competitors and audience. Kenu tried to keep calm before great moments. He was very excitable by nature, but he had mastered the art of inner restraint. As he sipped on the tepid water, Kenu surveyed all the other wrestlers with intense concentration, trying to size up the fight in each wrestler. He noticed that Nebu smiled broadly as he joked around with the dancers. The dancers giggled flirtatiously at his jokes. Nebu was confident because he was the reigning *Okalangba* for three years in a row. Obviously, Nebu had dismissed Kenu's tackle at practice and was confident of another win.

Suddenly, a white light appeared in a flash and pierced his eyes. He momentarily lost his sight and panicked and he dropped his cup. As he slowly regained his sight, a white-cloaked mirage appeared in the distance, nestled as a part of the clouds within a rainbow. Kenu stared at the mirage in shock. He assumed it was a hallucination. He blinked to regain composure and pinched himself to affirm that he wasn't dreaming.

"*Kenuuuuuuuuu*" a voice wailed.

Kenu bolted upright in his chair and stared at the image in surprise, unable to deny the truth in front of his eyes.

"Kenuuuuuuuuu" the voice boomed again. "*You have been chosen...*"

Kenu looked around in fear wondering if anyone close to him had seen the image. From the laughter and lightness in the air, Kenu realized that this was his image, meant solely for his vision. He looked up again and saw that the clouds had drawn together to cover the rainbow and that the cloaked image had disappeared.

Kenu won the wrestling match that day. An undeniable powerful force surrounded him during the competition. At the start of the wrestling match, each wrestler squatted in the wrestling ring, searching for a challenger. When it was his turn, Kenu squatted solidly in the ring as the first wrestler circled him, his eyes flaring as he strategized on the best way to topple Kenu. An automatic defeat was when a wrestler was lifted off the ground. Another way to win was to get an opponent's back to touch the ground. It was common for wrestlers to strategically fall on their stomachs to avoid being disqualified.

The village did not impose restrictions on aspiring wrestlers - anyone could wrestle. Wrestlers were matched by might, not weight, and smaller wrestlers challenged bigger wrestlers. It made the annual match exciting and unpredictable. When it was Kenu's turn, he walked to the center of the ring and squatted on the ground, waiting for challengers. Gradually, one by one, he lifted every single competitor off the ground using the *ichinchi* and *ibu nishi*

wrestling moves. Most of his competitors could not anticipate the weaknesses he saw in their eyes, letting him know where to attack his opponent.

When it was time to fight Nebu, Kenu was prepared. He had shown up at the Wednesday practice match to deliberately assess Nebu's skills. Kenu had concluded that the *insu nsusu* move was out - Nebu was too quick. Kenu knew that Nebu would be paying more attention at the Saturday match and would not be toppled by a surprise attack. Nebu circled Kenu carefully, before they assumed the inside arm position. Nebu started with the *ikpor aba* move, placing his leg in between Kenu's legs and circling his body, while trying to topple Kenu to the ground. Kenu countered with the *ikpu ughe* move and tried to circle his leg around Nebu's upper body. However, Nebu jumped quickly and landed in a squat to avoid Kenu's cinching leg. The crowd cheered and whistled.

As the crowd died down, Kenu resumed his initial squatting position, waiting for Nebu's next move. Suddenly, Nebu lowered his head and charged at Kenu. Kenu recognized the incoming *ibu nishi* move and prepared for the *ikuakankpabu* move. As Nebu's head collided with Kenu's chest, Kenu hooked his two hands under Nebu's arms and raised him in the air. Nebu let out a scream of surprise at the sudden movement. Kenu stood up with his hand still under Nebu's arms and lifted him in the air before swiftly pinning him to the ground. The crowd gasped in shock. The *ikuakankpabu* move was rarely used at the

wrestling match, but Kenu had executed the move perfectly. After recovering from their initial shock, the crowd rose to their feet and cheered at his victory. If Kenu had been surprised at his sudden victory, he didn't show it as he was hefted onto the shoulders of the village youths. He was carried around the village with gongs and chants alerting the village to their new winner.

Kenu had not thought of the wrestling match in a while. He immediately thought of the mirage as Azu, in harrowed breaths, described the unprecedented event. "*You have been chosen*" the image told him. He thought, *perhaps this is what the image meant. Maybe I was chosen for more than just being the king of the ring, maybe there is more.*

There was silence as Azu waited for Kenu's response. Kenu was a thinker - something that was quite rare in Umulu. Most villagers led simple lives of subsistence farming, punctuated with joyous celebrations and social festivities. Since Kenu had been born into a unique family lineage, people accepted that he was actually an intellectual, a concept hard to understand, but easy to appeal to in times of crises. During the silence, Azu subtly shifted his feet to create more distance between him and Kenu.

'It has to be the *Igbus*.' Kenu finally said.

Azu and Chief Ibekam gasped suddenly at Kenu's words. Everyone knew the story about the *Igbus*. They were mythical men whose skin glittered like diamonds. Their origin was unknown, but stories about them persisted at campfires and crowded market stalls. One day, a young boy

from the Ibokwe family had spotted an *Igbu* by the Ogoche river. He claimed that the *Igbu* fled quickly. After combing the forest, no one found the *Igbu*. However, the story spread like wildfire through out the village. With time, the story about the *Igbu* eventually dissolved into myth. Kenu sprang back to this moment in his mind, searching desperately for any facts he remembered about the *Igbu*, but he came up empty. In conversations, Kenu withdrew his opinion to think about exactly what he was going to say. As a result, neither of the three men noticed the long silence that passed by as they stood at the door.

Azu spoke first. "You think it's an *Igbu*? I really thought those men were a myth!"

"Azu, from what you have described, it has to be the *Igbus*. It explains the flash of light.' Kenu said calmly, though his mind was racing.

'*Ogwo!*' Azu whispered.

'This cannot be happening, I refuse to believe it.' Chief Ibekam muttered under his breath. 'How can they be real? They are a myth!'

Silence ensued at the Chief's words.

'Well what do we do now?' Azu asked fearfully, his eyes switching from Kenu's face to Chief Ibekam's face.

"It is up to Chief Ibekam.' Kenu responded, nodding at the Chief. 'However, it is safe to conclude that myth just became reality.'

Azu glanced Chief Ibekam who stared rigidly into the darkness that surrounded Kenu's house.

"Obviously, we need to alert the Chiefs in Edegelem." Chief Ibekam said. Chief Ibekam was the ruling chief of Umulu, but in times of emergencies, the villages in Edegelem worked together to solve the problem.

Kenu nodded in affirmation. For the first time since Azu and Chief Ibekam's arrival, Chief Ibekam looked at Kenu. Kenu raised his head slowly to meet his gaze. Kenu understood Chief Ibekam's look. Chief Ibekam had raced to Kenu's house, instead of sending a messenger to alert the *Ochimba* of Edegelem about the sudden appearance of strange men in the village. Serious matters concerning village security were reported immediately to the *Ochimba*, regardless of the timing of the event. Kenu realized that Chief Ibekam knew he had broken tradition by seeking Kenu immediately. In order to ease the awkward realization, Kenu bowed his head. In the excitement, Kenu had forgotten the formalities of greeting a Chief. Chief Ibekam allowed a tiny smile at Kenu's acknowledgement. Azu glanced at Kenu nervously, still maintaining his distance.

Chief Ibekam must have sensed his discomfort because he said tiredly, 'Thank you Azu. You may go now. I will send for you at the emergency meeting.'

Azu bowed, and abruptly walked away.

"The Chiefs will probably want to consult the oracle." Chief Ibekam said thoughtfully as he watched Azu depart.

The Oracle was a higher spiritual force that showed revelations after proper appeasement. Many people who

wanted to predict the future or check for specific events consulted The Oracle. Local jujucians scattered throughout the village, espousing The Oracle's spiritual capacity to predict the future. Most jujucians could not actually invoke The Oracle's presence. However, it did not stop jujucians from lying to locals and taking advantage of the incessant demand for consultations. Kenu was not surprised that Chief Ibekam had mentioned The Oracle. He knew that the village of Umulu believed that there was a supernatural way to avoid bad future events. The villagers consulted The Oracle to find out about land disputes, marriage matters and village security. Kenu secretly doubted supernatural solutions, despite his recent mirage. He knew the Chiefs had exiled his father for daring to question the *alaijo's* origin. Despite his misgivings, Kenu knew better than to vocalize his extreme doubt. However, he still recognized that he was an Umulu man and was born in the *alaijo*, so *juju* still seized his curiosity. He knew that *juju* could not be overlooked or undermined because it had a grounded place in Umulu culture. Thus, he learned to openly go along with myths and beliefs about The Oracle while secretly solely believing in the power of soul, not in magicians who claimed to know the future.

Chief Ibekam started pacing. He knew that to consult The Oracle they had to pick a jujucian carefully to avoid fraudulent disastrous predictions. However, his mind drew a blank. He had never visited a jujucian. He was a rational person who did not truly believe in *juju* but tolerated it as

an inevitable part of the village existence. With a sigh, he realized that he still had to alert the *Ochimba* and quickly shook Kenu's hand in gratitude. As he turned to go, Kenu thought of something.

"What road were they traveling on?"

Chief Ibekam scratched his head. "I'm not sure" he said slowly, "It was right around Azu's farm"

Ekenulo thought fast. He remembered that Azu's farm was at the intersection of Igbo road, which led to Umuebulu. "So they were probably on Aba road."

Chief Ibekam knew the location of every family's farm in Umulu and nodded in agreement. "That sounds about right. Why? Does that mean they were leaving Umulu?"

Kenu smiled. "With all due respect sir, why would they leave Umulu?"