**HURRICANE WOMAN**

AKINLOLU OLOWOOKERE

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ONE: A PARTING OF WAYS

14 YEARS AGO...

The bell rang with an insistence that broke through the stillness of the room. It was a sound demanding attention. Jerome Anthony looked up from the novel he was reading. He was thinking of rounding up this particular chapter before concluding business for the night but now...well, he had this other business to attend to. A glance at the wall clock told him the time was nine ‘o’ clock in the night. He knew whom it was. He had been expecting her.

Glancing around the tastefully furnished living room for a brief moment, he dropped the novel and walked towards the door. When he threw it open, a tall and slender girl brushed past him into the room. He closed the door and turned to appraise her with a smile. She was fair complexioned and very tall. He knew she had just turned seventeen. That made her a fully grown woman in his opinion. Besides, her stature wasn’t that of a girl anymore. He on the other hand was thirty seven but in his mind he still saw himself as a boy.

He looked into her huge, lovely eyeballs which were as clear as crystals and his smile shrank until it was replaced by a frown. Her upset face told him that something was wrong.

“Lola,” He called out. ”what’s wrong?”

For a brief moment, she stood rooted in the same spot while she stared at him like she was trying to make up her mind about something. There was something about her look that unnerved him and sent his heart racing. He couldn’t bear it. He quickly averted his eyes. He could hear her pacing up and down in an agitated manner. When he looked up again she had calmed down a bit.

“Whats wrong?" He asked her again. "This isn't like you. I was thinking we could have a nice time together tonight.”

Tears streamed down her face as she moved closer to him and threw her bombshell. “Look! We have a problem. I'm pregnant and I just confirmed it's three months old!”

He recoiled in shock and became quiet for moments. His mind reeled, his eyes swam and the room seemed to spin. She couldn’t have done more damage if she had hit him on the head with a sledge hammer. Another girl had come to him with the same claim just yesterday. He had paid her off with an instruction to get rid of it. But this girl was different. She happened to be the daughter of a business affiliate and a friend. Her father was a tough customer who shouldn't be trifled with. He was a multimillionaire and there were rumours that aside from his influence in government circles, he was a bigwhig in the underworld too. The silence that followed was eventually broken by Lola. “I am scared. What do we do?”

Jerome’s vacant eyes became focused once more. He had turned his gaze towards the door, backing her in the process. Now he turned and drew her close. “Its no big deal, sweetheart.”

She blinked at him in confusion. She wasn't convinced. “What do you mean it's not a big deal? My dad will kill me if he finds out.”

"I'll talk to him."

"No!" She protested. "You'll only make it worse. He expects me to be in school facing my studies; not sleeping with one of his friends."

He stroked her head and sighed. “Truth be told, I never planned for a baby. I only wanted some fun at least for now.”

Lola's's voice was hardly above a whisper. "Me too." A shudder passed through her as something crossed her mind. "What about your wife?"

"His eyes narrowed and his mood changed. "What about her?"

"She's such a nice woman. She'd always treated me like I'm the daughter she never had. I wonder how she'll feel if the truth comes out."

"Leave her out of this!" His voice had turned into an angry snarl.

She hesitated at the tension in his voice. "I didn't mean to upset you. I just wanted us to face the obvious."

His jaw became clenched as he scowled at her. The warmth that had earlier pervaded their conversation had leaked and was now replaced by a chilling cold. "I thought we've agreed that my wife is never to be a topic for discussion."

"I understand," Lola's reply was apologetic, her eyes searching his face for a chink in his tough external armour but it was an unrelenting face that stared back at her. "It's just that we need to address this. It's been bothering me and I can't ignore it any longer."

"Talk if you feel like talking but I don't see how it's going to help matters or change anything." The bitterness in his tone was like a bullet through her heart.

She exhaled deeply and tried to reason with him. "I've always admired the way your wife treated me. She embraced me like family, and I can't shake off the guilt I feel about betraying her."

His frosty gaze could have turned a living person to stone. She knew a storm was imminent. She knew it was at this very moment a subterranean tempest gathering beneath the surface of his controlled exterior. "Why don't you just leave her out of this? Whatever problems we have, they're between us. She doesn't need to be dragged into it."

"I'm not trying to drag her into anything." Her voice quivered. "I just can't help feeling so rotten, Jerome. I can't ignore the fact that she's too good a person to become a victim of our unholy affair."

He drew away as his anger exploded. "Unholy affair, hmm? That's a nice choice of words, isn't it? This sanctimonious attitude of yours isn't helping matters, girl. Don't pretend to care about her when you're busy sleeping with her husband."

Lola's eyes glistened with unshed tears. Her sadness and frustration threatened to overwhelm her. "I used to be a good girl, Jerome but you seduced and corrupted me. Though you're old enough to be my dad, you've put me in the family way and I fear what the consequences of my folly will be. My parents will be heartbroken and I'm so sorry for disappointing them. You should at least feel ashamed for betraying your wife too."

His expression turned ugly. "So, I'm the one to be blamed for your mess?"

She was getting angry too. "Yes, I blame you for my mess; and I blame myself too. You ought to have known better. You ought to have been a father to me instead of sleeping with me. You were supposed to guide and direct me, but you took advantage of me."

His face was a snarling mask. The fearful anger which she was conversant with was a seething force about to erupt. "You're a big fool and I made a big mistake getting involved with you."

"We both played the fool." She sadly replied. "'But I'm the biggest fool for giving you an opportunity to ruin my life."

Her last word was like a slap on his face. He lifted his right hand. "Stop!"

Her anger propelled her on. "I won't stop. Are you afraid of the truth? You think each time I look in the mirror, I like who I see staring at me?" Tears streamed down her face again. "You think the news doesn't get to me about your constant arguments and fights with your wife? You think I don't know you're a womanizer? pretending everything's okay? I feel like I've contributed to your family's problem."

"If you think I'm such a monster, why didn't you just leave?" He challenged her.

"I was emotionally hooked to you, okay?" She yelled at him. "I was determined to leave you but the effort was tearing me apart. And now, I'm finding out the hard way I should have made the move months ago."

His anger seemed to have drained away. "Stop blaming me, girl. From your confession, all you were after was forbidden pleasure."

"No... I.."

"Go and get an abortion." He told her bluntly. "And when you're done with it, stay the hell out of my life."

Lola clenched and unclenched her fists as she visibly struggled to put her emotions under control. "You heartless bastard!" She hissed.

"And you are nothing but a senseless wench." He spat.

"You'll regret this."

He laughed derisively. "You're in no position to threaten me, girl. Take your empty threats with you and get out of here."

She wiped her tears with the handkerchief in her hand. He grabbed her right hand and began to drag her towards the door.

She recoiled from his touch and jerked her hand away. "Let go of me, you monster!" There was a mix of wrath and pain in her eyes as she began to walk towards the exit.

He escorted her to the door and threw it open. A gust of wind rushed inside, rustling the window drapes and blowing some sheets of paper off the low center table. They scattered in an untidy heap on the floor. Jerome wasn't even aware of that. The girl hesitated and looked at him. Their eyes locked.

“Get out!” He ordered in a voice that had deadened itself to all feelings to all sentiments and even to all reasoning.

“But…” She protested.” What am I going to do?”

“Do whatever you feel like doing.” He retorted. His voice rose in pitch. “I don’t believe the pregnancy is for me."

"I swear; you've been the only love of my life."

Jerome's reply was impatient. “Stop rapping and face reality, baby. For us, love is past tense." He shrugged with a sneer. "You've probably been sleeping around like a common whore and using me as your maga\* all the time you claimed you loved me. You can't pin this on me.”

She leaped forward and struck him across his cheek, catching him unawares. She raised her hand again for another attack but he caught it in midair and held it fast. She struggled to break free but his grip was an iron vice on her wrist. "Let me go, you skunk!" She sobbed. There was a struggle as she attempted to resist while he dragged her through the entrance. Then he shoved her out. He glared at her tear stained face. She could see that he was past caring now.

“Show your face in my life again and I'll kill you!” He gasped.

“You’ve killed me already, you lying bastard.” She yelled a moment before he slammed the door shut in her face with a loud bang.

Her voice boomed aloud in his ears as she yelled hysterically from her position outside. There was a loud thump as she banged frantically against the door. Her heartbroken sobs assailed his ears. And then, all was silent.

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Eight months later, Jerome Anthony stepped out of his ash colored Hummer flanked by his two body guards. He was dressed in an immaculate white outfit while his two companions were dressed in grey. As he walked briskly towards the mansion ahead of him, his thoughts were neither on his surroundings nor on his bodyguards.

He pushed against the glass structure of the double swing doors of the entrance and disappeared into the building while his escorts waited outside. He walked past the exquisite looking lounge and went up to the top floor via a well polished wooden staircase. Every inch of the floor was covered with red rug which effectively deadened his footsteps.

The light skinned woman who stood at the end of the living room was not aware of his presence at first. She stared at the sunset through the opened window. Jerome stood motionless at the entrance, gazing at her back through thoughtful, calculating eyes until she sensed his presence and turned around with a start.

She was a beautiful and youthful woman of twenty eight even though her face looked dull and haggard this particular evening. When she sighted the visitor, her visage darkened with a scowl and her already tired face seemed to grow older. She folded her arms across her chest and fixed him a disapproving stare. “What do you want!’’ She challenged in an aggressive tone. In response, Jerome removed his sunshades and put it in his breast pocket. He took out a packet of cigarettes and selected one. In an unruffled manner he lit it, took a drag and sent out clouds of smoke through his nostrils. A slow derisive smile danced around the corners of his mouth as he looked up to meet her gaze. Her eyes blazed with resentment and fury. It was apparent that a contest of will was going on.

At length, he stubbed out his cigarette in a nearby ash tray and spoke for the first time. “Abekeola, I want a divorce.’’ He was no longer smiling.

“And you have a hell of a nerve asking me for that!’’ She retorted angrily.

He left the doorway and moved fully into the room. He sat on a divan, crossed his legs and repeated his last statement…as if he had not heard her response. “Abeke, I want a divorce.’’

“Read my lips.’’ She shot back. “NO!’’

Jerome smiled at the glowering figure of his wife condescendingly. “Let’s face the facts.’’ He began. “You're not enjoying this marriage; neither am I. I'm fed up with you. I'm sick and tired of being married to you. There's nothing to gain by remaining stuck to each other. Let's just call it quits."

“Aren't you even interested in saving our marriage?” She wondered.

“No, it's a hopeless case." He replied bluntly. "Look, I’m tired of our endless fightings.” He sounded exasperated. “I don't love you anymore. We both know that this marriage is practically dead. Let’s stop the pretense and get a divorce. Then everyone will be happy.’’

“You mean you’ll be happy!” She lashed out in a bitter voice. “And the tragic thing about it is that it’s all your fault.”

“Stop playing the blame game, okay?’’ He chided her without any sign of remorse. “We have irreconcilable differences. Let’s just end the torture and go our separate ways. Then everyone can be happy.’’

“Please do not repeat the word happy. It’s a big joke in this home.” She cautioned him. "What about our unborn child?"

"He's not my child." He replied.

“You wicked man!” She yelled and moved in his direction like a tigress ready to pounce on a prey. “You totally selfish and wicked man." She raged. "I've given you seven years of my life. Seven years of married life and the only way you can repay me is with a divorce? I picked you up from the gutter and made you what you are today. I alienated my parents on account of my love for you and I never fully recovered their favors till date!’’ She was moving closer. Jerome sensed trouble and swiftly rose to his feet.

She halted in front of him and glared with a ferocity that was strong enough to scare anyone. She stuck her index finger in his chest and continued her outburst in a quieter voice. “I gave you a chance to become somebody in life by virtually handing over my inheritance, my birthright to you! After enduring four years of your unfaithfulness and abuse towards me, you want a divorce?’’

He did not answer. He just stared at her in silence. He was used to her outbursts. As a matter of fact, he was expecting her to make a scene. Her eyes filled with tears of anguish which slowly slid down her face and down onto the rug.

“I didn’t come here for this.’’ He held out both hands in an attempt to calm her. “Acknowledge the fact that we are already divorced. It’s just that we need to make it legal.’’ He paused to see her reaction and plunged on. “Why don’t you just give me what I want and put an end to these endless squabbles? It's in our best interest if you think about it.’’

She calmed herself with a great effort and even forced a smile. “I see.’’ She wiped the tears with the back of her palms. “You don’t think we can still make it up, do you?’’ She asked in a voice that was unnaturally sweet.

“No way, Abeke!’’ He replied with a vigorous shake of his head, his eyes registering suspicion at his wife’s sudden change of mood. “I already told you I’m through with this marriage.’’

“Alright, if divorce is what you want, I’ll give it to you.’’ She was no longer smiling. “But could you wait a few seconds while I freshen up? Then we can talk things over, I promise.’’

He nodded even though his heart began to race for no reason. He had a premonition of something he could not yet define. “Fine with me, but don’t take too long. I’ve got a business dinner in an hour.”

He sat down and watched her leave the room but he felt restless after her departure. He got up and paced up and down while he pondered the state of things. The seconds crept by. He was studying the oil paint portraits on the wall when he sensed her return. He turned and was confronted first with her dead set face and a split second later with the pistol in her well manicured hands. She aimed the gum at his heart!

He broke out in cold sweat. Even though he knew she had never fired a shot before in the entirely of her twenty eight years on earth, the look in her eyes told him she was going to pull that trigger! And the gun was loaded. He knew that fact because it was his gun and it was always loaded for emergencies like armed robbery attack.

“Abeke!” He exclaimed in a voice that tried to disguise his fear. “Put down the gun! What is the meaning of this?”

“You want a divorce? Let a bullet decide the issue.” She stared at him out of eyes that glinted wild with an unnatural light even though the gun trembled in her outstretched hand. Her index finger closed around the trigger. He saw that and squeezed his eyes shut in anticipation of the shot to come….and death.

Time crept by while he waited and waited but nothing happened. When he eventually opened his eyes, Abeke was on the ground weeping silently. The sight deeply moved him. He knew he had missed death by whiskers. He breathed a sigh of relief and backed away. She did not bother to look in his direction as she snivelled and sobbed. He hurried out of the room and downstairs with his mind in an emotional whirlpool.

He emerged from the building and hurried towards the Hummer. His bodyguards hurried after him. One of them opened the back seat for him, and waited for him to get inside. Jerome stood stock still for a few seconds as he pondered the events that took place in the house a few moments ago. He shook his head and took his seat in the vehicle. A bodyguard slammed the door shut and hurried to take his place at the passenger seat. The other bodyguard who doubled as the chaffaeur positioned himself behind the steering and gunned the automobile to life. The gateman had already opened the gates. The Hummer reversed and roared out through the opened gateway of the fenced building.

TWO: ABEKE RISING

Calamities are like ripples on a river. They always have a beginning. Like stone cast into a pond, an event happens which causes a little splash and small ripples. Because people don’t do something about that event on time, it begins to give birth to other events which continue to increase in ever widening cycles of tension, violence and repression. These can climax in bloodshed and a meaningless wastage of human lives and property.

Abeke Helen Anthony was the first stone thrown into the calm river of politics in that particular electoral year. The first omen that things were not going to stay the same. Nobody knew it at the time. Not even she herself suspected that she was the long awaited harbinger of change and the portent that politics wasn’t going to remain business as usual in the corrupt political landscape of Nigeria.

She's now called the Phoenix Lady and the reason for that appellation isn't far fetched. Like the mythical bird called the Phoenix which burns itself to ashes and then emerges brand new from the ashes, Abeke's dream literally died only to reemerge from the ashes until those dreams became unstoppable.

She entered the political landscape as a nonentity. A mere political gnat unreckoned with in the midst of several juggernauts who were ready to win the presidency by every crooked means. They despised her because she came in as a gentle breeze and unheralded. No one foresaw her ending up as an out of control hurricane stirring up dust and devastating long standing bastions of power all over the country.

The first minus against her was the most obvious one. She was a woman in an arena dominated by males. In Nigeria, women aren’t regarded by the political class as good materials for positions of authority. Their rightful place is believed to be their matrimonial homes. And so, Abeke’s emergence was totally unprecedented. Even the electorate itself initially believed she was just a little pebble destined to cause a tiny splash in the political landscape before disappearing forever into oblivion.

Secondly, the fact that she was a divorcee didn’t help matters. Divorced women were considered as moral failures in Nigeria. Until recent times, they were regarded as a disgrace to their people even if it wasn't their fault that their marriage failed.

In addition to this, she had no political godfather supporting and championing her cause. None of the established ‘kingmakers’ were funding her political machinery. None of them bothered to spread money around to buy votes on her behalf. None made the effort to secure the approval of political bigwigs to lend her their support. She was regarded as the latest political joker by everyone who understood the arithmetic of politics in Nigeria.

The number four minus against her was that she was not from the Northern geopolitical zone which had dominated the politics of the nation since its independence from the colonial masters.

To cap it, she did not belong to the ruling party which had tenaciously held unto power for over twenty five years by every devious means available to it. The All People’s Action Front popularly referred to as APAF was the party to beat and nobody thought she had what it was going to take to defeat it.

Yerima Lawan, the former president had died of prostate cancer in his eleventh year in office. Like his predecessor, he had violated the constitution by contesting for a third term in office. He had to bribe the majority of lawmakers in the legislature before he could succeed but eventually, he was able to have his way. He was beginning to make surreptitious moves towards having a go at the fourth term in office when he died suddenly, leaving the presidential seat empty.

The Vice President, Victor Hara had taken over the presidential saddle for the past three years and now, the elections were drawing near. Going by precedents, most analysts were convinced that the elections were going to be a walkover for him and the ruling party. He had the power of incumbency and the kingmakers had declared him as their anointed candidate. In Nigeria, that was a BIG PLUS. Going by precedents, that was often enough to guarantee a win.

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Abeke’s rise to prominence was linked to a televised presidential debate in which she floored all the other seven major presidential aspirants including the current president. It wasn't an understatement to say that she took them to the cleaners. It was obvious with her brilliant speech and articulate thinking. She attacked the president and his party and undermined the policies of the ruling party with facts and figures. She enunciated her own party’s ideology and outlined a four year plan for turning around the ailing economy of Nigeria.

Her vision, her passion, her brilliance and her fierceness instantly made her the center of attention. Her force of character and her persuasive oratorical skills got a lot of people thinking. She had captured the attention of her nation and for weeks afterwards, that debate was the talk of everyone. Without knowing it, she had swayed multitudes and that included some of the presidential aspirants.

She wasn’t aware of what she had accomplished until three of the other presidential aspirants jettisoned their desire to rule the country. They pooled their resources together and decided to form a coalition with Abeke’s United People’s Congress in order to have a formidable chance of kicking the APAF out of power. They called their new alliance the Hope For Tomorrow Coalition which the youths gleefully labeled H4T-C.

That was another unprecedented event in the history of Nigeria.

By now, it was becoming clear to all that the upcoming presidential election was going to be the most keenly contested since independence. Everywhere Abeke went to campaign, mammoth crowds appeared in order to listen to her. A lot of those people went as skeptics but they left as believers in her cause. You could have called her an evangelist on a soul winning campaign. And you wouldn't be wrong if you had said she was successfully winning the souls of multitudes…to the fold of the H4T-C of course.

This Abeke was a dreamer. That much was obvious to everyone who either went to her rallies or listened to her broadcast speeches. That wasn't what made her so outstanding in everyone's eyes…or dangerous to the opposition. It was her ability to transfer her dreams and convictions and passion into the heart of listeners. She didn't just transfer her convictions, she actually planted them in the heart of listeners. And they germinated and brought forth fruits. Her speeches turned skeptics not just into believers but actually into disciples even though the opposition labelled her followers brainwashed clones. When you went to an Abeke’s rally, it was like going to a cathedral where the preacher performed a spiritual and emotional surgery on you. Many who had lost hope about the future of our nation came back with that hope revived after listening to the woman. Even Borang Sisalo, a hard boiled critic became a believer in the Nigerian dream once again.

A lot of youths who attended her campaigns were starting to recite the Nigerian pledge correctly. That was odd. Many of them had mocked the Nigerian pladge for years. They recited the first three lines by saying:

"I pledge to Nigeria my country.

To be faithful, loyal and honest.

To serve Nigeria IS NOT BY FORCE..."

Then they would break into sarcastic laughter. You couldn't blame them. You only needed to open your eyes wide and take a look around. The Nigerian dream wasn't working. The reality was most Nigerians were tribalists at heart. Loyalty is first and foremost to one's tribes, not to the country. Tens of thousands of students graduated from higher institutions every year without any hope of meaningful employment. Thousands of youths had turned to internet fraud as a means of livelihood. Armed robbery and kidnapping people for ransom had gotten out of hand. Religious extremists were getting bolder in their cold blooded murder of innocents in the north and they were annexing more and more territories as part of their multiple enclaves. Many well to do Nigerians and the best professionals in the country had fallen victim to the 'japa' syndrome. By this, I mean they were fleeing the country. In their search for greener pastures, they were migrating to places like the United Kingdom, Canada, United States and other nations with better prospects.

Abeke was a sincere and outstanding campaigner and undoubtedly a maverick in her methods and personalty. But there were unbelievers who still insisted that it wasn't going to last and that her movement wasn't better off than a nationwide jamboree destined to fizzle out with time. These people insisted that the mammoth crowds at her rallies were hired and they sincerely believed that she was wasting her time campaigning for the presidency. They were not going to believe that Nigeria was ripe for a female president.

Overtime, it became apparent that Abeke was waxing stronger and stronger until even the ruling party became uncomfortable with the magnitude of her success. Pundits had earlier likened her to a rapidly approaching political storm which one could do nothing about until it had spent itself. The only problem was that contrary to their prediction, she wasn't showing any sign of getting tired. Her speeches were stirring up so much awareness amongst the electorate that even the most apathetic ones were making up their minds to vote for change in the upcoming elections. A newspaper review referred to her as a female version of Demosthenes, Ronald Reagan and John F. Kennedy rolled into one. Her rallying cry was Martin Luther King Jr's favourite statement. "I have a dream."

Then she would share her dream of a future where Nigeria has become a major economic powerhouse and a world ruler. She would convince listeners that a Nigeria where unemployment is almost non-existent is possible. She would fill their hearts with imagination about a nation where corruption is dealt with without fear or favour irrespective of whoever is implicated.

With her articulate words, she would paint images of a rich and peaceful nation united and indeed one despite its ethno, cultural and religious diversity. It was like casting a spell. Many would leave those rallies with tears in their eyes and a determination to vote for Abeke in the incoming elections.

All the same, there were doubters who pointed out that she was doomed to fail because the elections were going to be rigged as usual. It was also their belief that even if she managed to win the elections, the military would frustrate her attempt to take over power since it was well known to all that the president's twin brother, Jeremiah Hara popularly known as the Fist of God was the commander in chief of the armed forces. Under his watch, the military was firmly behind Victor Hara.

The ruling party changed its campaign strategy by engaging in smear tactics in order to ruin her image. Her detractors called her a demagogue, a mere pretender whose major skill was talking instead of deeds. They labelled her Hitler’s female counterpart whose foremost gift was the ability to whip listeners into an emotional frenzy. Their opinion was that if she could not succeed at her marriage, then she was definitely going to be a failure in nation building. They warned voters not to be deceived by her speeches. They labelled her a hopeless divorcee.

Abeke's detractors tried to point the attention of the electorate to the reforms which the current president had instituted since he assumed the office. In response, Abeke and her supporters called those reforms a farce. She described them as unimaginative and inadequate to steer the country into the path of greatness in the long run. All attempts to threaten her with the nebulous and controversial hate speech law didn't faze her and only decreased the ruling party's rating.

By now, only four people were left in the presidential race but everyone knew that the actual battle was eventually going to be between incumbent president Victor Hara and the Phoenix Lady. However it was a country where tribalism and ethnic sentiments plus one’s religious affiliations were major factors that determined the votes. And the ruling party had mastered how to use this to its political advantage for twenty five years. The Hope For Tomorrow Coalition was not playing this card. This was also another reason why analysts did not think the H4T-C flag bearer could win.

When it became clear that Abeke had become a bigger threat than was anticipated, the All People’s Action Front stepped up its smear campaign. It sponsored her former husband to accuse her of adultery in a nationwide primetime T.V Talk-Show. He expressed disappointment that people could rally behind an adulteress like her. He told viewers that she was a devil even though she was pretending to be an angel of light. He spent time detailing her numerous faults. His claims included her many adulterous relationships. He even described an occasion when he caught her having fun with another man on their marital bed. According to him, the last straw from her was her attempt to kill him. He told the interviewer with tears in his eyes that he had no choice but to eventually divorce her even though he still loved her. When he was done telling his story, he admonished the electorate not to vote for a ‘devil’ like her.

That was the only event that got Abeke worried. It was a dirty and well calculated shot designed to wreck her credibility. It was also meant to destroy her self worth even though all her husband's claims were blatant lies. She was worried silly but it turned out that she had nothing to worry about

The incredible thing was that her rating in the opinion polls conducted nationwide jumped up by twenty percent before the week was over. Within the month, that rating her climbed to forty five percent. Instead of hurting her campaign, her husband’s attempt to rubbish her image actually won her many more additional sympathizers. It now seemed like Abeke Anthony had reached a point where no amount of slander could hurt her political ambition. But experienced supporters warned her not to allow her success so far to lull her into a dangerous sense of contentment which could end up becoming a trap.

She wasn't really troubled about the possibility of that happening. She was too busy thinking and planning ahead. In her heart of hearts, she believed that the failed attempt of her ex husband to destroy her and her political career was an omen to her that God was with her.

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Even Rosa, Abeke's daughter was fighting her own personal war in school over her mother's ambition.

Rosa's current class teacher had once described her as a bright and spirited teenager full of life, opinionated and highly focused though very selfless and kindly too. Despite her zest for life, her own life had been quiet enough until her mom shot into prominence through her decision to run for the nation's highest office.

Suddenly, Rosa found herself thrust into the tumultuous world of politics. As national excitement and anticipation filled the air, she found out that among her fellow students, opinions were sharply divided about her mom. And there were those in her school who sought to tarnish her mother's image and disparage her ambition as well.

Chuka Anthony and Kunle Pedro were the two boys who became the vanguard of resistance within the school walls. They were classmates of Rosa and their fathers were prominent figures in the ruling party. Because of this, they viewed Rosa's mom's candidacy as a threat to their family's influence. Fuelled by an irrational hatred and a fierce loyalty to their families' interest, they embarked on a campaign of mockery and intimidation.

What made things more bizarre was the fact that Chuka was Rosa's half brother. While he was a legitimate son of Jerome Anthony, she was his rejected daughter from his failed marriage to Abeke, her mother. Both of them knew about the bad blood between their parents but each of them vindicated their parent and told different versions of the truth about the events that resulted in their separation.

The two boys began their campaign by subtly spreading false and harmful rumours. Like toxic smoke, injurious gossip which casted doubts on Rosa's mom's integrity and qualifications spread from classroom to classroom and from hostel to hostel. Most of those rumours were offshoots of the malicious stories already making waves about Abeke Anthony in the media. The boys added exaggerations that sought to completely tarnish Abeke's image. Rosa was initially unaware of those whispers but eventually, she began to feel the deadly impact of the unfounded allegations. Many students distanced themselves from her. Even some of her closest friends stylishly withdrew from her because they didn't want to be associated with the daughter of a woman who was supposedly a whore and who tried to murder her own husband. Of course these were just two of the most popular allegations. Girls spoke in whispers when Rosa was around and boys pointed accusing fingers at her like she had committed an unpardonable sin.

Rosa had become tainted goods in her own school and the boys responsible for her woes celebrated the confusion they had unleashed. They taunted her openly and called her names. They laughed at her mom's campaign and relished in her discomfort. They kept stoking the embers of slander and had a good laugh each time they observed fellow students hushing their conversations and giving Rosa sidelong glances whenever she passed by

They took their battle to the next level by using the social media to continue their attacks. They unleashed a barrage of derogatory posts, painting Rosa's mom as unfit for the presidency. Unfortunately, they had a large following on social media most of whom were mere drones eager to please the two boys. Memes and crafted images that mocked Abeke Anthony and that sought to undermine her reputation flooded the students' chatroom and other online platforms. Whenever Rosa scrolled through the chats, she was horrified to stumble on a world of mindless hatred that festered and was fuelled by Chuka and Kunle"s campaign of falsehood. And the mindless antipathy towards her mother was growing in leaps and bounds everyday.

The boys couldn't have orchestrated a more effective form of personal torment. Rosa found herself isolated. People whispered and laughed as she navigated lonely corridors. Her detractors had successfully turned her to a stranger among her friends. The loneliness she felt was crushing in its weight. Yet, she was defiant and proud of her mother's aspirations. It wasn't the first time she had been mercilessly maligned and rejected. Even her own father had once thrown her out of his life after calling her a bastard.

Only one student stood with Rosa. His name was Mide and he refused to be intimidated by the public opinion of his fellow students.

"Aren't you afraid of having your image tainted by associating with me?" She asked him one day?"

"Oh, to the blazes with the whole lot of them." He scoffed with an impudent smile. "They're such a bunch of fools. Too naive. They don't know where they're going yet. So I guess it's easy for some idiots to lead them astray."

"Don't you also believe that my mom is a whore?"

"And so what?" He queried. "I mean, what's that got to do with you as a person? You're beautiful, smart, intelligent and so kind." He shrugged. "Even if your mom were a whore which I believe is nothing but a lie, let whoever is without sin among them and their parents throw the first stone."

She smiled. "Thank you, Mide, you're a real friend."

He waved her away. "No need to thank me. Not everyone is daft. This will soon blow over. What amazes me is how people allow ignorant fools to brainwash them."

"You are taking a big risk going against public opinion, Mide." She told him.

"Nah, I'm just taking a big stand against the tyranny of the majority." He corrected her.

Rosa's two detractors in the meantime were escalating their bullying. They took it to the next level by peddling the arguments that a woman doesn't have what it takes to lead the nation. This became a keg of gunpowder that exploded into a fiery debate among the students. The disagreement sharply divided the student body in two. On one hand were those who sided with Chuka and Kunle. They were mostly boys. But they were the minority. The other group was made up of boys and girls who sincerely believed that a woman could effectively govern the nation.

The disagreement served as an eye-opener for many of the students. They turned against Chuka and Kunle. They began to refer to them and their supporters as outdated. The two boys suddenly lost relevance as they were confronted for being narrow-minded in their beliefs. They had a hard time facing the constant barrage of comments questioning their derogatory opinion about the female gender's ability to rule.

Rosa jumped into the fray and challenged her mother's detractors to dare face her in a public debate. She confronted the boys and questioned their baseless attacks. She used the opportunity to emphasize the strength and character of her mother. Rosa's impassioned defense resonated with many in the school, leading to a shift in sentiment.

The harsh and unending criticism of Chuka and Kunle by a certain section of the male students and the trolls of virtually the entire female student population online and offline eventually proved to be too much for the two boys. They had to drop their campaign against Abekeola Anthony.

The school remained divided over Abeke Anthony's presidential ambition but Chuka and Kunle became laughing stock. They were forced to take a little of their own bitter medicine as they became outcasts in their school commune. Slowly, many of Rosa's former friends began to drift back into her life. But she would never count them as true friends again.

She was happy to survive the storm though it took a huge emotional toll on her. She was glad that despite the brutal challenges, her mom pressed on with her campaign, undeterred by the attempts to drag her down. She had the deep seated belief that just as the relentless bullying in her school backfired at last, her mom's opposers would eventually end up failing in their bid to stop her. She knew her mom very well. She was sure that the mudslinging and unfair tactics of the ruling party and her dad would only fuel Abeke's determination to defeat conventional belief and strengthen her determination to lead her nation. Every morning and evening, Rosa would kneel down and pray. "Dear God, please help my mom win the upcoming elections. Keep her safe from wicked people and send her helpers. In Jesus name I pray. Amen."

The tide began to turn, not just within the school but also in the broader community. People rallied behind Rosa's mom, recognizing the unfair media attacks on her personality for what they were – desperate attempts to sidestep issues and divert people's attention by a panicky political class desperate to cling to power through blackmail and deception.

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Dear dad,

Every boy needs a daddy and I am no exception. Even though you're my father, you’re more of a runaway dad. You're never there for me or my brother when we need you. You’re hardly home, but each time you come home, we're in dread for our lives. Mom is never happy whenever you're home for all you do is make her cry. Sometimes I think that God is deliberately punishing the entire family for giving us a father like you. I plead with you to rise to the occasion and make the necessary adjustments before it's too late for all of us.

your disappointed son

Chiji

Jerome sat in his quiet study, the forcefulness of his son's letter pressing on his heart as a heavy burden. His anger boiled over and he crumpled the letter in his hands into a ball.

He strode from his room and went looking for the writer. He found Chiji in his room playing chess with Chuka his junior brother. At their father's command, Chuka got up and departed from the room in a hurry. Chiji saw the fury on his father's dark visage and stepped backwards like a man expecting to be attacked.

"Who the hell wrote this letter?" The man thundered.

"I did." The son acknowledged, an edge of resentment in his voice.

A surge of anger simmered within Jerome. "What is the meaning of this?" He waved the letter in the air. Chiji looked up, his eyes wide with fear.

His father's voice was like a sledgehammer resounding against his ears. "You dare to undermine me? You're challenging my style of fatherhood?" Jerome's voice rose, the echoes of his anger resonating through the room.

"I'm..I'm sorry dad. It's just that you left me no choice." Chiji stammered as he attempted to explain his feelings. "Dad, I just... I needed you to know how I feel, how we feel." His words faltered under the intensity of Jerome's gaze.

Jerome's resentment, flared. "You think you'd be a better father if you were in my position? You've become my judge now? You're too good and I'm too bad to be your daddy now?" He scoffed. "I provide for this family. I work hard to give you everything you have. And this is how you repay me? With accusations and disrespect?"

"No, that's not what I meant Dad, I..."

Jerome shook his head reproachfully and cut off his son's attempt to explain. "You're a big disappointment. You've always been too soft; sentimental like a woman. Can't you be like your junior brother for once?" He sighed in frustration. The room became a battleground, the air thick with tension.

Chiji's eyes misted over like he was about to cry. He bit his lips as his father attacked him with cruel critism.

Jerome threw the crumpled letter on the floor and stormed out of the room.

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Amina, Chiji's mother went to have a talk with her husband over the issue later that night. He was in his own separate bedroom staring into space and still sulking over the letter. She cautiously approached, holding the crumpled letter in her hands.

"Jerome, Chiji is hurting." She called, her voice hesitant with fear, yet she was determined to make her point. "He lacked the boldness to express his feelings in your presence. So he poured his heart out into this letter. He just wanted your attention and your affection." She extended the letter towards him, a plea for empathy in her eyes.

Jerome's eyes blazed with supressed fury. "You're the worst mother I've ever seen, Amina." He spat. "Now I know who's been poisoning my own son's mind against me."

"I swear, I haven't encouraged him to do anything against your authority."

"Save your breath, woman," He hissed. "and let me be."

Amina looked pained by his words. She desperately searched for the right words to explain to her husband what he failed to understand. "He's your son. He's hurting and you need to do something before you lose him finally."

"I provide for my family. I work my butts off to make them comfortable." He shook his head. "Instead of a thank you, what do I get? Sentimental complaints from a fool of a son who wants me to become his nanny?" He hissed in disgust.

Amina sat beside him on the bed, determined to plead her son's case. "Can't you see your son isn't asking merely for a provider but for a father, Jerome. He wants emotional interaction with you his father. And that's how it should be."

Jerome's smile was a jeer and it hurt her. "This case is a dead horse, Amina. Stop flogging it. If your son wants a different father, let him find one. I won't allow either you or him to turn me into what I am not."

"Please, why won't you listen to reason?" She was in tears.

Jerome remained unmoved. "You and your rebellious son can't hold me to ransom." He declared. "Both of you are mistaken if you think you can dictate to me the terms of my own existence."

The following morning, Jerome relocated from his house and wouldn't be back for a while.

THREE: THE BETRAYER

Abeke remembered the picture-perfect life she seemed to have with her ex husband. That was before the nasty cracks began to appear in their seemingly idyllic marriage. The tide of expectations and the fear of going against societal norms held her captive in a relationship that was slowly killing her. She was loathe to challenge her husband to his face and she was afraid to report him to the appropriate authorities. In addition to this, she felt that she had to try her best to salvage the relationship that meant the most to her.

Her husband's demonic anger made it difficult to reason with him. She bore many bruises which she hid behind layers of makeup in those years. He once threw the glass table against the wall, smashing it in a fit of wrath. He hated to be confronted, especially by a woman.

Slowly, his once lively and dynamic wife became a mere shadow of herself, living in constant fear of her man.

Abeke kept believing for a few more years that Jerome was going to change. She was even tormented for a while with the unreasonable thought that perhaps she was the one who had a problem. She was tempted to believe that she was probably an unqualified wife unworthy of his love. She spent a long time questioning her worth as her self esteem dipped and her feeling of inferiority peaked. She felt totally useless and lacking in strength to either confront or escape the toxic cycle. It took her a long time to realise that no matter how hard she tried, she would never be able to please her husband. Eventually, she found the courage to seek help from her childhood friend.

She and Maggie had been separated for some years but circumstances brought them together again. Margaret gave Abeke a listening ear and compassionate support. She slowly and painstakingly tried her best to educate her friend and help her to rediscover herself. Maggie became Abeke's confidant once more. In those days, what she could offer to Abeke mostly was a listening ear and shoulders to weep upon. She explained to Abeke that she was right to fight for the survival of her marriage but that it was harmful for her to permit continual abuse from a man who might end up beating her to death one of these days.

When Jerome Anthony sued for divorce, Margaret's encouragement gave Abeke the needed determination to undergo the legal battle that followed. The courtroom became a battleground where she was forced to confront her oppressor. The divorce proceedings were emotionally draining, but at last, the deed was done. The marriage was dissolved and she was free; no longer tethered to the chains of her husband's abuse.

And yet, Jerome wasn't initially the monster he eventually turned out to be.

She met him when she was a final year undergraduate student. She was already in a relationship but Jerome was so charming and relentless in his wooing of her that he swept her completely off her feet. She quited her former relationship in order to focus on her romance with Jerome. He worked in a bank but his dream was to become an entrepreneur. They met at a Christmas party, became friends and then fell in love. They got married the following year after their whirlwind romance. Abeke was a devoted and caring wife, always giving her husband unflinching support. Jerome was an ambitious young man, but his ventures didn't always yield the expected results. Financial struggles loomed over their early years of marriage.

When Jerome decided to resign from the banking industry in order to venture into web hosting business, he became overwhelmed with financial struggles which became worse and worse until creditors hounded him and seized most of his properties. Abeke mortgaged her late father's estate in order to get him a loan. It was then that Abeke's ingenuity as an entrepreneur became evident. With her shrewd business acumen and steadfast support, she helped Jerome turn the tide. Her wit and skills in marketing and administration eventually helped him build a successful business, gradually making them wealthy. The business grew in leaps and bounds until Jerome forced her to retire because he wanted her to solely face the business of homemaking.

Life couldn't have been better or so it seemed. But Abeke was about to wake up to the fact that their newfound wealth had a great price and her marriage was going to have to be the sacrifice.

Gradually, she became aware that Jerome's newfound success was transforming him and the change wasn't for the best. He began to neglect his wife for his business and his excuses for not being around were mostly filmsy. He indulged in a lavish lifestyle, and turned to alcohol and parties. He had once been a loving husband but he became verbally abusive when drunk and he treated Abeke shabbily. And then he crossed a line as his abuse became physical. From time to time, he would beat her up. The breaking point came when Abeke discovered Jerome's infidelity.

Their financial woes had become a distant memory and they had amassed wealth beyond their wildest dreams. But at this point there were ominous signs that made it clear that there was trouble in paradise. Abeke's intelligence and dedication had played a crucial role in their success, but now her husband was, treating her like an idiot and a mere housemaid. He shouted at her for perceived flaws and called her unthinkable names. Her inability to conceive and have a child provided him with additional excuses to maltreat her.

As the business flourished, so did Jerome's ego. He intimidated his employees and treated them like dogs. He hired and fired at will and continued to flaunt his wealth around. Success became a lethal weapon that turned against its owner and the once charming husband and easy going husband transformed into someone sinister. He ingratiated himself into the snobbish and expensive world of the wealthy and he, revelled in luxury and excessive displays of wealth. The late nights at the office was usually an excuse to either attend or throw extravagant parties. Like old Chinaware, Abeke found herself abandoned and alone in the wake of Jerome's newfound indulgences.

There were days when her husband would stagger home, reeking of alcohol. His eyes, once filled with love, were now clouded with arrogance. He lambasted Abeke for the slightest perceived shortcomings. He blamed her for his stress and claimed sole credit for their success. The verbal abuse became a regular occurrence, leaving Abeke shattered and wondering in her mind whether this was the man she had married.

Heartbroken, she summoned the courage to confront her husband about his attitude. This only resulted in serious disagreements. In the meantime, Jerome continued his reckless lifestyle. Just to get at her for daring to confront him, he began to bring a string of girlfriends home. Despite her attempts to reconcile with her husband and save her marriage, it was becoming more and more glaring that she had lost him. She continued to hope. And then she began to hear about the children he fathered outside their marriage. I'm spite of that, the little hope left in her heart became stronger when she discovered that she was pregnant.

But that hope became dashed when he told her he wasn't responsible for her pregnancy. He called her unborn child a bastard and encouraged her to do whatever she wanted with her bastard. Then he walked out on her while she stood stunned in the middle of their living room. The last straw that broke the camel's back was catching her husband in the act with a strange woman on her marriage bed. Devastated, she confronted him with tears streaming down her face. Jerome, in a drunken stupor and with his breath and mouth reeking of alcohol dismissed her with a callous laugh while the strange woman on the bed with him told Abeke to lock the door on her way out.

Abeke lost her temper and pounced on the woman. They fought like beasts, punching and pulling and scratching and biting. But it wasn't a fair fight. Jerome teamed up with his concubine to beat his wife senseless. After she woke up in the hospital, she concluded that her marriage was probably beyond redemption.

Her husband had left for good by the time she returned home. She didn't want to believe it until he sent her a message that he wasn't coming back. She had to endure her pregnancy and delivery months as a single mother.

He did come back once to demand for divorce but she almost killed him with his own gun. She was served with the divorce papers two weeks after that confrontation.

But that was a long time ago. Even though, Abeke had healed physically, there were ugly internal scars that she had stoically borne. And now, this monster from her past had resurfaced and was trying to ruin her ambition. But he had obviously failed.

FOUR: DIRTY GAMES

When Jerome Anthony's slanders failed, the government changed its ploy.

Thugs and miscreants began to disrupt Abeke's political rallies. At the same time, law enforcement agencies developed cold feet in offering those gatherings the protection that they so desperately needed. The Inspector General of Police eventually issued a warning to the Hope For Tomorrow coalition to reduce the number of its rallies since the police force lacked adequate resources and manpower to cope with the extent of violence those rallies seemed to be provoking.

In response to this declaration of the police boss, Abeke's sympathizers and unbiased observers accused the government of trying to intimidate its most formidable opponent into stopping her election campaigns. Members of the public berated the police for deliberately shirking in its duty of providing protection for all political campaigners irrespective of their political affiliation. The tabloids and left leaning media accused the Nigeria Police of playing the lapdog to the government in power. They traced this disturbing biases of the police force from Independence to recent times. And they highlighted several instances to back up their claim.

It was at this time that Sule Salam, Abeke’s trusted campaign manager, found himself in a precarious situation when he was apprehended for possession of cocaine. The news sent shockwaves through the H4T-C campaign office, leaving Abeke and her team scrambling to salvage their reputation amidst the scandal.

But as Sule recounted the events leading up to his arrest, it became clear that there was more to the story than meets the eye. It all began earlier that day, when Sule had stopped by a supermarket to pick up groceries. He never imagined that this seemingly mundane errand would set off a chain of events that would change his life forever.

As Sule exited the supermarket, a chance encounter with a stranger left him momentarily distracted. The individual bumped into him, muttered a quick apology, and swiftly disappeared into the crowd. Brushing off the incident, Sule made his way to his car, unaware of what awaited him.

To his horror, Sule discovered a stranger sitting in the driver's seat of his car, poised to make a getaway. Reacting quickly, Sule raised the alarm, prompting the intruder to leap out of the vehicle and flee on foot. Bystanders sprang into action and pursued the would-be thief as he darted through the busy streets.

Just when it seemed like the perpetrator would be apprehended, the same individual who had bumped into Sule at the supermarket appeared on the scene, riding a sleek motorcycle with the finesse of a seasoned pro. Without hesitation, the intruder vaulted onto the back of the bike, and the unlikely duo disappeared into the chaos of the city streets.

Like characters straight out of a James Bond movie, they weaved effortlessly through traffic, causing vehicles to swerve out of their way with squealing tires. In was no surprise that they successfully evaded capture with skill and precision. In a matter of moments, they vanished from sight, leaving behind a stunned crowd. In the meantime, a bewildered Sule was left grappling with the fact that he had unwittingly stumbled into a web of intrigue and deceit.

Little did Sule know that this exciting event was a precursor to other events of his day which would spiral into a nightmare of colossal proportions. As he went about his duties at the H4T-C office, he could never have imagined the tumultuous chain of events that would soon unfold.

It started innocuously enough, with a routine visit from law enforcement officials armed with a warrant for Sule's arrest. At first, he brushed it off as a misunderstanding or perhaps even a prank. But his disbelief turned to horror as the officers subjected him to a thorough search, uncovering a carefully wrapped substance hidden in the outer pocket of his native attire.

Shock turned to disbelief when his car was searched, revealing not just one, but two kilograms of a mysterious white powdery substance stashed under the driver’s seat. Another four kilograms were found concealed inside the trunk of his vehicle. The officials wasted no time in identifying the substance as cocaine, casting a shadow of suspicion and accusation over Sule's once-spotless reputation.

But the nightmare had only just begun. In a reckless display of force, the law enforcement officials brutally beat Sule into a state of unconsciousness, leaving his body bruised, battered, and bloodied. Without caring whether he lived or died they callously dumped his limp form at the back of their squad van before driving him away to an uncertain fate.

As news of Sule's arrest spread, Abeke and her followers were quick to cry foul, accusing the government of using blackmail and persecution tactics to undermine the Hope For Tomorrow Coalition. They vehemently protested Sule's innocence, alleging that the incriminating substance had been planted on his person and in his car as part of a sinister plot to discredit and destroy their movement.

In response, government-owned media outlets launched a vicious smear campaign against the H4T-C, painting them as a haven for criminals and degenerates who used politics as a cover for their nefarious activities. Bizzare claims were made, alleging that the majority of those who attended H4T-C events were drug addicts, lured by promises of free narcotics which were distributed at campaign rallies.

As the accusations flew and tensions reached a fever pitch, astute observers opined that Sule Salam was just unlucky to be caught in the crossfire of a bitter power struggle that threatened to tear the fabric of Nigerian society apart. And as the nation watched with bated breath, the actual perpetrators of this sinister plot remained shrouded in shadow but the H4T-C members continued to insist that it was the ruling party using desperate tactics in its bid to hold unto power by all means. The outspoken Borang Sisalo claimed that the truth was evident even though the desperados in power tried to obscure their motives and machinations with the fog of political intrigue and deception.

As the investigation into Sule's arrest unfolded, Abeke and her team found themselves embroiled in a high-stakes cat and mouse game that they were not in position to win. As they raced against time to uncover the truth before it was too late, the war was fought in a highly publicised legal battle in the law court. But there was no guarantee that Sule was going to get justice anytime soon. And as Abeke fought to clear Sule's name and salvage her campaign, she knew that the true test of their strength and resilience was yet to come.

FIVE: STORM WARNINGS

Abeke had undeniably become a sensation, her influence extending far beyond the borders of Nigeria. International media literally hustled for the chance to get an interview with her. Prestigious publications like TIME, Newsweek, The Economist and others featured her on their covers. The BBC and VOA eagerly hosted her on their radio programs, amplifying her message to audiences around the globe. Her impact reached even the fashion world, as GQ magazine hailed her as one of the most influential females in Africa and praised her fashion sense.

Yet, amidst the accolades, there was an unexpected twist. The notorious PLAYBOY magazine, known for its risqué content, boldly placed Abeke on its cover, dubbing her the "sexiest woman out of Africa." Even though this was flattering, the label left Abeke feeling conflicted. Being dubbed sexy left her grappling with the juxtaposition of her political aspirations and this newfound objectification. She felt it was a big distraction from her objective although she and Maggie had a good laugh over this later.

Her media appearances continued to captivate audiences, with a brilliant showcase on CNN and a compelling interview on Al Jazeera. The buzz surrounding Abeke intensified on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook where discussions about her soared. The interview clip circulated rapidly on YouTube, garnering over four hundred thousand downloads within just twenty-four hours.

With each triumph, Abeke's momentum surged, and the tide seemed to be turning in her favor. Analysts cautiously predicted her victory in the upcoming elections based on her growing popularity and undeniable charisma. As the nation awaited the outcome, Abeke remained composed like a sprinter ready to take the lead at the oncoming electoral race. She declared in her latest Interview that she was ready to make history and usher in a new era of leadership in Nigeria. Her opponents vigorously disagreed and announced that no amount of propaganda was going to interfere with the reforms of Victor Hara.

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But as the elections drew closer, the storm clouds that had started to trail her political campaigns became darker. She sensed that sinister plots were on ground to get rid of her by all means. A light bulb went off in her brain that she was definitely on a collision course with forces that were not ready to accommodate the possibility of her ascension to power. A chilling prophecy, delivered by an unknown prophet further fuelled her fears. He claimed to have seen a vision of her; dead and, bathed in her own blood.

“Be careful, woman.” He warned her.

Angered by this grim premonition, she confronted the prophet, her skepticism evident in her tone. "What do you expect me to do? Retreat and cower like a frightened animal? Abandon my people to the mercy of those in power?" As she glared at him as if he were vermin, her disdain for his warning was palpable. In her heart of hearts, she had already dismissed him as yet another charlatan preying on the vulnerable with prophecies of doom.

He was unperturbed at her defiance. His response was a simple and yet profound directive: "Watch and pray."

Her frustration mounted. "What does that even mean?" She demanded, her impatience thinly veiled.

The man wasn't rattled by her outburst. Instead, he reiterated his message with calm resolve. "Surely, my message isn't that complicated, Mrs Anthony. You need divine intervention. This is a battle larger than you realize, and against a formidable foe. Only through prayer and vigilance can you hope to overcome the dark forces arrayed against you." He gazed at her with disturbing eyes that seemed to penetrate like hot iron into her very soul with their intensity. "There is a huge conspiracy on ground to terminate your life. God can protect you from the wicked but you need to do your part by tightening your security."

Skeptical, she probed further, testing his sincerity with a hint of sarcasm. "Should I also offer you some money so that you can pray for me as well?” She asked.

He smiled and rose to his feet like an offended dignitary. “I am a servant of God, maam, not a merchant.”

“I beg your pardon Prophet; my opinion is that the gospel needs money for its advancement.”

Her attempt at cynicism was met with a rebuke that shocked her. “God isn't broke, Abeke. He can always provide for his work through any means he chooses. My duty is to convey His message, nothing more.”

Her conscience pricked by his sincerity, she offered a reluctant apology. “My apologies to you then, man of God.”

He looked at her with genuine care. “My concern isn’t to judge your motive. It is to deliver God’s message which I have done. The rest is up to you. As the Bible says: to obey is better than…”

“…sacrifice.” She interjected, concluding the familiar biblical passage for him. Though her faith had waned over the years, echoes of childhood teachings stirred within her. She could still remember snippets of scriptural passages from her Sunday school class in church as a child.

“Indeed.” The prophet said in reply and promptly departed, leaving her to grapple with the weight of his words.

She was no longer a religious person. Even though she believed in God and her parents raised her to be a devoted Anglican Church member, her shadow had not darkened the doorway of a church for over a decade. Despite her estrangement from organized religion, the prophet's warning lingered, prompting her to reconsider her stance on faith and fate in the face of adversity.

SIX: THE HEARTBROKEN ACTIVIST

Borang Sisalo was a graduate of philosophy but he was already carving a reputation for himself as a gifted speaker and a vigorous human rights campaigner just like his elder cousin, Nanang Sisalo. He was a first class graduate from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. He was now thirty years old but he was already known as a relentless advocate for human rights in the current clime of oppression in the nation. His unyielding stand on justice and equal rights for all had won for him admiration as well as enemies. In addition to this, his passionate and effective mobilisation of youths in support of Abeke Anthony had been stirring an hornet's nest for the past two years but he wasn't thinking of that today as he alighted from the commercial motorcycle that brought him to his destination. After paying the fare, he watched the motorcyclist zoom off.

The mostly deserted beachfront levelled out before him, a serene expanse of sand and sea that seemed to stretch into eternity. This morning, it was a quiet sanctuary. The only sound came from the waters as they sang their ode to nature. The waves made rhythmic background music that crashed against the shore to interfere occasionally with the stillness. Though the air held a hint of crispness, there was a sense of comfort and peace. It was as if nature itself were offering solace to weary souls.

The rising sun, a radiant orb of golden orange, hung low on the horizon, levitating over the waters and casting a golden glow over the tranquil expanse. Its warm rays danced across the surface, painting shimmering patterns of light upon the gentle waves. As Borang gazed out at this breathtaking sight, he felt a sense of peace wash over him, momentarily easing the ache in his heart.

It was crazy for him to be here at 6:37am like this. Though he had a date with friends, it wasn't to take place until 9am. but He wanted to be here alone so he could possibly have the entire beach to himself if that were possible.

With a sigh, he kicked off his sandals, relishing the sensation of the soft, powdery sand beneath his bare feet. There was something grounding about the simple act of connecting with the earth and of feeling the grains of sand slip between his toes as he walked along the shoreline.

He found respite beneath the shade of a towering coconut tree and settled onto the cool sandy ground. From his immediate environment, his thoughts turned inwards and drifted to a woman he once held dear. Memories of her flooded his mind like a tidal wave. Each of those memories was a bittersweet reminder of love lost and dreams left unfulfilled.

He remembered the way her laughter had ignited the breeze with energy and zest. He recalled the sparkle in her eyes as she gazed out at the endless expanse of sea before them. He recalled the warmth of her touch and the way her hand fit perfectly in his. Each time they held hands, it was as if they were two mechanical wheels destined not just to be enmeshed but also to jointly drive the wheels of destiny.

But somewhere along the way, their love fizzled out, like a flame unable to abide in a storm. Words that were left unspoken and even the ones that were spoken as well as promises left unkept had torn them apart. Now he was left adrift in a sea of regret and longing. And now, he felt like a man man without a soul wandering through the length and breadth of the earth in search of his lost heart.

As he watched the waves crash against the shore, he couldn't help but wonder what might have been. Sometimes he hoped for reconciliation but each time, he had to awaken to the fact that his love was lost and the paradise they shared was gone. Forever.

Lost in his thoughts, he whispered her name into the salty sea breeze. It was a silent prayer carried away by the breeze while a part of him hoped against hope that somehow, someway, they might find their way back to each other once more. But he knew in his heart that it was a futile hope.

It was great romance while it lasted and then their relationship hit a turbulence that eventually buried it. Ngozi was a gentle soul and he knew she wholeheartedly loved him just like he loved her but at that season, she was already approaching the breaking point. Despite her parents' privileged position as highly placed members of the ruling party, she had opted to have him as her love. In the face of her family's intimidation and disapproval for their relationship, she had refused to let him go. She was a compassionate soul who hated controversies, yet she had never opposed Borang's activism. But then she became scared for him. He knew her fears were justified to an extent but he didn't believe in giving up a cause just because it was dangerous. She had become more and more apprehensive as Borang got more and more involved in the political campaign for his party and the confrontations that took place between the ruling party and Abeke's H4T-C. She helplessly watched him risk his safety as he openly advocated for a change of government. She believed it was only a matter of time before he would become a target for assassins or find himself in a prison. Everytime she voiced her fears, he would laugh and dismiss them but he had a gut feeling in his heart that she was probably right.

When their arguments became more frequent, it struck him that the fabric of their love was undergoing opposite pulls that might rip it apart. Yet he still hoped that love would prevail.

He remembered their last meeting. It was precisely at this very same spot. She had a smile on her face as she walked towards him. He knew that smile very well. It was always meant for him alone. It was the smile that always sent his heart racing and sometimes brought tears to his eyes. It was a smile that replaced the need to talk because it said it all. Her glittering eyes, wistful face and body language communicated only one thing. "I love you Borang. I am exclusively yours."

That was two years ago. They had sat side by side on this same spot and held hands like children as they watched the sun sink into the horizon. Then their conversation began

"Have you thought about things, Borang?"

He sighed and nodded. "Yes, I have."

She looked sideways at him. "And?"

"I'm still thinking."

"Liar." She rebuffed him. "You're just trying to evade the issue."

His silence was en eloquent witness to the truth of her statement.

"It's not safe, Borang," Ngozi begged, her anxious voice echoing her despair. "You're becoming too visible and too loud in your opposition to the government. It's a matter of time before you become a target."

"Don't worry about me. I'll survive."

"I shouldn't worry about you?" She scoffed. "You should know you're giving that advice to the wrong person. I stay awake most nights worrying about you."

His head was bowed as he tried to think of something to say to allay her fears.

She spoke again. "You are already a target. They'll set you up like Sule Salam or maybe you'll just disappear without a trace one of these days." A shudder went through her and then she stared at him in silence as she pondered those horrible possibilities. "But it's not too late to rectify the situation." She urged him at last.

He lifted his head and gazed into her eyes. "How do you know I'm a target?"

"Well, you know my parents are connected, right?"

"Right."

"They always make sure they are adequately informed about things that concern them."

His smile was weary and sad. "I understand. I'm a concern for them now. Nothing will make them happier than to see me eliminated somehow so that their daughter's relationship with a vermin like me could end."

"Daddy won't hurt you himself but he won't lift a finger to help you." She sounded depressed.

"How ironic." He declared. "My potential in-laws want me either dead or behind bars. They won't do it themselves but they'll be glad to have some other people do it for them."

"I can deal with my parents, Borang. I can eventually work it out to make them accept you but I can't deal with the thought of losing you to the machinations of evil men just because you're too stubborn to listen to reason."

"Ngozi, try and understand me..."

"What I perfectly understand is that you're in danger." She yelled. "Why won't you just take the backstage? Why must you be at the forefront of this current movement against the government? It can't end well."

Borang bit his lips as he thought of what to say. It was becoming gradually colder. Dusk was starting to fall. His heart ached for Ngozi but there was a fire burning in him that would not be quenched by anyone's plea or concerns. "You know me." He to her. "I can't just fold my hands and watch while innocent people suffer. Someone has to speak up, someone has to fight for their rights."

There were tears in her eyes now. "Put yourself in my shoes. I love you. What am I going to do if I lose you?"

"I'm sorry. This is my destiny. It's a path I must walk through." He told her in a voice that rang with his conviction. "Look at the country. It's been decimated and destroyed by the gang of wolves currently in power. Someone has to rise up and resist them."

"Have you thought about the cost?" Ngozi countered, her voice trembling with emotion.

"I have." He replied. "I've thought of the ultimate price paid by men like Martin Luther King Jr, Mahatma Gandi, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela and others."

"No, you haven't considered all aspects of the cost." She contended.

"What would that be?" He wondered.

"Me. Our relationship."

He squeezed her hand and was quiet as he pondered that. The softness of her hand and her nearness was no more a comfort to him. He was truly devastated at the direction of their conversation.

"I understand your fear." He said at last. "But this isn't a cause I can just turn my back on like that. This fight isn't about me. It's about the future of this country."

Fresh tears welled like rivers in her eyes as she struggled to reply. "I love you, Borang. You're the ultimate idealist but I choose to be pragmatic about this issue. How can you risk everything we hold dear for a fight that may never end? How can you fight for the future of your nation and refuse to struggle for the survival of our relationship?"

He wiped her tears with his hanky. "It would be a cruel thing to ask of you to understand." His voice was heavy with regret now. "But this is who I am. I can't turn my back on my nation just like I can't turn my back on you."

She arose with a heavy heart that ached with their struggle to win each other over. He could see that she was torn between her love for him and her fear for his future. "It's getting dark, Borang. I'll drive you home."

She drove in silence and he brooded all the way. Eventually, she stopped the car in front of the bungalow that was his dwelling place. He opened the door and alrighted before asking her. "Aren't you coming in for a cup of tea?"

She shook her head. "No. I've had enough of arguments for one night." Then she drove off without saying goodnight.

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That night, Borang stayed up most of the night. He was troubled and he felt torn between the two alternatives before him. He knew that Ngozi had a point. He empathized with her and felt her pain. But he was on a path from which there could be no turning back.

He knew that Ngozi deserved better. She had made some incredible sacrifices for him and for their love. He didn't blame her for trying to protect the relationship she had invested so much in.

He called her the next day but she wouldn't pick his call. Over the next couple of days, she ignored his call. He sent her text and WhatsApp messages but she ignored them all. He went to her house but she wasn't available. Eventually, after a tense week of worrying about her, her, his phone buzzed with a notification. He glanced at the screen to see a WhatsApp message from her. With a mixture of anticipation and dread, he opened it.

The message was brief yet piercing. Ngozi expressed her love for him but highlighted the irreconcilable differences between them. She couldn't bear to watch him walk a path that she believed would inevitably lead to destruction, both for him and for their relationship. She made it clear that she couldn't stand idly by while he risked his life and their future together for a cause she couldn't fully support.

Tears welled up in his eyes as he read her words, realizing the gravity of the situation. Ngozi was asking him to make an impossible choice: between his commitment to his country and his love for her. The weight of her ultimatum pressed down on him, forcing him to confront the harsh reality of his decisions.

For a moment, he was torn between his passion for justice and his longing for love. But deep down, he knew where his heart truly lay. With a heavy sigh, he composed a response, his fingers trembling as he typed out his words.

"I understand your decision, Ngozi." he wrote, his heart aching with every keystroke. "I will always cherish the memories we shared, but my duty to my country compels me to continue on this path. I hope someday you'll understand."

With a sense of finality, he pressed send, watching as the message disappeared into the digital ether. As he stood there, grappling with the ramifications of his choices, he knew that the road ahead would be a long and lonely one fraught with danger. But as he thought about the condition of his nation, he also knew that this was a path he could not turn away from.

SEVEN: KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOUR

Time passed slowly as he mused under the coconut tree. The sun rose higher and warmed earth. Gulls passed overhead and sang their ode to the sea as they proceeded on their journey to the unknown. Borang left the shade of the coconut tree and took a dip in the cold waters. The cold penetrated into his thoughts and seemed to cleanse his thoughts. He was coming out of the waters when the revelers began to arrive. He ignored them and went back to his position under the coconut tree, watching the newcomers making a hell of a noise and jumping into the water accompanied by multiple splashes.

His friends began to arrive at 8:53am. Kunle and George were dressed in beach clothes and a jaunty cap was perched on Kunle's big and bushy head. They were there to have fun and they weren't irritated by the loads of frolickers and swimmers at the beach this morning. On sighting Borang, they immediately went to join him. While they exchanged pleasantries, Chuks and Nosa arrived. Chuks never came on time for anything in his entire life. He even went late for important job interviews. Nosa was a hopeless playboy and a self acclaimed 'womanholic'. Nevertheless, he took time to ask after the health of Borang's mom who had just been discharged in good health from the hospital after a protracted illness. After that, the guys began their usual banter about girls and their exploits and their conquets in that field.

Borang ignored his friends jests about the different girls in sight and tried to focus his thoughts on his mother.

The group of girls who waded into the water and laughing on top of their voices did not catch his attention for long. The two hunks dressed in suit and waiting at the water's edge did not impress him either. He thought the girls silly and the suited men odd. Then he continued to think about his mom and what to buy for her in order to cheer her up.

Time crept by and most of the frolickers took their leave. The girls in the water waded ashore and sat in a circle and laughed and chatted while the two suited guys attended to the needs of a particular girl among them. Some of Borang's friends tried to reach out to the girls but the men in suit warned them to stay away. Borang only shook his head and laughed as his friends grumbled about the rude treatment they'd just received.

The sun was in the middle of the sky and literally roasting the earth with merciless heat when the girls decided to take their leave but the one who seemed to have come with the suited men insisted on having another swim. There was a brief argument between her and her friends. She also turned a deaf ear to the pleas of the men in suit to forget the idea. She waded into the water again and began to swim like a porpoise. A few minutes after that, she cane out and dried herself with a towel. Then she was ready to go. As her group passed close to Borang's position, the other girls were busy chattering but the girl was quiet. Very briefly, her eyes and those of Borang locked. A strange current of electricity seemed to pass between the two. Borang was startled and confused. The girl must have felt the same thing he felt because there was a startled look in her eyes and then she looked away.

He went home that night thinking of those eyes. He thought they were the most lovely and lively pair of eyes he had ever seen anywhere since he was born. But then after a night's sleep, he managed to put them out of his mind.

Exactly a week later, he was coming out of a shopping mall with the goods he had bought which he intended to take to his mom. Among the items was a baseball club for Nosa whose birthday was only three days away. Unlike Borang who thought the game dry and boring, Nosa was an ardent fan of baseball. As Borang moved with his goods in both hands towards the parking lot with the intention of looking for a commercial motorcyclist, a white and sleek Lexus pulled to a halt nearby. The driver emerged and slammed the door shut. She turned and hummed aloud as she twisted the key in her hand around. Her voice was beautifully musical and it was loud enough. Borang heard the song clearly across the street. The girl looked somehow familiar. She sang with an infectious zest.

"Here goes nothing.

Here comes something.

Parapa rapapa. Oh!"

And then the unbelievable happened. Three men rushed at her from the midst of nearby cars and attacked. Her screams for help rang out loud. There was a very intense struggle as they attempted to snatch the car key away from her. She fought with all her strength but it was a lost cause. A brute struck her a wicked blow on the chest and she went down noiselessly. Instead of coming to her aid, the nearest onlookers quickly beat a retreat.

Borang who had been stunned by the suddenness and savagery of the attack felt anger surge within him. He dumped his goods and snatched at the baseball club. He ran towards the men and struck speedily and brutally. He smashed a man on the head, knocking him out cold. The next ruffian turned swiftly and pulled out a fearsome looking knife. He rushed at Borang and slashed a wicked blow. Borang dodged but he wasn't fast enough. He felt searing pain as the knife slightly grazed his side. He instantly felt hot sticky blood staining his cloth. The brute rushed at him again and plunged the knife in the direction his stomach. Borang struck down viciously with the club. There was a crack of broken bones as the man dropped the knife. The ruffian held his broken hand as he fell on his knees while a horrible sob escaped from his throat.

The brute who had hit the girl was busy with her key as he sought to get inside the car. Sensing danger as Borang charged at him, he turned and thrust his hand into the pocket of his pullover trying to bring out a weapon. Borang grabbed his hand and gave him an headbutt that rattled the man's teeth and filled his mouth with blood. The brute struggled and succeeded in bringing out a pistol from within the pullover. It was a black thing with a brown handle. Borang struck him across the face with the baseball club and he fell against the car. Borang struck again and the man gave a hoarse cry of agony. There was blood on his face and there was blood gushing out of his nose which was clearly broken. The blood stained his cloth and some of it splashed on the white Lexus. The gun dropped from his hand as he slid down and then he fell face down on the paved ground.

Borang slowed his breath as he leaned against the Lexus, using it for support. He felt like he'd been in a race for his life. His cloth was stained with blood and wet with his sweat and blood. His wounded side felt like it was on fire. He carefully looked around. The three hoodlums were down. The girl was unmoving on the ground. He recoiled in shock when he saw her face at close quarters. She was the girl at the beach. She was the lovely and lively girl who had insisted on having a second swim. He moved in her direction and scooped her up.

The spectators were returning cautiously to the scene. Their expressions varied. Some had not yet recovered from the shock of the attack. Others were in awe of the man who had singlehandedly handled the hoodlums. They blinked in disbelief at the three incapacitated assailants, sprawled on the ground, while Borang stood aside with the girl in his hands and a look of concern on his face.

"That was a very dangerous thing you did." An elderly woman gently reprimanded him. "But thank you for taking the risk."

Others crowded around Borang and a buzz went around as they expressed admiration and gratitude for his courageous act. Uniformed security men who had been alerted hurried towards the scene.The assailant whimpering in pain attracted a few sympathetic murmurs from the crowd who watched as he continued to cradle his injured hand. But no one offered him any assistance having seen their brutal attack on the lady. Many of the onlookers jeered at him while a few talked about breaking his leg. Many other people maintained a cautious distance, wary of the situation's unpredictability. In the aftermath of the chaos, there was a sense of relief that permeated the air. The onlookers boldly crowded the man and his three victîms knowing that the danger had been averted. Some rushed to check on the young lady, offering to take her from Borang's hands but he refused to hand her over. All he demanded was that someone should drive them to the nearest hospital. A man offered to do that. The security men eventually arrived at the scene and demanded to know what was going on. Everyone tried to speak at the same time and it was the noise that woke up the girl. She stirred and her eyes fluttered open just as the noise of hard soles running on the pavement broke through the collective murmuring. Two huge men in suits pushed their way through the crowd and then set their eyes on Borang as he put the girl back on her feet. On sighting him, their faces twisted with anger and disdain. "Get your dirty hands off her!" One of them snarled, his voice filled with contempt as they rushed at him. Borang recognized them. They were the same arrogant bodyguards that were her escorts at the beach. The same men who prevented Borang's friends from having access to the girls at the beach. They roughly pushed him away from her side while his protests fell on deaf ears. They pounced on him like he was a criminal and struck him mercilessly while the girl looked on in confusion and the security men tried to restrain them. Borang was too shocked and confused to effectively protect himself from their torrent of blows. But the onlookers booed the men and began to pelt them with available projectiles which included newly purchased eggs, stationeries, cosmetics and others. The men were forced to stop their assault but Borang was bruised and battered with his clothes torn and bloodied once more.

Many of the bystanders cursed the men and demanded why they were embarrassing Borang.

"She's under our care." One of the men defiantly shouted. "He shouldn't mess with our ward."

"You're incompetent idiots!" A woman yelled at them. "Where were you when he was risking his life to save the girl from those thugs?"

The men ignored her and whisked their charge towards a black Honda. They turned deaf ears to her protests and pushed her inside before zooming off. Borang could only watch helplessly, his heart heavy with a sense of defeat because something within him really longed to know her better.

As he trudged wearily towards his discarded goods, a younger man followed him. "You could become rich through this event, you know." He said.

Borang gave him a fleeting and suspicious look before continuing his walk.

"You think I'm joking?" The stranger pressed him.

"I don't care." Borang was tired and not in a mood to be nice to anybody.

"I know the girl. She's Franca Abayo, last born daughter of chief Sunny Abayo."

Borang had heard of Sunny Abayo but he wasn't awed. "How does that information make me rich?"

"Those two goons are the bodyguards he employed to shadow his daughter everywhere. Since they assaulted you while on duty for their master, he's liable for their assult on you. You can sue the man for damages running into millions of naira. Or you can prove to him that you actually saved his daughter's life. Man, he'll pay you handsomely to show his gratitude."

"Thanks but I'm not interested."

"Don't tell me you're turning your back on the opportunity of a lifetime."

"I already said no." Borang growled.

The man raised both hands. "Okay, okay, it's your funeral." Then he walked away.

Borang went home dejected. If the girl was whom that dubious guy claimed she was, then it was stupid of him to even think of being friends with her. Her folks were the usual rich, snobby and arrogant folks. Just like Ngozi's folks.

Yet the girl knocked on his door three days later. It was six o'clock and he was trying to unwind in front of his newly bought plasma TV when the knock rang loud and clear. He gaped after opening the door. It was like a dream. The lady was at his doorstep. She was dressed simply. White cardigan over blue jeans trousers. Her hair was stacked in a bun and she wore a pair of eye glasses. Not too far away was a black Honda which he remembered very well. Two muscular figures leaned against the car and watched. Borang felt a rush of anger and clenched his fists. But the girl dispersed the tension with her hesitant smile.

"Hi, my name is Franca Abayo. I'm really sorry about the embarrassment my guards caused you a few days ago."

He was astounded. "Good God! Is that why you're here?"

She nodded. "Of course, that's why I'm here."

"You're crazy."

That disarming smile appeared on her face again. "Not as crazy as a man who risked his life to fight three hoodlums on behalf a girl he doesn't even know."

"Okay. Apology accepted. Good night."

"You shouldn't be rude to a lady just because you played the knight in shining armour."

He was about to swing the door shut but her statement froze him and he had to take another long and hard look at her. This girl was something else. He thought. She seemed unflappable by awkward situations. She had grit and humour and she could be as stubborn as a bull when occasion demanded it. That was his impression now.

"I'm not trying to be rude. I just feel your mission has been accomplished." He explained.

"May I come in?"

He shrugged. "If your goons don't kill me first."

"They're hired muscles assigned by my father to keep me safe." She explained. "Don't worry about them."

She entered without hesitation after he stepped aside. She sat before the TV and chatted with Borang for another ten minutes. She explained that after her recovery from the effect of the attack on her, she had been overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and remorse in her heart about the vicious attack on him by her father's hired bodyguards. The last image she had after she was taken away from the scene of the attack on her was of Borang. She couldn't forget his bruised and battered figure and the shocked look on his face. From the information she was able to gather later, his only crime was risking his life to save her from those hoodlums.

She determined to make amends for the wrong he had suffered and immediately embarked on an extensive investigation. She wasn't just interested in uncovering the identity of her saviour, she was also determined to locate him. She went back to the mall and obtained a CCTV clip of the ugly event that launched Borang into her life. Then she got an artist to draw a lifelike immitation of his appearance. Having done that, she posted his picture on social media sites and asked people for help in identifying him. It only took her two days before she got her answer. Now, she had doziers of information on Borang and his passion for advocacy and activism. Her determination to right the wrongs inflicted on him by her father's guards impelled her on in her quest. A tip from a source who suddenly became sympathetic after she paid him an encouraging amount of money led her to Borang's apartment and now here she was.

They stared at each other in deep thought. The silence had become somewhat awkward. He could see the gratitude and admiration in her eyes. "Thank you for saving my life." She said in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

Borang felt his heart swelling with an emotion he couldn't explain as he looked into her eyes. In those eyes he could now see not just her deeply felt gratitude but also a spark of connection that seemed to be flickering between the girl and himself. It was the same spark that flared briefly between them at the beach. It was so intense that he rose from his chair. The girl got up too. "It's getting late." She told him. "Since my mission is accomplished, I'll bid you good night."

"Thanks for checking on me." He said. "May I have your number?"

She nodded without hesitation. "Why not?" Then she called it out while he stored it on his phone.

At the door, she encouraged him to go back before her bodyguards could get other ideas.

EIGHT: IF LOVING A WOMAN IS A CRIME

Borang called Franca the following day just to thank her for her previous day's visit. She came on another visit the following weekend and spent thirty minutes with him. It wasn't a romantic love. They just had a connection that seemed made in heaven. She interviewed him about his activism and questioned him about his motives for getting involved in advocacy and activism in the first place. She wanted to know about his family and his career plans. He explained that he currently lectured on introduction to philosophy in a private polytechnic and was planning to go for his doctorate soon.

She explained that she was an accountant in one of her father's companies. He learned that just like himself, swimming was her most favourite hobby. He learned that she had a much older senior brother, Timba who studied theatre arts and was planning to go fully into movie production very soon. According to her, Timba was a flamboyant person who loved to show off a lot. He also lived like he was the king of the world and did his best to control her life just like their dad. Franca explained how much obsessed her father was over the security of his children which necessitated the presence of the two guards, Charlie and ArmanI who shadowed her most of the time.

Their relationship was like a slow burning fire. It wasn't romantic. They just loved being together. They didn't see their frequent outings together as dates. Bu they found out that they had a lot in common.

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Kunle's birthday was on the third of the next month. Since he didn't like publicity so much, he only invited his three closest friends for a birthday meal. They all knew his great culinary skill, so naturally they all came early for the meet. They sang him the usual birthday song, gave him their gifts and then settled down for his mouth watering delicacies. They talked about a lot of things and then came back to Borang's ordeal after saving Franca from robbers. Then they expressed curiosity about her occasional visits to Borang's house as well as their outings together.

Chuks couldn't contain his curiosity. "How long have you been dating that lady?" He asked Borang.

Borang chuckled, shaking his head. "No, we're not dating. We're just friends."

"Friends my foot," Kunle scoffed, excitement evident in his voice. "That's Franca Abayo, the millionaire's daughter, isn't it?" He whistled, impressed. "Some guys just seem to have all the luck in the world."

George, ever the voice of reason, interjected, "Don't call it luck. Probably a curse. Remember, his last relationship was with Ngozi, who was the daughter of a rich tycoon and a staunch member of the ruling party. He's getting himself hooked up with the daughter of another wealthy man who's also deeply involved in politics." He shook his head, a hint of concern in his tone. "I hope this one works out fine."

Borang brushed off their speculation. "You're just speculating on the impossible," he countered. "Ngozi's dad is like a mere street hawker compared to Franca's daddy. Mr Abayo is a walking financial institution. And the family doesn't associate with commoners. Franca is a nice girl, but I assure you, she won't ever date a commoner like me."

Chuks burst into laughter. "This is so unlike you, dude."

Borang furrowed his brows. "What do you mean?"

"You're so close to the girl, yet you can't even see the obvious," Chuks explained. "She likes you."

"I know," Borang replied, a hint of solemnity in his voice. "She's grateful that I risked my life to save her from those miscreants who attacked her."

Kunle sighed in frustration. "I don't understand you anymore," He declared. "You're an extremely intelligent guy, top of your class in university. You're a fitness enthusiast, skilled in boxing, karate and judo. Your perspectives on national issues are legendary and clear. Yet, you're totally blind when it comes to dealing with a mere woman. What's wrong with you?"

Borang smiled dismissively. "Stop getting stressed over my relationship with Franca, guys

" He replied. "If you'd like to take a shot at her, I'd be willing to facilitate a talk between the two of you."

George snorted. "With those two gorillas that always follow her around most of the time?" he waved the suggestion away. "Hell, no!"

Their banter continued as they attacked the meal. After they were done, Nosa who had been quiet throughout the affair stunned them by announcing that he and Chloe, his long time girlfriend were getting married the following year.

One could have heard a pin drop at the silence that followed this announcement. Then the room erupted into cheers as his friends congratulated him.

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Overtime, report of Franca's relationship with Borang reached her family. Her father immediately confronted her about it.

"Who's this lowlife I hear you've been hanging out with?" He asked her over supper one night.

She paused and stared at her meal in dread. "Dad! I haven't been seeing any lowlife." She protested.

Her brother, Timba chuckled unpleasantly. "Liar." He growled like a displeased bear. "Charlie and Armani have been giving me detailed reports about your frequent visits to his house."

"He's not a lowlife." She insisted. "He's a very decent young man with a big dream for his nation and he's..."

Timba's rude laughter interrupted her speech and it hurt her pride.

"He's nothing but a rabble rousing activist trying to marry the daughter of a millionaire." Her brother spat. "Stop being stupid. That cheap gold digger isn't worthy to be your boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend and he's not a gold digger." She retorted.

"If that is the truth, then it shouldn't be difficult for you to end your relationship with him." Her father told her.

"I don't understand." She replied in a pleading voice. "Can't I choose my own friends?"

Sunny Abayo forked a huge meat into his plate of rice and began to slowly and methodically cut it. "You can, but your choice of friends have to meet the acceptable expectations."

"But Dad, he's a really nice person and I assure you, he's..."

"He's nothing but trouble; a leader of rebellious youths who give the government lots of headache." Her father replied. "The government is monitoring him and his group in recent times and I assure you, he's going to come to a bad end one of these days."

"His family background is a big disappointment, honey." Her mother, Nadia Abayo spoke for the first time. "He's a son of retired teachers. Imagine that!" Her distaste showed in her voice and in her expression. "I can't allow such to become my future son in law."

"Mom! He hasn't proposed marriage to me. And it's not a crime to come from a poor background."

"Shut up there." Her mother rebuked her. "You think I was born yesterday? What are you going to do if he proposes marriage to you tomorrow?"

Mother and daughter stared at each other in silence while Franca pondered over the possibility of that happening. "I don't see that happening?"

"But what if you're wrong?" Her mother insisted.

"We're just friends."

"You like him more than you're letting on. Cut your tie with him before you're too emotionally involved to save yourself and family from the embarrassment of such an emotional involvement." Timba told her.

She ignored him and appealed to her mom instead. "Does everything have to hinge on money, power and prestige, Mom?"

"Are you insane?" Her brother queried. "Of course you're nothing without all those things."Just do as you are told."

She got up in anger.

"Where are you going?" Her mother demanded.

"I'm no longer hungry." She declared as she walked away.

Timba rose to his feet with an intention to follow her. "Come back here. Come back at once."

"Let her be." Their father told him. With a sigh, he turned to his wife. "Talk to your daughter, okay."

She nodded. "I'll do my best. But you know how stubborn she could be at times."

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Borang couldn't help bursting into fits of laughter when Franca told him about the faceoff.

"It's not funny." She told him.

"I'm sorry." He replied with a grin. "I just find your family so hilarious."

She regarded him with upraised eyebrows. "In what way?"

"What are they afraid of?" He wondered aloud. "It's not as if I'm a prime marriage candidate or anything. And I haven't said I want to marry their daughter."

She gave him an odd look that made him uncomfortable. "Are you't telling me you wouldn't like to marry their daughter?"

"Call me a realist." He replied. "It's not possible. The girl is so beautiful and classy. Besides, she's from a family literally drowning in wealth. Common girl, she's not going to take me serious."

She didn't look pleased with that statement."Are you sure of this?"

He waved at her. "Absolutely sure."

Her retort was like a serrated knife. "Then you're as blind as a newborn rat."

His smile shrank until it was replaced by a frown. An awkward silence pervaded the air. There was subtle tension now.

"Are you serious?" He exclaimed. She ignored the question and glared at him. But her eyes said it all. "Christ!" He groaned. "Look, I can't come between you and your family, okay. I haven't even proposed to you and your household is almost on fire. What do you think is going to happen if I come with a proposal?"

She wasn't in a funny mood. "Borang Sisalo, if you think I'm going to beg you for a marriage proposal, you're mistaken. But in case you come to your senses on time and decide to do the needful, you know how to get in touch."

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He had sleepless nights. Franca wasn't a cheap girl. She didn't fraternize easily. She always chose her friends with care. He'd always known her to be bold and forthright. And in this case, she hadn't even tried to pretend about her feelings. He didn't need to read between the lines. She had laid her heart bare. She didn't want a mere platonic relationship with him. She wanted him to propose to her but she wasn't going to insist if he wasn't interested. Neither was she intimidated by her family's opposition to her relationship with him. This was something he had no prior experience to compare with. He'd never met a woman like this.

He really admired her disposition and truth be told, he'd always loved her. But he was hesitant about plunging into a relationship with her because he couldn't escape the sense of discomfort that crept over him each time the thought crossed his mind. The thought of the opulence of Franca's influential family and their scorn for those they considered below their status appalled and offended him. He wasn't ignorant about the reasons for their outright disapproval of him.

Aside from the fact that he was from a humble family and her family belonged to the constellation of bigwhigs and the movers of Nigerian society, the family also belonged to the ruling party and he was a major opponent to that party. He was one of those undermining their political clout and eroding their relevance. He knew his campaigns on behalf of Abeke Anthony had turned him into a major threat to their power and influence.

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The 'breakthrough' came unexpectedly. It came as a call from an unknown caller on his phone.

"Hello, who's this?" He was tired and irritated after a very busy day.

"I presume I'm speaking to Borang Sisalo." The voice was male and deep and very musical. It reminded him somewhat of Franca's voice.

"You are correct. How may I help you?"

"My name is Sunny Abayo. I understand that you're a good friend of my daughter."

It was an understatement to say that Borang was stunned. His shock left him tongue tied.

"Hello, are you still there?"

"Yes sir."

"I'd like to meet with you."

Borang scratched his head. Was he dreaming?

"Tomorrow is Saturday. Do you know my house address?"

"Hmm, I'm... I mean...yes sir. I mean I have an idea of the location."

"You want me to send a chaffaeur to come pick you up?"

"No sir. I'll find my way."

"Excellent." The man sounded very pleased. "Franca and I will be expecting you at 8am."

Borang stared absent mindedly at the phone as the line broke off. This was weird. And just unbelievable. This was a breakthrough too good to be real.

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The gates of the Abayo estate was gilded, majestic and massive. It loomed before Borang like the entrance to an imposing and forbidding castle. He paused and straightened himself. He felt a bit irritated because despite himself, he couldn't shake off the desire to make a good impression on his first visit to Franca's father and family. He was dressed like he was going for a job interview. Black suit, skyblue shirt and red necktie. He gave himself a quick look over for the umpteenth time, hoping he didn't resemble a beggar. This is just too good to be true. Franca's dad of all people demanding to see me. He thought. He couldn't wait to see him and her too of course.

He pressed the bell button and waited. There was a grating sound as the gate slid open by itself. He hesitated for a few moments and then went in apprehensively. The gate slid shut again and he felt like a newly arrived convict at a prison facility from which there could be no escape.

A driveway made of finely cut granite led straight to the imposing structure of the mansion. On either side of the driveway was a well trimmed flower hedge. It was a huge compound which sprawled out in all directions. He could see a white and wooden picket fence not too far from the main building. It demarcated this section of the compound from the other side which seemed to be a sort of orchard grown with all manner of fruit trees.

There was no one in sight which was another thing that seemed weird to him. The silence was eerie, discomfiting and even hostile. He found himself fidgeting as he waited for someone to appear and attend to him but the moments crept by and no one did.

Taking a deep breath, he began his trek towards the colossal building ahead. The only sound was the tap tap of his sole on the cast concrete. It took him almost a minute to arrive at the gigantic building. He reached for the ornately designed doorbell and pressed it.

The response wasn't what he expected. There was a low growl like the purr of an engine from his left and then the menacing bark of a dog shattered the overwhelming silence. The colossal and fearsome black dog that made an appearance from the side of the building stunned Borang. He took a step backwards as the beast strolled menacingly in his direction.

He raised up both hands and called out in a voice that tried to be brave. "Easy boy, take it easy. I'm here by invitation. So just take..."

The dog snarled angrily and then let loose a wicked bark that made Borang's blood run cold. He forgot what he was planning to say next. Stumbling backwards, he beat a quick retreat as the beast lunged towards him with its canines bared in readiness for a kill. Confusion flooded his mind as he struggled to understand what exactly was going on. Where is everybody? Why doesn't someone come to my rescue? But his confusion didn't slow him down. With his heart racing a mile a minute, he darted to one side as the dog attempted to cut off his escape.

"Anybody home!" He yelled. "Help!"

The brute snarled and strolled forward. Borang moved sideways. The dog refused to take its eyes off its victim. It seemed to be toying with the newcomer but Borang was sure of one thing, if this beast succeeded in catching up with him, it would be 'game over'.

They continued their tense game of tag around the vast compound. He was sweating and it wasn't only because of his exertions. He could feel the adrenaline coursing through his veins with each near miss as the dog snapped at him. Finally, in desperation, he fled towards the picket fence. He could hear the sound of bounding feet and blood curdling snarls as the relentless canine came after him in full pursuit.

His panic gave him strength and uncommon acceleration. With a burst of speed, he lunged over the fence and rolled over on the other side. He didn't stay down, his survival instinct propelled him to his feet and then he was brushing his dirtied cloth with his hands.

Unable to follow him to the other side, the dog stopped before the fence and continued to bark furiously.

"Devil take you!" Borang cursed as he tried to catch his breath. He withdrew his hanky and proceeded to wipe his sweat covered face. It was then he heard the sound of laughter. A man was approaching. On sighting him, the dog stopped barking and totally relaxed. Borang studied him with deep interest.

The newcomer was fair in complexion, tall and huge but not obese. Borang judged him to be around sixty or above. He was slightly bald and he had handsome features that somewhat reminded him of Franca. He guessed then that this must be her father.

The man had an expression on his face that made it clear to Borang that he had been watching the whole fiasco and enjoying it.

The newcomer whistled sharply, calling at the creature. The dog gave Borang a final menacing growl and then obediently made its way towards the man. It's owner gave Borang a curious look and then burst out laughing. There was a smirk on his lips as he spoke. "Welcome, Borang Sisalo." His voice dripped with scorn. "I see you've met Titan. He's fiercely protective of his territory, I'm afraid. And he's very hostile to those who threaten our family, you see."

Borang swallowed hard, his heart pounding in his chest as he tried to maintain his composure in the face of the intimidating display. He was trying to figure out how he'd become a threat instead of a welcome guest. "I... I'm here to see you sir." He stammered, his voice betraying his nerves. "You sent for me sir. You said you and Franca would like to see me."

Mr Abayo's eyes gleamed with amusement. "I'm afraid Franca won't be able to see you." He replied, brusquely. "However, we can have our chat." The amused expression vanished from his eyes and something unpleasant replaced it. "My daughter isn't for your type. She isn't going to marry a riffraff and a rable rouser who has no future."

Borang stared at him in shock. There was pure hatred on the man's face. He seemed ready to kill. "Sir, I'm not in a love relationship with your daughter." He replied in a voice that was hoarse with weariness and shock.

"I wasn't born yesterday, young man." Sunny Abayo replied. "She's madly in love with you. I see it in her eyes."

Borang knew he had to tread with care here. "You must be mistaken sir."' He said. "We're just friends."

An unpleasant smile reappeared on the man's face. "Look here young one, if you take advantage of my daughter, I swear I'll bury you alive. Leave her alone, you hear?"

Borang was sweating again. He wondered what he had gotten himself into. "I understand sir. You want me to completely erase from her mind any impression that I might have romantic interest in her."

"That isn't good enough." Franca's father countered. "You must cut off all contacts with her. If it will require that you leave this city and relocate, I'm ready to reimburse you."

Borang's heart sank. He realized that he would never be welcome in this man's family and in his world. With a sigh of defeat, he nodded his assent. But an intense rage was boiling in his heart too. This was the height of humiliation and intimidation. This man had given him an invitation to his home only to unleash a dog on him. And then he had threatened him with death because he didn't want him to be involved with his daughter.

"Titan, leave!" Mr Abayo called out. The dog turned and trotted away. Then he told Borang. "You're free to go but remember all I've told you. Leave Franca alone. You may feel like sueing me in court for assault. There's no problem. But I'm warning you, you're not big enough to travel that route with me. Your family will suffer and I'll make sure you die a miserable death."

As Borang turned to leave, his mind swirled with a mixture of frustration and impotent anger. He felt like finding a way to strike back at the man but he wasn't eager to hurt Franca's dad or engage in a war with the family members of a woman he might eventually marry. But as he walked away from the mansion, he couldn't shake the feeling that Sunny Abayo deserved to be taught a bitter lesson.

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Back at his modest apartment, Borang brooded over the encounter with Franca's dad. He felt depressed by the stark contrast between his world and the world of the Abayos. It was clear to him that it would be an impossible feat for an underdog like him to successfully cultivate a meaningful romance with someone like Franca who came from a privileged background, but a part of him had secretly hoped that their love would conquer the giants of wealth and social status.

"Stay away from the girl, Borang." Kunle advised him. "Can't you see where this road leads? Heartache, disappointment and unnecessary troubles."

"Don't be like the fool who rushes in where angels fear to tread.." Chuks counselled him. "The Abayos have a history of trampling on the less privileged and getting away with it. They have unbelievable influence in high places. Don't mess with their daughter, bro. It doesn't matter how she feels. This so called love with her has no future."

"But, she's an adult." Borang protested weakly. "Doesn't she have the right to choose?"

"Her family's wealth and affluence cancelled all those rights." Kunle argued. "From day one, she's been groomed to marry another millionaire's brat. Face reality and move on with your life. You're just going to end up becoming a casualty in the war that is sure to result if you insist on having your way."

A loud bang on the door interrupted their conversation. They gazed at each other in amazement. "Who is it?" Kunle eventually called out.

The answer was another loud bang on the door. Borang was curious and irritated. He went to the door and opened it. He was instantly brushed aside as a huge guy stormed into the room. The guy stood in the unclosed doorway and surveyed the three guys in the apartment. "Which of you is the rat called Borang Sisalo?" He spat.

Borang quickly studied him. He was as tall as a basketballer but thickset and sturdy like a wrestler. He wore a vest that accentuated his massive chest, bulging biceps and rippling muscles. He wore ripped denim Jeans trousers and high quality sneakers. His hair was braided like a woman's and his finger nails were carefully manicured. He was a very handsome chap but there was an aura of fear and intimidation that surrounded him. Borang felt his hackles rising and his anger began to boil again. This sinister guy that just barged into his apartment uninvited was definitely a bully and Borang hated bullies.

"I am Borang." He replied coolly. "What may I do for you?"

The guy moved faster than any of them in the room anticipated. He grabbed Borang, slammed him against the wall and poked him in the chest. "You stay away from my sister, you hear?"

Borang stared at him in wonder. "You're Franca's brother? But your dad just gave me a warning and it's not up to ten hours."

"I don't care whether it's ten seconds." The guy's spit showered Borang's face as he hissed. "If I ever see you with Franca again, I swear to God I'll cut off your balls."

Kunle and Chuks found themselves involuntarily shrinking back at the visitor's malevolence.

"What's wrong with you people?" Borang wondered aloud. "Your father invited me for a chat and then unleashed a dog on me as if loving a woman is a crime. He did that to threaten me over a woman I'm not yet in a relationship with. Now you're here like a common tout. You barged into my house uninvited and you're threatening to harm me for a crime I haven't even committed!"

"Did you say my dad unleashed a dog on you?" Franca spoke from the open doorway, interrupting the conversation between the two men.

All eyes in the room turned towards the doorway. She was there. Today, she was dressed in navy blue shirt over black pants. She was stunned at the scene before her but there was anger on her face too.

Borang gave his assaulter a look of indifference before answering the girl's questions. "Yes, he did. He invited me for a chat with himself and he told me you would be there as well. I was lucky to come out of your family house alive after that monstrous dog chased me around." He sighed slowly. "He unleashed that brute of a dog on me." He declared, a note of anger that comes from a sense of being betrayed punctuated his voice. "He warned me to stay away from you."

Her eyes glistened like she was about to cry. "I'm so sorry, Borang. I never wanted things to turn out like this." She turned to her brother. "How could dad stoop so low, Timba? And you too?"

The huge guy released Borang and clapped his hands enthusiastically. "How touching!" He jeered. "A love story in the making and right before my eyes." He moved closer to his sister. "What are you doing here? We expressly warned you never to come near this lowlife again."

"It's my life and I have the right to live it the best way I see fit." She retorted. "Besides, Borang isn't a lowlife but a perfect gentleman."

"What do you think you're doing?" Timba exploded, his tone laced with contempt. "You know what Dad said about staying away from him. Do you have any idea what you're getting yourself into?"

"What's your stake in this?" She demanded. "I'm a twenty four year old woman and considered an adult under the Nigerian constitution. I'm gainfully employed and I've been making critical decisions that affect my life and others for a couple of years now. Please leave me alone and let me make my own decisions."

Her words didn't calm Timba's anger. It only infuriated him further. There was a loud crack as he delivered a stinging slap across her cheek. She staggered backward, shock and pain flashing across her face as tears welled up in her eyes. She didn't look angry anymore but there was a sadness and a sense of frustration that masked her features now.

Her voice was hoarse as she struggled to articulate her feelings to him. Her next words shocked everyone in the room. "I love him, Timba." She replied, her voice trembling with emotion. "I love him even if he doesn't love me in return. But it's his decision and not yours or dad's or anyone else's; you hear me?" There was a fierce gleam in her eyes now. "I'll rather die than allow any of you to dictate who I can and cannot be with."

"Then I'd better kill you." Timba roared as he raised his hand to strike her again.

Borang rushed forward and grabbed his upraised hand. He glared at the enraged giant through eyes blazing with fury. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" He demanded, his voice seething with anger. "You're not ashamed of assaulting a woman? And your own sister for that matter?"

"Let go, lowlife," Timba purred dangerously like a puma about to leap on a prey. "or your friends will be carrying your corpse out of this room in a couple of minutes."

"No." Borang was emphatic. "You're not hurting her again."

Timba glared at the man who had stolen his sister's heart. Then he yanked his hand out of Borang's grip and struck fast and hard. Borang staggered back as pain and colours exploded across his vision. Timba struck him again and the blow felt like a sledgehammer against rock. Borang reeled back and fell on his knees with blood pouring from his nose. He felt the taste of blood in his mouth too. Franca and the other two guys were shouting now and telling the guy assaulting him to stop.

Borang was clearly in trouble. His two friends could see that and they tried to help. They rushed at Timba and tried to block his way but the enraged man was too strong. They fell in different directions as he effortlessly shoved them away. Then he moved closer to his quarry again with fury and murder in his heart.

"Stop it, Timba!" Franca cried and pleaded. Her hands were outstretched in a helpless attempt to diffuse the tension. "Why are you doing this?"

He stared as Borang slowly rose to his feet and began to wipe off the blood on his nose and mouth. Then he gave his sister a scathing reply. "I'm doing it for you." Having said that, he stalked towards Borang again and struck viciously.

Borang knocked Timba's hand aside as he evaded the blow, leaving the man off balance. He packed his anger and frustration into two vengeful punches. One in Timba's hard packed stomach and a measured one at the huge man's temple. Timba fell without any struggle. He was unconscious before he hit the floor. Then he was quiet.

Franca rushed to her brother's side and felt his pulse. "He'll be awake in a few moments." Borang assured her.

She nodded and bit her lips to stifle the sobs that were coming out of her throat.

"I'm sorry, Franca," Borang said as he wiped more blood from his nostrils with a handkerchief. "but your brother left me no other choice."

"Man, I always wished I could fight like you " Kunle exclaimed, a note of envy in his voice.

"I always thought your obsession with self defense was a waste of time." Chuks recalled. "I guess I've been wrong."

Timba opened his eyes with a groan and sat up. "My head!" He exclaimed.

"Be glad that you are Franca's brother." Borang told him. "I would have broken some bones for all the embarrassments you caused me."

Timba struggled to his feet, rage and humiliation twisting his features. "Don't think this is over, lowlife." He growled. "No one ever strikes Timba and gets away with it. You won't get away with this." Then he staggered out of the room. A few moments later, they heard a car engine purr to life and recede as the vehicle drove away.

"I'm sorry, Borang." Franca apologized. "I brought this trouble on you. He's not going to let this matter go. His ego won't allow him."

"In the light of that, I think you should just stay out of Borang's life for now." Chuks told her. "Don't get me wrong lady. You're lovely and loving but your folks are too mean and inhuman for a nice guy like our friend."

"It's okay Chuks." Borang called out. "I know you're trying to watch out for me. But you've got to admit that she stood up for me and risked incurring her family's wrath just to show me love." He could feel his heart breaking at the sight of her pain and the dried tears on her face. He called to her and took her hand. "I love you, Franca but I honestly don't know whether our love has a future because this opposition is so strong. But I'll try my best."

While Borang's friends looked on in discomfort and fear for him, he and Franca clasped hands and gazed into each other's eyes. They both had fears but they had reached a silent agreement that their love was worth fighting for, even in the face of adversity.

They didn't know it yet but In the days and weeks that followed, their relationship would be put to the ultimate test. Politics and family would threaten to completely tear them apart. And they would have to fight for this love with a level of determination they didn't know they possessed.

NINE: A BIRTHDAY WISH

The phone rang shrilly and brought Abeke out of her musings. It was her landline and she knew immediately that it was her secretary. "Doctor Franklin is around."

Abeke sighed. She was tempted to instruct her to tell the visitor that she wasn't around. There was a part of her that was 'terrified' by the man but it wasn't because Doctor Franklin was a bad person. In fact, he was extremely nice which made it harder to be nasty to him. In recent times, the man was becoming more terrifying on account of his ability to stir up certain unwanted emotions in Abeke which she thought were dead. Her hesitation was momentary. "Send him in."

She had met him through Maggie and after her emotional breakdown, he was one of those who gave her medical care during the darkest period of her life. He was an extremely quiet and very considerate man but he also had his own dark past. He had lost his wife and only son seven years ago. He had openly acknowledged and admired Abeke's resilience despite her past. And he had made no attempt to hide his deep affection and attraction to her. But having understood her past history, he approached her cautiously, understanding the delicate nature of her emotional state. Although his attention was flattering, Abeke recoiled at any gesture of affection. She had hammered suspicion into a rugged and impenetrable breastplate that shielded her heart from men and the dangerous bullets and arrows of affection.

Dr. Franklin wasn't discouraged by her reticence. He kept persisting, not with forced advances but with genuine kindness and friendliness. He respected her boundaries while patiently hoping for the iron barriers around her heart to melt. Abeke, wasn't interested in lowering that barrier but they remained friends because he was such a friendly and straightforward person. She remained steadfast in her determination never to put herself in a position that would ever allow any man to exploit her again. Even though she was a strong and independent woman now, it was apparent to him that the shadows of her destroyed marriage still haunted her.

The doctor entered the office with a smile that seemed to chase away the shadows. There was a flutter in the pit of her stomach. It irritated her because in recent times, Franklin's presence had been creating that effect in her. It wasn't a feeling she wanted to ever entertain.

Frank wasn't a frivolous person, nonetheless he was lively. Although, there were few times she noticed a haunted look in his eyes. She knew then that he was grieving his lost family.

After the exchange of pleasantries, he told her. "I'm sorry for coming a bit late. We had an emergency case and I had to return to the hospital."

She picked her bag and arose. "You don't need to feel sorry for saving a life, Frank. I understand."

It was a bright and beautiful day. The sun shone brightly in a blue sky. The whole world seemed full of life. Abeke knew it was mostly because Franklin was around. She had observed that things always seemed more lovely whenever he came around.

"You want to tell me about the patient responsible for your lateness?" She inquired after they reached his grey Lexus which was parked beside her car just outside the office complex.

"It was a pathetic case." He replied. "A young boy of fourteen poisoned himself because his parents went through a messy divorce." His eyes had a far away look as if he was looking at the boy all over again. He shook his head. "Poor boy. Thank God, we managed to save his life."

She settled in the passenger seat in silence after he opened the door for her. Why is it that the bad choices of people usually generate a sequence of bad choices in others? She wondered. The man who was divorced by his wife could have made horrible choices which eventually forced the woman to opt for divorce which eventually instigated that boy to opt for self destruction. She felt deep sorrow for the boy. He was just about Rosa's age. What if Rosa had been forced to embrace the path of suicide to deal with her own pains too? There was a time when Abeke had become psychologically unravelled and unable to attend to her child. She wasn't in any condition to be of help to Rosa. As a matter of fact, she was gradually considering suicide as an option. She still remembered that black day at the courtroom. Things had been going downhill long before then but it was the day that redefined her life forever.

The day of her divorce was like most typical days. The sun was out early. She prepared for the verdict like she was preparing for a war but she already knew the outcome.

The courtroom was the stage for the final interactions between her and Jerome as a couple. Her emotions ran wild as she and Jerome faced each other across the cold and soulless courthouse. Abeke, once the most beautiful woman in Jerome's world and the backbone of his wealth and success had now become an outsider to him. He considered her a barrier to his progress, a barrier which had to be removed. He wanted her out of his life so that he could start afresh. The judge dissolved the marriage on the ground of irreconcilable differences. This effectively closed that chapter of their lives as husband and wife. As they exited the courtroom, their eyes met one final time, a look of wistfulness and farewell on the part of Abeke and defiant hostility on Jerome's part.

But as they went their separate ways Abeke felt she was the obvious loser. She had literally lived her life for her ex. She had given him her heart and her very life..

She was horribly scarred by the ordeal. She swore that no man would ever have such an opportunity to hurt her again and she resolved that she was going to emerge stronger. But she never bargained for the emotional trauma that her divorce was going to inflict on her.

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"You don't look happy. What's wrong?" The doctor asked.

"Sorry, I couldn't get that boy out of my mind. I mean the boy that poisoned himself." Abeke lied.

"Oh..." The doctor kicked the car to life. "It's a sobering case." He frowned. "We flushed the toxic substance out of his system and saved his life. But who's going to help him get rid of the emotional poison in his heart?" He reversed the car and drove towards the highway.

"My exact thought." She replied. They exchanged a momentary glance at each other. It was full of understanding and electricity. Then the doctor averted his eyes and drove on. A few moments later, the car joined the busy traffic at the highway.

"My son, Tayo would have been his age mate had he been alive today?" He reflected.

She patted his hand comfortingly. "I know. But he wouldn't have you mourning endlessly about his death. I'm sure that he would prefer that you celebrate his life by saving other lives which you have been doing excellently well."

He nodded. "I'm glad that Rosa was able to get over those issues."

"I thank God for that, everyday." She said in reply.

They remained mostly quiet until they got to their destination. "You have been distracted." Franklin observed as they exited the car. They were in front of MAMRAMS, a popular eatery in the heart of town. "I wish I knew what is on your mind."

"I have a lot on my plate. Surely you know that." She told him.

"The campaign?"

She nodded. "Definitely."

"But you're doing just great. What are you worried about?"

"You know it's not over yet." She replied.

"Stop being a worry-wart." He chided as he ushered her into the exquisite and well lit interior of MAMRAMS. After they had picked their menu they waited and made small talk. When they were done with the food, she thanked him and then asked. "Frank, why this outing? I only came because I'm a bit free and you begged and pestered me so much to come."

"Can't you guess?"

"No."

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, happy birthday. Happy birthday to you." He sang.

"She stared at him in shock. "Oh...But today isn't my birthday. It's tomorrow!"

He was grinning now. "I know. But I won't be free tomorrow. So I thought of celebrating with you a day ahead." He shrugged. "Besides, no one gets to compete with me today about wishing you a happy birthday. Tomorrow is every other person's chance. Today is strictly for me alone."

She shook her head. "You're weird, Frank. I've never heard of anyone giving somebody birthday wishes a day before the actual date. It's crazy."

"Well, maybe it's because I'm crazy for you."

"There you go again..."

"You're too focused on business, Abeke." He replied with a grin that revealed his impeccably white teeth. "Lighten up."

"After my daughter, my business is my life." She declared.

"I know. I just wish you could slow down a bit, y'know just learn to relax more."

She chuckled and pointed at him. "You're the pot calling the kettle black."

"Point taken." He responded. "I'll try to follow my own advice more. But my profession..."

"Your profession doesn't give you the right to kill yourself with overwork." She teased.

"You are better off than I am, you know."

"How so?"

"Let's see." He said with a seriousness that hinted at humour. "You have a daughter to live for and a business that keeps you fully occupied. And you have your current campaign to focus on. All I have is my medical career." He declared matter of factly.

"Don't you dare turn my birthday into a pity party."

Their wholehearted laughter was like a valve that released the stress they had stored inside for days.

"Thanks for making me laugh on my pre-birth day." She said.

"You're welcome." He clasped his enormous fingers and took a breath. "I guess you deserve to laugh after all those political brouhaha, eh?"

"It's not yet over, Frank."

"It soon will be."

She was meditative now. "Thanks again for the moments of laughter. I can't remember the last time I wholeheartedly had a good laugh."

He winked. "Right now the only thing that makes me happy is saving lives and making you happy."

They stared at each other in a silent interlude which was eventually broken by her. "You don't know what you're saying. I'm a broken woman who has been scarred beyond recognition. I have nothing to offer you except the excess baggages from my past. Besides, there are people after my life now. They won't stop until I'm destroyed." Her pain seemed amplified as she made this assertion. "You deserve a better person than I am. And you deserve a lot more than I can offer you."

"All I want is you." He declared on a note of finality. "Your excuses about me deserving a better person is nonsense. You're just scared to love again."

"It's not true." She protested.

"I know it's true." He retorted. "I don't know what you actually think about me, Abeke. But I do love you with all my heart. I swear I'll never hurt you or break your heart if you give me a chance."

She rose abruptly to her feet. "Can we leave now?" She looked upset.

He smiled. "Let's go but understand this. I won't give up so easily on you."

TEN: GAME OF DEATH

In later years, Abeke would share with the public how her political opponents changed their game. The series of events that took place as the elections drew nearer and nearer convinced her that she wasn't just involved in a political competition but rather in a game of death.

At the end of a series of campaigns across the southwestern part of the country which concluded with further mobilization of her party members, she came back home exhausted. Home was a beautiful Duplex in a sprawling expanse of land at the outskirts Ibadan. After a gruelling season of travels and endless meetings with her campaign team members and party excos, she was only too glad to have some time for rest.

She returned to the extreme delight of her two dogs. The huge and black wolfhound was Jose and its white counterpart, the German Shepherd, she named Napoleon. Both dogs were utterly vicious and provided her home with absolute security. Her gateman was Abdul Farouk, a no nonsense man in his mid-thirties. The easygoing gardener was David Koruma, an elderly man in his late sixties. Maria was the cook and house keeper who kept the house neat and clean at all times.

Abeke’s daughter, Rosa was currently a boarding student at one of the most prestigious private Secondary schools in Lagos. Abeke practically lived alone except when schools were on break. Only then did she have her daughter around to keep her company.

After attending to her dogs, she ate a light supper and retired for the night. She was so exhausted that she instantly fell asleep.

Hours later, she awoke with a start and sat upright in the darkness while her heart raced for no obvious reason. All her senses were unusually alert. She had a feeling that something was wrong, yet the whole world seemed to be at peace. Her dogs would have barked their heads off at any unusual occurrence. But they were quiet. She would have gone back to sleep but that insistent feeling that something was wrong became so strong that it overwhelmed her. She glanced at the luminous bedside clock. The time was 03:05AM.

She reached for the switch of the bedside lamp and felt something strange brush against her hand. She recoiled in shock, for she knew instantly that it was the hairy hand of a man. The knowledge that a total stranger had succeeded in barging into her room right in the middle of the night spurred her into action. She jumped up, intending to make a dash for the entrance but coarse fingers clamped on her left wrist with an iron grip. A gasp of fright escaped from her mouth. She was about to scream when someone roughly wrapped his arm around her neck and chocked off her shout.

“Shhh!” A voice hissed in the darkness and the scream died in her throat.

“Who…?” She began to issue a challenge but her assailant tightened his grip once more on her neck, cutting off her speech.

“You want to live?" The voice demanded impatiently. "Keep your mouth shut and listen.” It was a quiet and self assured voice but filled with a deadly menace that set off warning bells in her mind. He eased off his arm a little so as to give her enough room to breathe. She gasped aloud and coughed as she desperately sucked air into her lungs.

After a few moments of waiting for her to draw enough breath into her lungs, the man spoke again. “I bring a message to you from the powers that be. I’m talking about the powers that enthrone and depose presidents in Nigeria. Drop out out of the presidential race. Bury your futile ambition to rule the country or be prepared to lose everything you have. And that includes your very life. Do you understand?”

She nodded vigorously to indicate that she did.

"I can't hear your response." Her assailant taunted.

"Yes.." Abeke gasped out. "I understand."

“We’re watching your every move Abeke.” He growled. “So, tread very softly and watch your back. We know where your daughter is. We’ll get her first and slaughter her like a pig! Then we'll come for you.” She swooned with fright at his threat against Rosa. As she stumbled against him, he released her. She fell on her knees and tried to control her feeling of terror.

“Do you understand?” Her assailant's voice called out.

“Yes.. please don't hurt my daughter!” She whimpered.

“I'm glad we understand each other.” He said as he roughly pulled her to her feet once more. She felt then the brutal strength of his grip and perceived the faint scent of his deodorant. Even in the darkness, she could perceive that he was a very tall and huge fellow. She gasped in pain once more as she felt the pressure of his iron grip. “This is your first and last warning." He growled in a barely audible voice. "The next visit of this kind will draw blood. Understood?”

Her head suddenly exploded in stars and different shades of colours. She cried out in pain and began to fall before she could understand what had happened. Then it dawned on her that he had slapped her without warning. As she fell back on the bed, he pounced on her. Thinking he was about to molest her, she fought fiercely to push him off. Effortlessly and with gorilla strength, he pinned her down while he pressed something against her nostrils. She began to weaken as the powerful smell of a pungent substance assailed her nostrils and overwhelmed her senses. Her struggles eventually ceased as she lapsed into heavy asleep. An instant before she became unconscious, it struck her mind that she had being drugged with chloroform.

ELEVEN: ESCALATION OF CRISIS

She woke up with a serious headache and immediately remembered all that happened in the night. It was nine minutes past eight O’clock the following morning. After a quick examination of her body to ascertain that her assailant hadn't molested her, she heaved a sigh of relief.

Ignoring her hangover, she snatched at her cell phone and rushed out of the room in her pajamas. She wanted to make sure her employees were okay. The gateman was sprawled in a pool of his own blood with a slit throat. His blood had caked and flies were beginning to buzz around him. She could see immediately that he was stone dead! She collapsed in a heap and stiffled a sob but the thought of her other employees launched her to her feet and she hurried to the gardner's quarter. He was luckier than the gateman. He was fast asleep and securely bound with a rope. She remembered how she was drugged with chloroform and concluded that he had also been drugged to sleep. He didn't wake when she barged into his residence. He failed to stir when she called his name. He continued to sleep even when she had spent sometime slapping and shaking him. Eventually, he opened his eyes after she poured a bucket of water on him. She left him then and rushed next into Mary’s quarters. The woman did not even stir when Abeke roughly shook her. she had been drugged as well. Abeke discovered the corpses of her dogs at last. They had been shot through the head.

She began to make frantic calls; first to the police and then to her best friend, Margaret and finally to her party executives and her campaign team members. She waited in tears while the moments crept by. Friends, sympathizers and party members began to troop into her apartment. They expressed anger at the brazen assault upon her and tried to console her about her dead employee. They were clearly concerned about her safety and began to complain about the incompetence of the police who weren't yet around to begin investigation.

In spite of the fact that the nearest police station to Abeke’s house was only twenty minutes’ drive away, the law enforcers did not make an appearance at the scene until two hours later. Their convoy came with a lot of noise from their sirens. Uniformed men hurried into the compound, snapped pictures and questioned Abeke and her surviving household staff. After taking their written statements, they collected the corpse and promised to get in touch with her in due time. Then, they drove off in their convoy with blazing lights and shrieking sirens.

Reporters descended on the scene like vultures. They too snapped pictures, asked questions and made themselves a nuisance until some party members got tired of their activities and threw them out.

Within the next hour, the news was all over the internet. Before nightfall, major radio and T.V channels were broadcasting it. Twenty four hours later the tabloids were abuzz with it. All the major dailies in the country and some foreign ones including the Boston Globe and the New York Times reported the incident.

The left-leaning newspapers’ editorials blatantly accused the ruling party and shadowy godfathers in the political terrain of sponsoring intimidation and terror against Abeke and her political movement. She was hailed as an Amazon and praised to high heavens for her courage and resoluteness in the face of the numerous threats that she had faced so far.

The Inspector General of Police claimed that investigation was on and that the culprits would soon be apprehended. Of course no one believed him. There were people who just laughed in disbelief.

Unknown to everyone, the drama wasn't yet over. Five days later, while Abeke was driving home after her visit to a friend who lived at the outskirts, gunmen gave her car a hot chase into the city. They riddled her RAV with bullets until she veered off a bridge and plunged the automobile into the shallow river below. After the assailants drove off, sympathizers pulled her out of the car and saved her from drowning. They whisked her to a nearby private hospital for treatment. When the medical personnel recognized whom she was, they treated her free of charge. Within forty five minutes, she was out of the place after being treated for minor bruises and shock. Her bullet ridden car was pulled out of the river next day but it was a complete wreck.

Her party rose to the occasion by hiring security contractors from ‘The Firm’, a private security firm staffed strictly by ex-soldiers. These were detailed to watch over her day and night. They also accused the incumbent government of trying to murder their flag bearer. The spokesman for the president however cautioned the critics of the government to desist from making inflammatory statements capable of destabilizing the nation, especially when they had no solid proof to back their claims. The spokesman also reminded critics that hate speech was now a crime punishable by law in Nigeria. He promised that appropriate action would be taken against those found guilty of irresponsible utterances against the government no matter their position and influence. He signed off with the popular maxim that nobody is above the law. By the way, hate speech in the Nigerian context meant scathing criticism or even constructive criticism of the government.

Three days after this, operatives of the state security arrested Borang's uncle, Nanang Sisalo, one of the most highly vocal critics of the government. Nanang was the national director of Watchdog Naija, a human rights organization that was affiliated with Amnesty International.

A day before his arrest, Nanang had granted an interview to a left leaning newspaper in which he called the government of Victor Hara a 'Tyrantocacy'. He explained that the label was not in any dictionary but he had personally coined it to mean a government run by a few bullies at the expense of the populace. He referred to the ruling party as a gang of vampires whose mission was to grow fat by sucking on the blood or the life force of the electorate. After security operatives accused him of treason and of making libellous statements capable of inciting sedition against the government, he was thrown into the notorious Alagbon, one of the worst prisons in the country to await his arraignment before a judge.

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Borang was still mulling about his uncle's arrest as he alighted from the taxi on his way to Kunle's house. His mind was neither on the busy street or the hurrying crowd. So engrossed was he on his uncle's fate. It was a sixth sense that warned him of unseen danger as he prepared to cross the traffic lane on his way to Kunle's house. He stood still as cars drove past, wondering about his sense of unease. A small voice at the back of his mind told him there was danger but he wondered how there could be danger and if there was, where it could come from. Men and women walked past or crossed to the other side of the traffic lane. There were two cars parked nearby but there was no sign that anyone was inside them.

He was thinking of crossing again when the grey car roared to life and sped in his direction with a squeal from protesting tires. The unpleasant stench of rubber on tarmac and of overheated and grating metals hit Borang's nostrils as the car hurtled in his direction. Bystanders scattered in all directions before the approaching car and people screamed in alarm.

Borang twisted out of the way and jumped on the pavement as the Honda thundered past his former position. He gaped open mouthed as the car squealed to a grinding halt and then turned around. The car stopped and the driver's window slid downwards. Through the windshield, Borang could see the driver. It was none other than Timba Abayo all dressed up in a yellow t-shirt. His dreadlocks looked newly made. His huge earrings flashed in the afternoon sun. Their eyes met and spectators gawked at the man. He oozed of recklessness and raw power and danger. He was grinning and Borang knew that Franca's brother actually wanted him to see him before inflicting grievous bodily harm on him. The guy meant to kill him and he wanted him to know who was going to murder him. He sensed that he was a dead man if he didn't do something smart.

Timba revved the engine and then the vehicle leaped forward like a beast on a hunt. Pedestrians scattered before the overspeeding car like cockroaches before a charging rhino. Borang ran like the devil itself was after him. He heard the car roaring close behind him. He leaped off the kerb and ran through a thoroughway between two houses close to the road. He slipped behind a third house and then was lost from sight.

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In the quiet neighborhood where Borang's parents lived, the peace of their home took wings and fled at the unexpected visit from strangers who came under the cloak of darkness. The knock on the door sent a shiver down their spines. They sensed a premonition of the ominous message that awaited them on the other side. Paul Sisalo, Borang's father stole a look at the wall clock. The time was 9:37pm. He and his wife Titi had just finished their night prayer and were about to turn in for the night.

As he opened the door, his eyes widened in surprise at the sight of two shadowy figures looming in the doorway. Their faces were obscured by the cover of night and they exuded an aura of menace that sent a chill coursing through his veins.

"Can we help you?" Paul asked cautiously, his voice tinged with apprehension.

The taller of the two strangers stepped forward, his voice low and menacing. "We have a message for your son, Borang."

Paul's heart skipped a beat at the mention of his son's name, a gnawing fear taking root in the pit of his stomach. "What kind of message?" He pressed, his voice trembling with uncertainty.

The stranger's lips curled into a sinister smile, a chilling reminder of the threat that hung in the air. "Tell Borang to abandon his campaign against the government. And tell him to forget his futile ambition to marry Franca Abayo." he declared, his words laced with malice. "If he refuses, he's going to die."

Paul recoiled in shock, his mind reeling at the implications of the stranger's words. "Are you serious?" He protested, his voice trembling with a mixture of fear and defiance. "All this trouble because of a woman?"

"The Trojan war that engulfed all major Greek states started because of a woman." The stranger replied.

"That is nothing but myth. And Borang doesn't easily change his mind about issues." Paul declared. "He's never intimidated by threats."

The stranger's expression remained impassive and unmoved by Paul's bravado. "Talk to him or be prepared to lose him." He warned, his tone icy and unforgiving. "Consider this your only warning."

With that ominous proclamation, the strangers melted back into the shadows, leaving Paul and his wife, Titi, shaken to the core. As they stood in the doorway, the weight of the threat hanging over their son's head felt like a heavy burden they could scarcely bear.

Paul clenched his fists. "Borang is too stubborn. He'll never back down," He declared, his voice ringing with a mixture of admiration and frustration. "What shall we do?"

Titi clasped her hands in a silent prayer as her apprehension grew. Her eyes were filled with concern for her son. "Our son is already in danger, Paul." She said. "You have to call him. We have to warn him."

The following morning, Borang came in response to his parents' summons.

"Let the girl go, Borang." His mother told him after briefing him about the previous night's warning from the strangers. "You can't afford to throw away your life because of a mere woman."

"Franca isn't a mere woman, mom." He protested. "She's worth a thousand women."

"It's irrelevant if they kill you for her sake." His mother retorted. "With time, she'll marry someone else if you're killed. End of story."

"You got a point there," He agreed. "but it's a bit complicated."

"It's simple enough for me." She told him. "Those men mean business. They're ready to kill you if you don't forget about the girl. They said so."

Borang shook his head. Surprise and anger darkened his features. "I can't believe these guys came to threaten you." He muttered.

"How on earth did you get yourself into this mess, son?" His father sounded unhappy.

"I saved a maiden in distress. I acted the role of a knight in shining armour." Borang replied with a far away look in his eyes.

"it's not too late. You can still put an end to this." His mother said.

"I wish it were that simple." He replied.

"You can't marry into the family of your enemies." Paul told him. "It's obvious that these people hate you. If you marry their daughter against their wish, they'll never allow your union to experience peace. From the little demonstration we got here last night, I believe they'll hunt you to the grave."

"Who exactly are these people?" Titi wondered. A tremor went through her voice as she remembered the previous night's encounter. "The mafia?"

"No mom. They're just power drunk bullies intoxicated by too much wealth and influence. Their ego won't allow them to consider the rest of us as fellow human beings."

"I beg you, do not mess with them." His mother pleaded. "Let the girl go."

"Even if I did that, I don't think it's going to make a difference." Borang declared thoughtfully. "There's a member of their clan that will never forgive or forget."

"Who is that?" Paul asked.

"Her brother." Borang said wearily. He lifted his eyes to give his father a direct stare. "You see, I suspect that those men who came here to warn you were sent by her dad. Timba will rather strike without a warning."

"Be careful." Paul warned his son. "I didn't live this long by being stupid. Don't be stupid about this your love affair."

TWELVE: FLAMES IN THE NIGHT

Without reason, Borang awoke with a racing heart. He wondered what had awakened him. He listened while his heart continued to race. There was an irrational fear tugging at the back of his mind.

The city continued to slumber beneath a blanket of darkness. Yet it was a disquieting silence that gnawed at the pit of his stomach. Without warning, the oppressive silence was shattered by the sound of splintering wood and shattering glass. He jumped up at the chaos and ran to the living room on bare feet. His hair stood on end as he sensed danger.

There was a crash against the entrance door. One of the windows smashed as a heavy projectile crashed into the house. Heart pounding in his chest, Borang sprang back, his senses heightened by the adrenaline coursing through his veins. As he stumbled back towards the bedroom, the door caved in and was torn off its hinges. He quickly flipped the light off and ducked moments before a group of men armed with weapons rushed inside. He retreated towards the kitchen and watched them as they separated and hurried towards the two bedrooms.

There was no time to think or to process the sheer terror of the moment. With instinct firing him up like fuel in a tank, Borang darted towards the back door, his every movement fueled by the urge to escape the house. For he knew that if those men laid their hands on him, he was a dead man.

He opened the kitchen door and ran on the balls of his feet towards the flower hedge. He threw himself inside a a thick flower bed and waited with racing heart. The sound of running feet dispersed the silence as men clad in black clothes ran outside through the kitchen door. He counted five men in all.

One of the men screamed at the others. "Find him, damn you!" Borang's blood ran cold as he recognized the voice of Timba Abayo. The dreaded adversary stood like a statue while the others fanned out and began to search the compound.

After a few minutes, they converged around the huge man again. "He isn't around.' One of them spoke. "I think he escaped."

"How could that be possible?" Timba wondered.

"He's smart." Another man spoke. "Look how he outsmarted us to escape the house. I wouldn't be surprised if he's leaped over the fence already."

There was silence as Timba thought that over. "You could be right." He grudgingly replied. "We'll go but before we do, I'd like to leave him a message. Burn down the house." Having said that, he went towards the gate and exited the compound. The men hurried inside again.

Not long after this, the air became thick with the acrid scent of smoke. In a hurry, the men went out through the gate too. Borang dared not rise. Not yet. He heard a car purr to life and drive away. He saw tongues of flames leap up in the house and crawl up the window drapes. They were unnaturally bright in the darkness. He got up and sprinted towards the house with the hope of dousing the flames before they could get out of hand.

A deafening explosion sent shockwaves rippling through the air and through the walls of his home. Flames erupted from every corner and encapsulated the building in an inferno of destruction. The shock flung him backwards and into the air. The breath was knocked out of him as he landed on his back. He rose to his feet with a groan and retreated to a safe distance.

Choking on the thick smoke that filled the air, Borang fought to maintain his composure. He watched as his home, once a sanctuary of peace and solace became a blazing battleground in the ongoing war of the Abayos against him.

As he continued to stare at the destruction before him, he no longer had any doubt about who orchestrated this brutal attack. Timba Abayo was on the war path and it was evident now that the guy wasn't ready to stop until he had had his revenge. Borang felt sick. Are there really people like this in the world? He wondered. How much longer before this maniac finally caught up with him?

He went out through the gates and stumbled through the streets while the flames behind him continued to devour his home. Borang knew one thing for certain. This fight was becoming much costlier than he had ever anticipated. And as he disappeared into the night, he had made up his mind about two things. The first was that he wasn't going to be to be cowed into submission by the flames ignited by the Abayos. The flames that were now threatening to destroy him. The second was that he needed to at the least inform the civil authorities that his life was in danger.

THIRTEEN: BORANG GOES TO JAIL

The following morning, Borang was at a police station to report his ordeal. The sergeant in charge fixed him a look of boredom and ordered him to submit a written report. Then he dispatched his men to inspect Borang's house. What remained was a blackened husk surrounded by smoking rubbles. The sergeant assured him action would be taken and told him to leave an address where he could be contacted as well as a phone number. Borang informed them that his phone had been destroyed in the inferno but gave them his parents'address.

The following day, he was summoned to the police station and got the shock of his life. Timba was there. Immediately he sighted Borang, he pointed at him and told the sergeant. "That's the man I was telling you about. He broke into our family house uninvited and harassed our dog. He's been harassing my sister with marriage proposals day and night. Just last week, I was at his house to plead with him to stop his incessant harassments. He assaulted me with the help of his friends."

The sergeant narrowed his eyes as he focused on Borang. "Is that so?"

"He's lying." Borang replied. "Like I told you in my report, he's the one who's been harassing me."

There was a strange look on the sergeant's face. "What report are you talking about!"

Borang gaped at him. "But you told me to write a report yesterday morning. How odd that you have forgotten."

"Are you insinuating that I'm lying?" The man challenged him while an amused smile twisted the corners of Timba's mouth.

"I never said anything like that. But I was here yesterday and I lodged a complaint about being harassed and hounded by this brute here. You told me to write a report and even sent a couple of men to visit the remains of my destroyed apartment."

"Are you sure of this?" The police officer asked.

"As sure as hell." Borang was getting angry.

The man shrugged and called all the officers around to converge. Then he asked Borang to pick out any of them who was around when he came to the station the previous day. Without hesitation, Borang picked out three of the men. But to his surprise, they all denied having ever seen him before. Timba was having a good laugh by now.

"Your crimes are multiplying." The sergeant told him. "You're even lying against police officers now?" He ignored Borang's protests and ordered his men to throw him into a cell.

"Wait!" Borang called out. "I've got a question to ask you?"

The man nodded impatienly. "I'm listening but be quick about it."

"How much did he pay you to set me up?" Borang demanded as he pointed at Timba Abayo. "How much did you sell your conscience for?"

The sergeant turned to his men. "Give him ten lashes of the whip every morning so that he can learn some respect and then retain him behind bars in cell number five."

"Sir, are you sure about that?" A burly looking officer asked with a note of concern in his voice.

His superior officer fixed him an irritated look. "What do you mean?"

The officer scratched his head nervously. "Nothing...em, I mean no offense sir. Just that the guys currently in that cell are hardened criminals. They're like animals. This man might not come out alive or intact."

"I didn't ask for your opinion." The sergeant rebuffed him. "He's a criminal. He should feel at home among other criminal minds."

The officer apologized and watched as other cops began to take Borang away. Timba popped a pill into his mouth and gave his enemy a gloating smile.

They took Borang past different cells from which incarcerated men gazed out at them from behind the bars that barricaded the entrance. They stopped before cell number five and pushed him inside. As the door slid close behind him, Borang demanded for a lawyer. One of the officers peered at him through the bars and told him nonchalantly. "There are no guarantees that you're going to get one. You're likely to be half dead with hunger and constant flogging before you eventually get one; if you ever did."

"You'll wish you were dead before this is over." Another officer, one of those who had accompanied him to his burnt house but who had now denied ever seen him said.

"You can't do this!" Borang yelled. The men merely ignored him and walked away. Borang felt a great despair wash over him. There was a chill in his soul as the realization dawned on him that corruption had seeped into the very foundation of justice. The police obviously in a sort of satanic alliance with Timba Abayo had decided to turn him into the aggressor and to paint his oppressor as the oppressed. They were now determined to turn him into the villain in this twisted tale.

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The three seedy looking men who had been occupying the cell before his incarceration there began to draw closer.

"Hello fellow criminal." One of them jeered in greetings. "Welcome to the university of pain and sorrow." The men broke into laugher. The speaker was a tall and wiry fellow with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Have you brought anything for us?" A short and muscled individual asked. "If you did, we can make your stay here less painful."

"Failure to bring something for the boys can only add to your sorrow." The first man announced.

The third man was massively built like a gorilla and he was hairy like one. He said nothing. He just sized Borang up with cold eyes.

"I haven't brought anything." Borang told them. "I came here to report a crime and before I knew it, I was accused of being the criminal."

The men broke into laughter again. "Yeah, that's the Nigerian police for you." The third man sneered. "But since you might be here for a while, you need to pay rent money so that we can take care of you."

"But I just told you what happened."

"I don't give a damn what happened." The man yelled.

"Please, I don't want trouble." Borang raised both hands, trying to reason with the men as they converged on him. He instantly decided that the gorilla-like man had to be taken out first because he would prove to be the most dangerous in that confined space.

He knew they were expecting him to cower and beg them. His anger and frustration was boiling over now. He had been tricked and then left at the mercy of a dog and he had been assaulted in his own house. Then he had almost been run down by a brazen hit and run driver. And then his home had been invaded overnight only to be burned to ashes. And now he had been framed and thrown behind bars for a crime he had not committed while his assaulter was busy fraternizing with the law enforcers. And to rub salt on the wound, these thugs were trying to pick on him and take advantage of his perceived vulnerability. He decided to apply the shock tactic. Since these guys weren't interested in showing him mercy, he wasn't interested in having mercy on them.

Borang ran towards the wall and the men gave chase. He leaped, planted a foot on the wall surface and then catapulted himself over the heads of the first two. He collided with the last man who happened to be the gorilla guy, hitting his nose with his knee cap as he dropped on the guy like the hammer of Thor. The gorilla man went down without a sound. He went down with a broken and bloodied nose that instantly splattered the floor with bloodstains. Borang sprang to his feet, turning with clenched fists in readiness for the next round.

The other two men stared at the unconscious man open mouthed before turning angry eyes in his direction. They were a bit wary now but they obviously thought he just got lucky. They charged at him again with the intention of bringing him down. He leaped again and spun in the air before slashing down his right leg in an axe kick. The tall guy was the unlucky one. Borang's leg crashed on his shoulder breaking a bone. With hardly a pause, Borang launched himself aside, dodging the blow of the last man and smashing his lips into a pulp with a brutal uppercut.

Moving back and pausing to catch his breath, he examined his handwork. The gorilla man was as still as a log. The tall man was convulsing and screaming like a soul in the lake of fire. Maybe he was in hell already. The short guy had vomited blood and his lunch. There was a yawning gap in between his teeth and two of his front teeth were lying in the middle of the puddle. A sound that was half a sob and half a moan escaped in a constant stream from his throat.

The sound of several running feet echoed on the corridor outside. In moments, a couple of officers emerged and crowded around the entrance. Among them was the officer who had objected to his incarceration there.

There was shock on all faces. It was glaring to Borang that they weren't expecting what they saw.

"Christ!" An officer exclaimed. "What the hell happened here?"

"I think the guys were playing a game of tag." Borang replied with a straight face. "They must have had a head-on collision or something like that."

The cops exchanged bewildered looks. But the one who had objected to his being locked up in that particular cell was smiling. He looked very happy. The officers opened the cell door and carefully made their way inside. They looked at the collapsed men and the mess on the floor.

"This place needs cleaning." One of them remarked.

"And these men need urgent attention." Another added.

They bundled them out and took them to the infirmary. A couple of cleaners were brought in to mop the mess. The sergeant came around before nightfall. "I heard what you did to those poor men." He said to Borang. "You are a real beast, you know."

Borang ignored the jibe and kept scratching his chin, half listening as the man continued. "All you have done merely confirms that Timba Abayo's report about you is the truth."

"I want to see a lawyer. And I want access to my family members."

"Oh, your father and mother were here a while ago." I told them to be patient while investigation continues."

"You won't get away with this." Borang told him.

"You're a dead man already, Borang Sisalo." The man responded. "You just don't know it."

Borang slept alone in the cell that night. He slept amidst a swarm of mosquitoes that kept him mostly awake and sore. Despair whispered in his ears along with the high pitched music of the mosquitoes. Yet a glimmer of hope flickered in his heart. He dreamt of Franca that night. He dreamt that they lived in a new Nigeria and the whole world came to watch him marry her. He woke up shivering with the cold and depressed about the future. He lamented the fact that even his dreams made mockery of him.

FOURTEEN: FRANCA PROVES HER POINT

Franca stormed into the police station, her voice echoing with indignation as she confronted the sergeant. "I'm here on behalf of Borang. Release him and let him go, officer."

He carefully studied her. "Who are you?"

"My name is Franca Abayo. The man in question is my friend..."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Call him anything you like." She retorted with blazing eyes. "He's done nothing wrong and you have no right to lock him up."

"What do you mean?" He demanded angrily.

"I mean exactly what I just said." Her voice was unnaturally calm.

"I don't understand you Abayos any longer." The man grumbled. "Your brother came to make a complaint about the man in question whom he accused of incessant harassments and threats to his life. As a good officer of the law, I have incarcerated the man until we conclude investigations into the matter."

"I don't care what lies Timba spoonfed you." She spat. "You know the truth; you're just so greedy that you took a bribe from Timba and chose to pervert justice."

"Hey! You listen to me..." He growled.

"No! You listen to me, you fat sleazeball." She fired back. "You have just one hour to release him from prison."

"And what are you going to do if I don't?" He jeered.

An unpleasant laughter gurgled from her throat. "I'll destroy your career." She said without hysteria but something in her tone chilled him to the bones.

"Are you threatening me?"

"No." She told him. "I'm just telling you what's going to happen." She leaned across the table at him. "You see; the man you have locked behind bars is my heart, my love and my life. I'm going to get married to him and my brother isn't keen about the idea." An unpleasant smile appeared on her face. "Timba will always be family to me and I believe we can settle our differences eventually. But you are a stranger to me officer."

He was getting angry now. There was something about this young woman that threatened him and made him feel impotent. It wasn't just what she said. It was an aura of dignity and self assurance that clothed her and it was something else which he could not define. "I advise you to take your leave now and allow justice to take its course. As for threatening me, I'm not afraid of you or your family."

"You should be." She said as she arose from her seat. "Two years ago, precisely on the fourteenth of February. It was Valentine's day, do you remember? A certain officer got drunk and raped a fourteen year old girl. The girl conveniently fell down from the three story building before she could report the case. No one knew what actually happened except someone who had the video recording of the incident. But if that video were to be released to the public, I'm sure that officer is going to spend the rest of his days behind bars for child molestation, rape and murder. That is if the mob doesn't cut him in pieces first." She stared at his horrified face and bid him good day.

"Wait!" He called out. "How did you know about what happened?"

"I'm done talking." She replied. "All you have is one hour."

"I swear I'll do as you requested but do I have your word that the secret remains a secret?"

"The information is of no use to me except as a means of forcing a corrupt officer to do the right thing." She answered. "The only way it's going to leak out is if you are obstinate or if I die untimely."

"That isn't fair." He exclaimed. "What if something bad happens to you?"

She wasn't amused. "You'd better pray to God that I'm safe." She told him. "The video is in the custody of certain lawyers who have strict instruction to release it to the public and to appropriate authorities in case something bad happens to me." That was her parting shot as she began to take her leave.

"Wait!" He called out again. He was sweating profusely. His breath was laboured and he looked sick.

"What now?" She was clearly annoyed.

"I'm releasing him right away. You can wait if you'd like to leave with him."

An officer escorted Borang out about ten minutes later. On sighting him, Franca broke into a run and fell into his arms. She wept and wept while the officers watched in discomfort. Then she led him outside the building. Borang felt grateful to see the sunshine again and to breath fresh and unpolluted air unlike the stale air in the jail house.

"I'm sorry I didn't know what happened on time." She explained as they settled into her white Lexus. "It was your friend, Kunle who alerted me."

"It was your brother. He's tried to kill me twice now." He said in response. "And then he got that coyote of a cop to throw me behind bars."

Tears coursed down her cheeks.

"What do you want me to do, Franca?" He asked in sorrowfully. "Your folks aren't just harassing me; they're threatening my life, threatening my family and even trying to put me behind bars for good." He sighed deeply. "I'm a fighter by nature but I'm in a real dilemma now. How can I fight your folks and declare at the same time that I love you? What happens to our love if I end up destroying either of your brother or your father? And yet, life is precious. How do I protect myself without hurting them?"

She held his hand. "We shall fight together."

He nodded and then spoke as something came to his mind. "How were you able to secure my release?"

"Oh." She shrugged. "Well, those who have skeletons in their wardrobe are easily persuaded to amend their ways."

He gave her a quizzical look. "Franca? I hope you haven't done anything illegal."

She smiled cryptically. "Not at all. But I have friends who are privy to the dirty secrets of sergeant Marcus Onome. I used those secrets as a weapon That's all."

At his instruction, she kicked the car to life and drove him to his parents' house.

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"How could you?" Franca confronted her father and brother over supper that night.

"They stared at her in silence and unsure of what she was driving at.

"Stop acting like a child." Her father rebuked her. "If you've got anything to say, spit it out and let's eat our supper in peace."

"Why did you invite Borang Sisalo over to this place only to unleash the dog on him?"

Her mother was horrified. She stared speechlessly at her daughter and then at her husband as she waited for a response.

Sunny Abayo subtly studied his wife in discomfort. He clearly hadn't intended for her to be aware of the issue. With a nonchalant shrug, he gave a flippant answer. "He needed to be taught an unforgettable lesson." He replied.

"Honey!" His wife exclaimed. "Are you saying you actually did that?"

His expression was remorseless and his silence was an eloquent answer to her question.

"My God! That's too extreme." She exclaimed.

"Obviously not extreme enough." Franca told her mom. "Can you imagine that Timba visited Borang at home and asaulted him? He also tried to run him over with his car. As I speak, Borang is homeless. Timba made sure of that. After his attempt to kill Borang overnight failed, Timba and a gang of murderers with him burnt everything to cinders."

Mrs Nadia Abayo was stunned at this revelation. So was her husband. Both of them turned towards Timba.

"Is this true, Timba?" There was enough chill in Nadia's voice to cause a freeze. Timba quailed before his mother and then angrily burst out. "It's a damn lie!"

"I don't believe you." His mother declared.

He shrugged like his father had done earlier. "Do I look like I care?"

She leaned across the table and dealt him a resounding slap. "I'm your mother, not one of those cheap prostitutes you're so found of frolicking with." She reminded him."You will give me the respect that I deserve."

Instead of an angry response Timba chuckled good naturedly. "Sorry mom, I must have forgotten my manners. I apologise."

"You aren't sorry; just playing games as usual."

"You haven't answered my question, son." His father insisted. "Did you without my consent take matters into your hands and do those things which your sister accused you of?"

Timba gave Franca a bitter look before attempting to respond. "Even in a court of law, evidence is needed to convict an accused. And she got nothing on me except hearsay from her stupid boyfriend."

"In case you haven't noticed, this isn't a court of law. It's the Abayos' family house." His father growled. "So cut the crap and stop playing games with me."

Timba arose from his seat and ignored the question. "I'm not hungry anymore." He announced. "I'll just go take a ride on my superbike."

They watched his receding back in silence until he was out of sight. Then Nadia turned to her husband. "Timba is totally spoiled and it's all your fault."

Sunny sighed. "Trust a woman to shift all blames on a man." He protested. "How on earth is this my fault?"

"You spoiled him silly and refused to correct him when he needed correction." She pointed out. "Besides, you set a bad example for him. Imagine; you dared to let loose that crazy dog on a fellow human."

"He's just a lowlife." Sunny contended.

"Does that make him less of a human?" She queried. "Fine; he's far below us in the food chain. But what gives you the right to treat him like he deserves lesser respect than our dog?"

"Common, you're taking this too personal." He sounded exasperated.

"No, I'm your wife. I should be able to tell you the truth when you're out of line. Your actions against that boy was reckless."

"What do you want me to do?" He contended. "Beg him? Bribe him? Agree that he becomes my son in law?" There was a note of distate that that appeared in his voice as he made the last statement.

"Whatever decision you make, be careful that you don't lose your children." She warned.

"What do you mean?"

"You've lost Timba already, you just didn't know it." She was meditative as she said this.

"In what way?"

"He's not subject to your authority anymore." She told her husband. "He's just doing his own thing now. He's your only son but I'm afraid your willingness to always overindulge him isn't helping him."

"He's the male heir to my business empire, Nadia." He pointed out. "He's entitled to those privileges."

"You've been creating a monster and you've been too blind to even see it." She argued. "Can't you see that he's turned into something else?" She looked pained. "All he's interested in is working out in the gym, using steroids, hanging out with gangster bikers and frolicking with women of questionable character. You think with his current mindset, he'd be able to take over the business empire you spent your entire lifetime building?" She shook her head. "I think not. He'd rather spend time with his motorcycle gang members than stay in an office to direct business. And now, he's not even afraid of trying to commit murder. You've lost him, Sunny. You need to go the extra mile if you are going to ever succeed in bringing him back to his senses."

"He's not entirely useless. At least he's been planning to go into movie production." He contended.

"I honestly don't think he'll make it that far." She responded. "What with all the hard drugs and his obsession with guns?"

Her husband said nothing as he pondered her words. "He's your son too." He said at last. "Why don't you talk to him?"

"I know he's my son but he won't listen to me." Nadia replied. "He's always looked up to you. You have a better chance at helping him."

He grunted and was silent once more. So she spoke again.

"You're losing Franca too, honey. I'm afraid you can't bully her into submission over this issue. While I don't like the boy she's hanging out with, I think we'd better learn to provide her with solid reasons if she's to agree with our sentiments."

"I'll do no such thing." Sunny growled.

Nadia smiled knowingly. "Stop being unreasonably stubborn. You know I'm right."

Despite herself, Franca smiled appreciatively at her mom's arguments.

"I won't allow her to dictate to me." Her father insisted.

"She's an adult and right now, she's the most viable heir you have. You know she has no problem turning her back on our vast wealth. Make sure you don't lose her too."

Sunny Abayo rose to his feet in annoyance and walked out. Franca went to her mom's seat and kissed her on the cheeks. "Thank you mom. I think we're getting somewhere at last."

"It isn't you I'm worried about," Nadia muttered anxiously. Tears welled in her eyes as she meditated on the current issue. This was getting out of hand. How could her own flesh and blood commit such atrocities? Her husband had always been a hard man. She knew this and had always been comfortable with that fact. He didn't amass his great wealth by being weak. In the dog eat dog world of business, it took a smart and tough man to succeed and Sunny was both strong and smart. But in this matter, he had exhibited a measure of recklessness. It would seem that his rage and bitterness had almost driven him over the brink. More frightening was that his action had emboldened Timba to take matters into his own hand and to embark on criminal acts to address the issue. Her son, whom she had raised with love and care, now stood accused of unspeakable acts of violence. The thought was like a dagger through her heart. "I'm really scared about your brother. He's my son but I don't even know him anymore." She confessed to her daughter.

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The elderly couple accosted Franca at the parking lot after working hours as she made her way towards her Camry. The sky was a dusky purple, and the parking lot lights flickered on, casting long shadows. Franca, lost in her thoughts about the day’s work, was startled by a polite but firm voice.

"Miss Abayo, may we have a moment of your time, please?" The man said, his tone respectful yet urgent.

Franca’s two ever-present bodyguards, dressed in dark suits, immediately moved towards the couple, their faces stern. Franca quickly raised a hand to stop them. "Hold on, guys." She said, her eyes scanning the couple.

They appeared to be in their early seventies. The man had a gentle but determined look, his eyes betraying a deep worry. The woman, standing slightly behind him, seemed more hesitant yet resolute, her gaze fixed on Franca. They were simply dressed, exuding a seriousness that piqued Franca’s curiosity.

"About what?" Franca asked, her voice cautious.

The man sighed, glancing at his wife, who stepped forward before he could reply. "About our son, Borang." She said, her voice tinged with both sorrow and determination.

Franca felt a jolt of recognition. Now that she looked closer, she saw the resemblance between this woman and Borang, not just in facial features but in the bluntness and directness of her speech. "Oh! I see." She turned to her bodyguards and instructed them to give her some space. Then she faced Borang’s parents again. "Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Sisalo. I’m honored to have you as my guests. What may I do for you?"

Mrs. Sisalo didn't waste any time. "Leave Borang alone." She blurted out, her voice almost breaking.

Franca sighed slowly, feeling the weight of the moment. "I understand your sentiment, ma. But I love Borang. He’s my life. I’ll never hurt him."

Mr. Sisalo shook his head, his eyes filled with a mixture of frustration and sadness. "You don’t understand," He said quietly. "Your love is hurting him. It’s threatening his very existence."

Franca’s brows furrowed in confusion and pain. "You’re mistaken, sir. I would gladly lay down my life for him."

Mr. Sisalo nodded slowly, acknowledging her sincerity. "No doubt you would. But what about your family?" He asked gently but pointedly.

Franca's face tightened, her heart pounding. She knew where this conversation was heading, but she remained silent, waiting for them to continue.

Mrs. Sisalo's voice trembled as she spoke again. "Your folks want him dead." She said bluntly. "You can’t marry a corpse. He’s of no use to you dead. Can't you see your love is about to send him to an early grave? If you truly love him, let him go. At least, you would have saved his life."

Franca felt a tear slip down her cheek as she struggled to find the right words. "You have to believe me." She whispered. "I had no idea my family would go this far. Borang means everything to me."

Mr. Sisalo placed a comforting hand on his wife’s shoulder, then looked at Franca with a deep sense of empathy and urgency. "We know you love him. But love isn't always enough. Sometimes, love means making the hardest sacrifices."

They turned and walked away, leaving Franca standing there, numb with sorrow and confusion. She stood frozen, the gravity of the conversation weighing heavily on her. The parking lot, now quiet and empty, seemed to echo the desperate pleas of Borang's parents. She replayed their words in her mind, grappling with the implications.

The parking lot, now fully lit, seemed to close in around her. Her bodyguards watched her with concern, unsure of what had transpired but sensing the depth of her distress. Like a magnet, her distress drew them closer. They approached cautiously. "Miss Abayo, is everything alright?" One of them asked.

She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "Yes, everything is fine. Let's go."

As she finally made her way to her car, Franca knew she faced an impossible choice. Protecting Borang might mean losing him forever, but losing him might be the only way to truly protect him. She sat behind the wheel, her hands gripping the steering wheel tightly, tears streaming down her face as she tried to summon the strength to make the right decision.

As she drove towards her home in her Camry and followed in a separate vehicle by her guards, Franca couldn't shake off the feeling of dread. Borang's parents were right; her love for him had put him in danger. Her family, powerful and ruthless, would stop at nothing to keep them apart.

She knew she had to make a decision, one that could save Borang's life but break both their hearts. Franca knew she needed to talk to Borang, to find a way to protect him without losing him. But deep down, she feared the only way to truly save him was to let him go.

Tears blurred her vision as she drove, but her resolve hardened. She would do whatever it took to ensure Borang's safety, even if it meant sacrificing her own happiness.

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Franca sat on the edge of the sofa, her fingers nervously twisting the hem of her shirt. The room was dimly lit, the only light coming from a small lamp on the side table. She had been anxiously awaiting this conversation with Borang, dreading every second that brought it closer. His parents' visit loomed over them like a dark cloud, casting shadows on their once bright and hopeful relationship.

Borang entered the room, his face a mask of concern as he took in Franca's tense posture. He had always been able to read her like an open book, and tonight was no different. He sat down beside her.

"Please, Franca, don't even think of ending this relationship," He began, his voice filled with an earnest plea. "We can work through this together."

She turned to him, her eyes filled with a mix of sorrow and determination. "Borang, I have to save your life first. You're of no use to me alive if it means you're constantly in danger because of me."

He shook his head, refusing to accept her words. "We'll find a way, Franca. We always do. You know that."

"The truth is," She said, her voice cracking under the weight of her emotions, "I've been very selfish about this. I can't bear the thought of losing you. If anything ever happens to you because of me, I don't think I could live with myself."

Borang sighed in exasperation. Not again. He thought. There was an eerie similarity between this scenario and the events that caused a separation between him and his last girlfriend. "And I'll kill myself if you leave me," He retorted, his eyes blazing with a fierce determination.

Franca sighed heavily, the weight of their predicament pressing down on her shoulders. "You can't be serious, Borang. This isn't just about us anymore. Your parents, they won't understand. They might..."

"They might what?" he interrupted, his voice rising in frustration. "Disown me? Hate me? Let them! None of that matters if I don't have you."

"Borang," She whispered, her voice choked with emotion. "I love you too much to stay and put you at risk. Please, understand that."

His gaze softened as he looked into her tear-filled eyes. "I never wanted a relationship with you, did I? I never thought there was a chance. But then you convinced me there was a way. You infected me with your love, and now that I've become a believer in our cause, you want to leave? No way!"

Franca's tears began to flow freely, each one a testament to the pain she was feeling. "Borang, there's no need to be fanatical about this. You know I love you. I'd rather have my heart broken than watch you come to harm. Please, let me go."

They sat there, both of them in tears, staring at each other across the chasm that had opened up between them. Borang reached out, his fingers gently brushing against her cheek, wiping away her tears.

"Franca, listen to me," he said softly, his voice filled with desperation. "I can't lose you. Not now, not ever. You are the one who taught me to believe in love, in our future together. I can't go back to the way things were before you."

She looked at him, her heart breaking at the sight of his anguish. "And I can't bear the thought of you getting hurt because of me. Your parents, they won't understand. They might..."

"Stop worrying about what might never happen." He interrupted, his voice rising. "Life itself is a risk. So is love."

"Borang," She whispered, her voice choked with emotion. "There are acceptable and unacceptable risks. I love you too much to stay and put you at risk. Please, understand that."

He pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly as if letting go would mean losing her forever. "No, Franca. I can't let you go. We'll face this together, no matter what. We owe it to ourselves, to our love, to fight for our future."

She buried her face in his chest, sobbing uncontrollably. "I'm so scared, Borang. I don't know what to do."

"Then let me be your strength," he whispered into her hair. "We'll figure it out, one step at a time. Just promise me you won't leave."

"As tempting as It is, I honestly can't promise you that." She murmured, clinging to him as if her life depended on it. They stayed like that for a long time, wrapped in each other's arms. She gave him a kiss that conveyed the depth of her passion for him and then pulled away. "I promise I will always love you, Borang."

"Franca!"

"I'm not abandoning you but..."

"Please stay."

"Bye, Borang." She stumbled out of the doorway, weeping quietly. He stood riveted to a spot as he stared after her. Knowing Franca very well, he understood that no amount of pleading was going to change her mind.

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"I promise," she murmured, clinging to him as if her life depended on it. "I promise I won't leave."

They stayed like that for a long time, wrapped in each other's arms, drawing strength from their love and the unspoken promise to face whatever came their way together.

As the night wore on, they talked about their fears, their hopes, and their dreams. They shared stories of their past, reminiscing about the moments that had brought them closer together. Borang spoke of his childhood, of the pressures and expectations his parents had placed on him. Franca listened, her heart aching for the boy who had grown up under such a heavy burden.

In return, she shared her own fears and insecurities, the doubts that had plagued her since the beginning of their relationship. She told him about her family, about the struggles she had faced growing up. Borang held her, his heart breaking for the girl who had endured so much.

By the time the first light of dawn began to creep through the window, they had forged a new understanding. They knew the road ahead would be difficult, filled with obstacles and challenges. But they also knew that as long as they had each other, they could face anything.

"We'll make it through this, Franca," Borang said, his voice filled with quiet determination. "I promise you, we'll find a way."

She nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. "I believe you, Borang. I believe in us."

FIFTEEN: BIG BROTHER

During and after the last pre-election violence in Nigeria, certain class of media monitors, politicians and journalists accused sections of the Nigerian media of broadcasting messages of hate and inciting massive hatred and violence against the sitting government. It will be right to note that all of the accusers were sympathetic to the government of Victor Hara.

Some observers went so far as to suggest that certain radio stations had acted like the infamous Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) in Rwanda, during the 1994 genocide. They claimed that the radio stations more especially sowed the seed for the upheaval that would later engulf the country. They kept harping the inflammatory and at times violent nature of political discourses on those stations and later on television stations which ended up inciting the populace. It was in this season that the inglorious hate speech law was put to maximum use by the federal government.

The Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation or NBC became increasingly more important and more hated as it became a tool for challenging, intimidating, harassing and punishing recalcitrant broadcasting stations. Eventually at the receiving end of the government offensive were several prominent media houses which included TV stations, radio stations, newspapers and magazine publishing houses. Most prominent among those media houses were the BLACK NATION news consortium owned by Margaret Timein. The BLACK NATION owned the Millennium Conscience newspaper, the SCORE news magazine, the BLACK TRIBE TV station and the FREEDOM FM radio station.

It should be noted that a big propaganda war was going on in the Nigerian airspace. While those radical media houses were busy denouncing the government of the day, government owned media houses and government sponsored freelance journalists were busy fighting back. They fought back with defamatory information about members of the opposition. They hyped up government accomplishments within the past few years. They praised Victor Hara and the ruling party to high heavens and encouraged the populace to vote for the president in the upcoming election…so that they could continue their good work. Simply put, it was broadcasting propaganda at its finest. Though truth be told, it failed to stem the tide of negative feelings and ill will towards the government all across the country.

Anyway, one thing was clear to those with insight. Desperation was driving the Nigerian government into madness. The NBC, the Nigeria Police, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, the Nigerian Army, the National Assembly and other arms of government eventually earned the name Big Brother. Nigeria became Christened Animal Farm. Even the president got a new name. Napoleon.

Eventually the radical journalists and the most vocal and vociferous opposition figures began to suffer the repercussions of their rebellion. Wholesale arrests took place. They were charged with hate speech and the fanning of national discord. Many of those media houses were slammed with heavy fines. Hardcore and unrelenting media houses like THE black NATION Consortium were shut down and proscribed. Many of their journalists were hauled off into detention and left to rot there without trial.

Ninang Sisalo, the unrelenting human rights activist later accused government agents who arrested him of unlawful incarceration and debasing treatment. In his memoir published by Sphinx House Publishing in recent time, he documented the inhumane treatment the police meted out to him in detention which included isolation, torture, starvation denial of access to a lavatory which resulted in his staying in the same room with his own faeces for two weeks.

SIXTEEN: A JOURNEY TO HELL

It was glaring that one of the foremost troublemakers in the period before the elections was Borang Sisalo. In recent times, he had become a more highly effective vocal critic of the government and its policy of repression of every form of dissent during that season. In recent times, he had been making a lot of waves as he travelled from campus to campus across the country, mobilizing the youths and encouraging them to turn their back on the old political establishment and vote out the corrupt people in power. He also spent time on radio and television programs sensitizing the populace about their roles in the upcoming elections. He was getting a lot of attention too and it was becoming clear that he was probably a bigger influencer than even his incarcerated cousin, Nanang Sisalo.

It was on a Saturday morning when he was arrested by operatives of Operation Iron Fist, a police division responsible for combating armed robbers, fraudsters and hardcore criminals. Borang was addressing a large group of students at the University of Lagos when crime fighters stormed into the scene in four squad vehicles.

Uniformed operatives were jumping down from the moving vehicles before they pulled to a halt with squeals of protest from their tires. The newcomers lifted their automatic rifles and the surroundings exploded into fearsome sound as they shot continuously into the air. Of course the meeting broke up and there was a stampede as people fled for their lives. Despite this, the policemen still fired teargas into the midst of the crowd which further aggravated matters.

Those who had the misfortune of falling down were trampled by the others. A good number of people were later hospitalized. Borang was arrested and beaten almost senseless by the law enforcers before they threw him into one of the vehicles and then drove away. The media was abuzz with the news.

Unknown to all, the drama was just beginning. The following morning, the inspector general of the Nigeria police in a televised broadcast vehemently denied the involvement of the Nigeria police in Bonang Sisalo's abduction. He called the abduction the work of criminals and mischief makers who disguised as Nigeria law enforcement officers. His opinion was that the intention of the abductors was to give the government a bad name as an enemy of free speech. He vowed that they would be hunted down and made to face justice.

No one heard of Borang again until two months later and it was on a BBC televised interview. He declared himself a fugitive forced to live in the United Kingdom because the Nigerian government had tried to kill him. It was in the course of the interview that he explained what happened to him from the time of his arrest to that moment in the studio.

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According to Borang, after his arrest by the authorities, they drove him out of town. The officers in the same vehicle with him physically assaulted him over and over until he became unconscious. When he awoke, it was late afternoon and the convoy was still traveling at full speed but despite his groggy state, Borang sensed instantly that they were no longer in Lagos state.

His hands were cuffed and he was bruised and battered with cuts and abrasions all over his bloodied body. He had a serious hangover and he was hungry and terribly thirsty. At sunset, the convoy veered off the deserted highway into a dusty road that led into a forest reserve. A fearful sight awaited them.

A brand new Liteace bus was parked in a clearing and there were armed miscreants seated on a couple of benches by the roadside playing chess. The miscreants arose and waited until the police convoy parked. Then a tall, hairy and rugged looking man emerged. Borang felt a chill as his eyes took in the man's dark features. The man lit a wrapped substance whose pungent smell assaulted the environment and began to calmly smoke it as he waited for the newcomers to draw near.

After Borang's abductors had removed his handcuffs, they brought him down and roughly pushed him towards the miscreants. The officer in charge of the operatives addressed the man smoking beside the bus. "When are you going to stop your dependence on weed, Cyrus?"

The man called Cyrus turned his bloodshot eyes and gave the officer an intense gaze before blowing a cloud of smoke in his face. "Not your damned business." He retorted.

The officer fanned the smoke away in an irritated manner. "Watch your manners." He warned.

"You aren't here because of my good manners, are you?" Cyrus's sarcasm was like the bite of a shark on succulent flesh. "You are here as usual because the government needs me and my boys to do a dirty job for it. Let's cut the crap and go to business, okay?"

"That's the package." The officer said as he pointed at Borang.

Borang stared at the criminal in shock. Cyrus managed to smile for the first time. "The hypocrisy of the government and bootlickers like you is amusing, Amos."

"Don't you dare mention my name before him."

"I already did." Cyrus's cruel eyes seemed to glitter as he responded. "I did because you dared mention my name before him. Anyway, like I was saying, your hypocrisy is amusing. You call a full blooded human like this man a package when he's actually a victim. One of your most popular slogans in the police force says that THE POLICE IS YOUR FRIEND. I don't think you're acting like this poor man's friend."

Amos glared angrily at him. "Are you here to condemn me or to do a job?"

Cyrus puffed at his wrap and blew out another cloud of smoke contentedly. Then he removed the weed from his mouth before speaking. "I'm not here to fool around, Amos. Just reminding you that both of us have a lot in common than you realize."

Amos spat in indignation. He flung the briefcase in his hand at Cyrus's feet and bundles of crisp looking naira notes spilled out. "Take your your pay and let it stick in your mind that we have nothing in common..."

"Except that we're half brothers and both of us work for the government of the federal republic of Nigeria " Cyrus scoffed. He snapped his fingers and two of the nearest miscreants drew near and began to stuff the money back into the briefcase. "Oh I forgot to mention that both of us are criminals too." Cyrus's raucous laughter rang aloud before he eventually added salt to the injury. "The only difference between us is that you're a criminal in uniform but I'm a confirmed criminal who despises uniforms. I think it's it's because cowards like to hide behind their uniforms."

Amos looked like he might rush at his half brother. He looked like he was ready to tackle him and batter him to death but then he clenched his fists and turned back towards the squad cars.

Cyrus grinned. "I've really enjoyed this family reunion brother, though I'm wondering what exactly you want me to do with this new em...'package'."

"Make him disappear forever and then you can shoot yourself in the gut." Amos growled without a backward glance. Opening the door to his Hilux, he settled in the passenger seat and scowled as the Hilux turned and drove off in a cloud of dust. The other squad vehicles came alive and sped after it.

Only then did Cyrus turn to the abducted man. "Long time no see, Borang." He called out."

Borang started in shock. "You remember me?"

"Of course I do." The other man replied. "A little disagreement over a fart and the shit hit the fan. Of course I was the victim of the fallout. God! You really humiliated me. I've dreamed a couple of times over the years about finding you and strangling you to death."

"That was a long time ago, Cyrus." Borang reminded him. "Both of us were boys just fooling around."

"Well, I'm not fooling around now." Cyrus replied. "Understand this; your government wants you dead and has paid me handsomely for your execution. I'm not really sorry but you're a dead man walking." He turned to one of his henchmen. "Get him into the bus."

It so happened that five other captives were already seated in the fourteen seater bus. Eight armed men piled into the bus with the captives. They were escorted by two other vehicles as they drove towards their unknown destination. Borang knew then that he was going to die for sure. This crime lord and himself had a history that dated back to his first week in the new secondary school he attended when his family relocated to a new part of the vast Ibadan metropolis years ago.

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Borang remembered his first day in Philip's Memorial. The sky was dull and the weather was sort of humid. He hated everything then; the weather, the school, the situation that resulted in his parents' relocation.

He stuck his hands in his pockets while his Addidas school bag stuck to his back like an appendage as he stayed at the entrance to his newly assigned class and hesitated. He felt a wave of loneliness wash over him all of a sudden as he remembered the friends and the house and the former school that he had left behind.

He heard the sound of running feet and turned. But he was too late. A burly looking boy was running towards him at top speed while a couple of other boys were hot on his heels. The boy roughly shoved Borang out of the class entrance and dashed inside. Borang fell and the other boys laughed, jumping over him as they dashed inside the class too.

Borang got up angry and hurt. He would have gone after the boy but another boy pulled him back. "Don't do it, new boy." He warned Borang. "That's Cyrus Boro and his worthless henchmen. They're bad news. Just leave trouble alone."

During the lesson periods, Borang studied Cyrus closely. The boy was belligerent towards other students and contemptuous towards his teachers. He even argued with Miss Bisi, the biology teacher and insisted that arthritis was a contagious disease. He was lousy and he loved to crack coarse jokes that threw the class into an uproar. Those uproars served his purpose which was to cause distractions during the lessons.

When the bell rang for break-time, Cyrus was the first student out of the class. His gang members rushed after him yelliing wildly on top of their voices. There were nine of them. Cyrus was the alpha dog. He called the shots, mostly on account of his sharp tongue and brutal fists. The others included Taiwo and Kehinde who were twins. Then there was Chibuzor, KC and Charles. Borang couldn't recall the other guys' names.

Cyrus and his guys formed a cluster in front of the snack bar eating beef roll as Borang and some other students drew near. They cracked coarse jokes and argued about who was going to win the incoming elections. The other students formed a que and placed their order for lunch. Suddenly, a loud noise that sounded like the staccato bursts of a gun rent the air. The sound came from the direction of Cyrus and his boys but they all shouted in protest and covered their nostrils while other students turned curious stares in their direction.

"Who farted?" Cyrus bellowed furiously and turned to face the new boy.

"Not me." Borang protested.

"It couldn't have been you." Cyrus scoffed. "The last time you farted, all the surrounding vegetations dried up and wilted. Of course it couldn't have been you."

"Hey!" Borang shouted in displeasure. "I don't like it." Cyrus's gang members broke into unrestrained laughter.

"Do I look like I give a rat about how you feel?" Cyrus retorted.

"Stop insulting me." Borang insisted. "Everyone farts, even you."

"Is that why you are torturing nature with your toxic waste?" Cyrus scoffed.

"The last time you polluted, I remember that all the fowls in your street died." Borang shot at him. Conversations died down as fellow students froze and focused on the two.

Cyrus's grin was contemptuous. This was a game at which he excelled. "And the last time you farted, your grandma died and the cops had to arrest you for murder."

The boys howled in another round of unrestrained laughter. Borang's voice rang out loud and clear amidst the noise. "From what I heard, the last time you farted, there was an earthquake in Turkey and Syria that buried half of the inhabitants."

The laughter wasn't as serious as the earlier round but some of the students in the queue forgot about lunch and began to draw near with an eager look on their faces. They'd seen Cyrus wreck guys with his tongue in the past. They had no sympathy for the new boy. He just happened to be a likely object for their amusement. That was all.

"The last time you farted, a tsunami buried half of Miami under sea water." Cyrus jeered.

"The last time you farted, all the vampires became extinct." Borang's anger vibrated through his voice. "Even the great Dracula died of the stench."

"This is great entertainment." A dark and wiry boy declared after another round of laughter from everyone now.

That hateful smile was still on Cyrus's face as he hurled another taunt at his opponent. "The last time your grandpa farted, the second world war ended and Hitler surrendered."

"And the last time your grandma farted, Hiroshima and Nagasaki went into extinction." Borang retorted. His eyes blazed with his resentment. "Reliable information has it that the world powers blame the disaster on A-bombs just to save your family from shame."

Two of the spectators were rolling on the grass by now. Many others held their ribs as bouts of laughter shook their bodies to the frame.

"Give it up, Cyrus." One of the boys called out. "This new boy is a pro. I think he won this round."

"Like hell he won." Cyrus was irritated. He faced his opponent again. "The last time your grandma farted, the emissions blanketed the sky. The mammoth and the dinosaurs died en masse."

"The last time you farted, the earth shifted its axis and the ice age was the result." Borang fired back.

"And the last time you farted, I broke your jaw." Cyrus yelled as he leaped forward and slammed his fist into Borang's jaw.

The boy staggered back and fell on his rumps. The laughter died abruptly and the spectators began to chide Cyrus.

"Cut it out, man."

"It was just a joke."

"You started it "

Borang rose with swollen lips and blood trickled from the corner of his lips. A confident smile replaced the earlier resentful look on his face as he wiped away the blood. He hurled another insult at his opponent. "The last time, you farted, Satan fell from heaven and the earth hasn't been at peace since then."

The girls applauded Borang while guys crowded around him and shook his hand. Everyone seemed glad to see Cyrus humiliated for once. Cyrus glared at him. "Watch your back boy." He hissed. "I won't forget this." Then he stormed off.

"Did you see what just happened?" A girl asked her friend.

"Yeah, the newcomer buried Cyrus, king of the bullies alive." They broke into laughter and gleefully exchanged hi-fives.

The following week Cyrus and his boys waylaid Borang after school hours and beat him up. He fought back like a tiger and wounded a couple of them but one against nine wasn't a fair game. They beat him mercilessly and left him half conscious with his uniform torn. Two days later, Cyrus beat another boy and the boy later died in the hospital due to skull fracture. Cyrus managed to evade the cops and he disappeared from society. Borang never heard of him again till today.

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The convoy reached a small enclave after about two hours of journey. There must have been about twenty other captives there guarded by armed men. Borang knew instantly that the guards weren't legally law enforcement agents but more of brigands or you could call them militants. The captives were chained and were in various clusters

He recognized a few familiar faces which he had either seen on tabloids or met in person. They included radical student activists that had been campaigning vociferously against the government, left leaning journalists, influential politicians who had been working day and night to ensure the downfall of the ruling party at the coming elections and many others.

Borang was amazed. Many of these guys had been missing for weeks. A few had been missing for close to two months. They looked bruised, emaciated and traumatized. For the very first time, he understood that all the captives had one thing in common. They were all against the ruling party.

A brigand wearing a bandolier gave a toothed grin as the newcomers were herded into the camp. "Hi guys." He called out in a cheerful tone. "Welcome to hell."

SEVENTEEN: ESCAPE FROM HELL

It was dusk when each of the captives was fed two slices of biscuits and a cup of water. Then they were told to lie down after being warned that anyone who tried to stand up would be shot immediately. Night fell swiftly. Temperature dropped and Borang knew it was going to be a very cold night. The stars were beginning to come out when a middle aged politician called out and asked for permission to pee. One of the brigands helped him up and led him thirty feet away. There was a bright flash from the muzzle of his rifle and the night echoed with frightening report as he shot the politician point blank in the head.

Borang and the others were shocked to their marrows. They could only watch as other brigands carried away the dead man.

"Who else wants to wee-wee!" The killer called out. No one bothered to answer. Throughout the night, no other person made any attempt to ease themselves. Like his colleagues in danger, Borang couldn't really sleep. He slept in short naps full of nightmares. The fear of the captives wasn't the only thing that prevented them from sleeping. An invasion of vicious mosquitoes kept them awake and swearing through most of the night as they swatted and tried to keep them away.

At daybreak, they were unchained and made to engage in a trek that lasted thirty minutes from camp. Only Cyrus slowly drove a Range rover ahead of them. They eventually arrived at a huge clearing which had something like a concrete embankment which slopped down into a kind of natural and quiet lake. Cyrus had already parked the car and was calmly smoking another wrap of weed at the edge of the embankment. There was a plastic bucket beside him. Smiling at the approaching captives, he picked a piece of meat from the bucket at his feet and lazily flung it into the lake. Instantly, there was a disturbance below as scores of crocodiles emerged and began to fight for the meat.

The captives were forced to que in a single file and made to approach the lake. Borang watched as the men were forcefully taken one after another and carried to the very edge of the embankment. Each captive struggled desperately but their struggles were short lived. It was like a horrible nightmare. He watched as each unfortunate victim was flung into the lake. Every time a captive landed in the lake with a splash, the crocodiles would dash in his direction and the water would turn red with blood as they tore the victim to pieces and quarrelled with each other for the remains.

Borang was sweating profusely and shaking with fear. His mind worked overtime as he frantically considered different escape plans. But he couldn't think clearly. There were gunmen all around and any attempt to fight or take flight would result in immediate death. Yet the line was shrinking and anytime now, it was going to be his turn. Borang prayed desperately in his mind. He asked God to forgive his many sins and have mercy on him. He made a deal with God to clean his acts if God would just have mercy and save him from this impending death.

It didn't seem like God was in the mood to save him on that day because the line just kept shrinking without an answer to his prayer. Now only eight men were ahead of him. A feeling of despair and anger washed over him. He resolved that he wasn't going into that lake alive. They would have to kill him first. At that very moment, there was a very ugly disturbance. The next man to be carried to the crocodiles wasn't ready to become crocodile breakfast. He was a huge and strong looking man and there was a scuffle as he tried to fight off the brigands who attempted to take him to his death. He struck one of the guards closest to him and leaped forward. Another guard tackled him and an all out fight broke out as other captives joined. Many of the guards rushed to the scene. They began smashing left and right at the captives with the butts of their guns. But despair had given the captives strength because they refused to be cowed into submission. They seemed determined to die fighting. While all attention was riveted towards the disturbance, Borang saw his chance and took it.

Without thinking much about his next action he turned and sighted Cyrus' Range-rover parked at the edge of the clearing. He rushed towards it. With adrenaline running high in his body, he leaped in through the already open driver door. No one noticed him until he turned the ignition and the engine came alive. Then a man yelled. It was Cyrus. He shot the captive standing directly on his path and turned as the unfortunate fellow fell. He blew a hole in the head of the next captive on his path. Then he leaped forward as Borang put the car in reverse and began to speed backwards. Cyrus whipped his automatic rifle around and took aim.

The gun belched flame and the stacatto blast of gunshots echoed around. The windshield of the car blew up into smithereens and Borang spun the car left. A brief glance at the direction of the embankment showed that the fight was over. All the captives were dead. Shot dead. Cyrus was running after the car. All the other brigands were running in full pursuit of the fleeing vehicle. In the meantime, a blizzard of bullets shredded surrounding vegetation as they shot at the fleeing car. Borang breathed another prayer and ducked as he engaged gear. He turned the car around and sped off in a cloud of dust.

A few minutes drive brought him into the enclave. Without slowing down, he rammed into a bandit standing directly on his way and refused to give the man a backward glance as he flew into the air and crashed towards the left. A moment later, Borang smashed through the partially open main gate and was outside the enclave.

He didn't bother to look back. He kept driving and driving until he was back at the highway. He knew his captors would soon be after him. He calculated that the farther he was able to get away from them, the better his chances of survival.

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He continued to drive like a madman and almost had a head-on collision with a commercial bus. He drove on until he reached a small town. His phone had been consficated the previous day by the police. Luckily, his wallet was still on him. He abandoned the car and took a public transport going to Ibadan even though he knew he was taking a great risk going back to the town where he currently lived. He knew those who were after his life would not hesitate to search for him in that city but it was a huge city and he was confident that it was big enough to offer him concealment.

A friend sheltered him and helped him escape to Benin republic. It was easy from that country to relocate to the United Kingdom.

In the meantime, the police was desperately searching for him. They tried hard to locate and capture him by monitoring his friend's and relative’s homes. But the bird had successfully escaped the coop.

Thereafter the Africa Conscience Human Rights Organisation assisted Borang Sisalo to move to Europe, America and Canada.

The information minister denied the government's involvement in the attempt to murder Borang Sisalo. He called Borang's story another elaborate hoax designed to discredit the government of president Victor Hara. He vowed that the government would not waste its time paying attention to a controversy cooked up to distract it from its job of providing good governance to the Nigerian people.

EIGHTEEN: THE VISITOR

About two months before the elections, Abeke received an unusual visitor at home. It was on a Sunday afternoon when Augustine Ofodu, her chief security officer came to inform her that a man was at the gate asking after her.

"Who is he?" She inquired.

The CSO looked nervous. "I can't say for sure but I'm sure of this; he's someone in government. I mean someone with lot's of clout."

"Are you sure?"

"Hundred percent sure."

"What does he want?" She wondered.

"I wish I knew."

"Well... tell him I'm not available now."

"I advise you to see him immediately and be done with him." Augustine told her. "I know his type. He won't take no for an answer. He's not the forgiving type. He'll see you even if he has to barge into your bedroom."

She shivered as she remembered the night an intruder killed her gateman and entered her bedroom to threaten her in the middle of the night. "I won't be intimidated into seeing him against my will." She said. "I'll have him arrested if he bothers me."

Augustine exhaled aloud. "I think this man is a law unto himself, Ma'am. You'll understand when you see him."

She was curious. Her curiosity got the better of her. She followed the CSO outside. Her security men were at strategic parts of her compound. But outside her gate was a convoy of eight cars. A sleek looking chrome plated Mercedes Benz Maybach glowed dully in the afternoon sun. It was parked directly before her gate and was at the head of the convoy. She was stunned. A man who rides in a Maybach isn't a nobody. Only the president of the country and a few super-successful celebrities and a handful of billionaire tycoons in the country used this brand of car.

As she gawked at the car, the chaffaeur emerged from the driver's side and quickly opened one of the back doors. The middle aged man who emerged from the interior of the Maybach looked like a professional wrestler. He was exceptionally fit. Despite the fact that he was dressed in a purple Dashiki, his muscular frame could not be hidden below the clothing. He wore dark sunshades and despite the fact that he was very handsome, she could see that his face was one of the coldest she had ever seen. He wore a crew cut and his bearing told her that Augustine wasn't mistaken in his assessment. The man had the bearing of a pompous military dictator. But he looked somehow familiar.

Only then did it register on her consciousness that five of the other cars were military jeeps and that there were military men in uniform outside her gate with their guns at the ready.

He gave her a direct stare and removed his sunshades. He exuded an aura of intimidation that angered Abeke. Her stomach churned with resentment and bitterness. She instantly felt confrontational.

'Who the hell does he think he is?' She thought.

He gave her a polite but somewhat insolent grin. “Afternoon, Abeke.”

And then it struck her like thunder whom he was. "Tayelolu Thomas?" Her tone was uncertain.

His grin became wider. "That's me. I'm glad you still remember me."

"What on earth are you doing here?"

"Trying to save your life." He declared without hesitation or abashment. "Can we talk inside?" When she agreed, he ordered his men to wait outside. Then he followed her into her living room.

Her mind was a maelstrom as emotions and memories had continuous head on collisions in her head. This guy used to be the big boy living at the end of her street decades ago. In those days, he liked to throw his weight around a lot. He was the bully who made his boys carry her cousin and throw him into a dirty pond just to show him who was boss. He was the hard headed student who liked to embarrass some of the teachers by playing pranks on them. He did that most especially to female teachers. He liked to tease her by calling her his wife in those days and it was deliberate on his part because he knew the label made her really mad.

Time had passed and they had been separated with no love lost between them. Although during her fourth year in the university, he had tried to profess love for her and she told him to go to hell. Here they were again. She didn't know what he wanted this time around but what he meant by saying he wanted to save her life aroused her curiosity. After they were seated, she spoke. "Now tell me, why are you here?"

"Why did you marry that loser?" He blurted out.

"What are you talking about?"

"Common, you know what I'm talking about. Why did you marry your former husband?"

A defiant gleam was in her eyes now. "I did it for love, but you wouldn't know the meaning of the word, would you?"

His hard face softened a bit. "You should have given me a chance. I wouldn't have broken your heart and I wouldn't have tried to destroy you publicly."

"Yes, I should have swooned just because a renowned bully from my past came to propose love to me. Is that right?"

He sighed. "But...I had changed."

"Well, pardon me if I didn't believe you. Even now, I don't trust you. What do you want with me anyway?"

"You've changed. You're tougher." There was grudging respect in his voice.

"Blame that on my abusive ex and evil politicians who will stop at nothing to eliminate me from the political race."

"And that's exactly why I'm here." He told her. "I'd like you to drop out of the political race."

She smiled but it was a frosty smile devoid of goodwill. "And you honestly think I'll do that?"

"No, but I have to try all the same."

"Go back home, Thomas. You are here on a wild goose chase."

"I know these guys, Abeke. They'll stop at nothing. You already know that. They'll kill you if you persist in this course."

"They sent you here to warn me? You're one of them?"

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He tapped his fingers impatienly on his right knee. “Common Abeke, that's a pointless question. You know the answer already. I am Tayelolu Thomas; even if we'd never met before now, you should have heard and read enough about me..”

She stared at him reproachfully. “You're the business mogul who owns a quarter of all the real estates in southern Nigeria. Am I right?" She didn't wait for an answer. "You're currently serving your third term in the Senate. you are the CEO of a multinational oil company and a host of other unknown business interests, huh? You're currently the entrepreneur regarded by Aliko Dangote as the only rival to his business dominance in Nigeria. You've been probed too many times on corruption charges but you always come out squeaky clean. But many people accuse you of blackmail, graft and the vilest of political offences.”

He wasn't pleased with her assessment. He shrugged. “Your dossier on me is only partially correct yet I see that you are only too eager to listen to my detractors.”

“They say you're a man without scruples. Bad things always happen to your opponents." She rubbed it in without caring how he felt.

Tayelolu thoughtfully scratched his chin. He wasn't disturbed. “They"re wrong. If I had no scruples, I wouldn't bother to come warn you."

“Unless it suits your purpose.” She implied.

He looked pained, like he really cared about her. “I do care about you. You don’t have what it takes to win this war you've embarked upon. You’ll surely lose." He plunged on before she could interrupt him. "I've spent twelve years in the political terrain, Abeke. I'm a genius when it comes to smelling which way the wind of fortune blows. I always know how to pick the winning side. I know you have the popularity and the goodwill of many people but you are bound to fail in this current venture of yours because there are too many odds against you. I’m backing Victor Hara because I know he's going to win this election. ”

“You're backing him because you're too much of an opportunist." She countered.

An amused smile lit his face “I won’t deny that. But I'm too much of a realist to ignore the obvious. You're going to lose.” He clasped his fingers. "All your supporters will shout for a while and then it will be over forever. That isn't what scares me, girl. It's the fact that your opponents won't forgive your impunity."

"Are you threatening me?"

He shrugged. "Interpret it anyhow you want. But I have a mission here. Make a deal with us. Drop out of the presidential race. If you are interested, president Hara is ready to accommodate you as his running mate."

She was too stunned to respond immediately. Eventually, she was able to speak. "He must be really scared to make me such an offer but no, I won't agree to his offer."

"What's wrong with you anyway?" He growled in irritation.

"I should ask you the same question. What's your problem? Don't you care about this nation? Aren't you interested in fixing its problem?"

His brutal face looked angry. "Wake up Abeke. Nigeria cannot be fixed by anyone. It's too far gone."

Her tone was harsh. "That's where we differ. I'm a believer. I believe that my nation can still be fixed."

"By you?" He sneered. "Then you're a bigger fool than I believed you were." He spread out both hands. "What has Nigeria ever done for you anyway?"

She ignored his question and clenched her fists like a boxer ready to deliver a punch. "You and your fellow vultures won't have any prey to feast on if we all decide to take advantage of the country." She called out. "You want me to turn a blind eye to this nation's problem, eh? You want me to just pretend that it doesn't exist or you want me to turncoat and join your rotten clique?"

"At least, you'll live." He said.

She wasn't convinced. "I've been living for a couple of decades. My life isn't worth a kobo if I betray my country at a time like this."

"Why am I even bothering to warn you?" He sounded bitter. "You're deluded, you're self-righteous and too stubborn for your own good."

"I can't follow your path." She insisted. "There's no honour in it."

"Honour?" He exclaimed. "Please don't tell me about honour? How much good has honour ever brought anybody?" He exhaled angrily. "Honour doesn't sell anymore. Can you go to the market and buy goods with honour? There are hundreds of thousands of graduates roaming the streets of Nigeria seeking for employment. Honour doesn't get them a job. Connections and smartness does. There are millions of honourable people dreaming of a better day to come and they go to their graves still dreaming. Well, their nebulous honour never fails to be a continuous disappointment. In your own case, your precious honour is most likely to get you killed. Wake up, Abeke. Wake up before it's too late."

"How much did you sell your conscience for, Taye? We were raised up on stories about the patriots. Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Tafawa Balewa, Nnamdi Azikwe and others. Don't you want to be like them?"

"No." He declared without hesitation. "Nigeria is no place for heroes. Nigeria is a country that kills its heroes along with their pipedreams. Balewa was executed and his body was found six days after he was overthrown. Awolowo was jailed and then they made sure he never became president. Azikwe had to become a fugitive."

"Who exactly are you, Thomas?" She demanded. "I don't even know you anymore."

He rose to his feet. "I'm a realist trying in vain to save a fool's life. Thanks for your hospitality and the insults."

NINETEEN: AN INTERVIEW WITH A KINGPIN

The phone rang with an insistence that shattered the peace of the night. The man turned on his bed with a groan and reached for the cellphone. The callername was unusual. It was simply the alphabet X. He picked it up and spoke in the partial darkness

"Hello."

"Don't tell me you're sleeping when there's fire on the mountain."

"Sir, everyone has to sleep at some point or there'll be hell to pay for."

"That woman is hell bent on going all the way." The caller said. "She's turning down every attempt to negotiate. She's too arrogant for her good."

"No sir." The man on the bed answered. "She's not proud. She's just a believer, a fanatic and a patriot at heart."

"Christ!" The caller swore. "Don't tell me she's converted you too."

"Not at all. I've just reached the point of enlightenment, that's all."

"Meaning?"

"I've come to really understand who she is."

"You're having a fool's notion about her?"

The man on the bed sat up and adjusted himself. "It was Art Tsun Tzu who said that in war, you need to know yourself and you need to know your enemy." He told the caller. "If we're to stop this woman, we must acknowledge who she really is and what she actually stands for. Otherwise, we'll be using the wrong tactics and weapons."

The caller was momentarily silent as he pondered on this. Eventually he spoke again. "What is the implication of that?"

"I think only death can stop her ambition. But if she dies, it's going to be a great setback for the government in power. We have nothing to gain by killing her. We'll be ostracized by the committee of nations and there'll be chaos here at home."

The caller exhaled sharply as he digested this. "I don't think we have any other option aside from assassination. We'll take care of her and take proactive steps to manage those fallouts you mentioned."

"Before we resort to such a drastic measure, I'm of the opinion that we should allow one more person to talk to her."

"She won't listen. She's more stubborn than a billy goat." The caller's frustration was evident in his voice as he complained bitterly.

"Let's try one more time." The response from the man on the other end of the line was calm.

"But what if we fail to convince her?" The caller persisted in a voice saturated with palpable anxiety.

With a hint of resignation, the man on the bed yawned slowly before replying. "Then we must plan ahead. I can't deceive you on this, sir. She's going to win the upcoming election. But we have to be ready to hijack the process and turn it to our advantage."

"What do you mean?" the caller inquired, his curiosity piqued.

"There will be trouble, but it must be kindled and managed by us." The man explained cryptically.

There was a note of uncertainty at the edge of the caller's voice. "What if things get out of hand?"

"It won't, sir. We're the government. We'll have the final say. The law enforcement agencies and the judiciary are marionettes on our strings. We aren't daft. By the time we're through, she'll be indicted by the constitution itself."

"Hmm. Sounds like a good plan, but is it going to work?" The caller mused, still hesitant.

"Desperate times are here, sir. And this is a desperate plan. If you have a better one, I'll be glad to embrace it." The man replied, his tone unwavering.

"I don't think we should give her a chance to participate in the polls." The caller declared coldly.

"Except she dies, there's no chance," the man on the bed stated matter-of-factly.

"Then she dies," The caller declared, with firm resolve.

"But..." The man on the bed began, his voice trailing off as he contemplated the dire implications of such a drastic action.

"There are no buts about this one." The caller insisted. "The only thing we should agree on is the mode of death. Poison? Car accident? Fire accident? Armed robbery?"

"Like I said, it's a very dangerous option." The other man cautioned. "We shouldn't resort to it except as the last desperate option. Even then, it could backfire. It could create a scenario that rages out of our control."

"Don't worry about consequences. We'll be on top of it." The caller assured, his confidence unwavering.

The man on the bed sighed slowly. "So, we give her one more warning. If the warning fails, then we light a fuse and KABOOM! We set the country agog."

"Exactly," The caller agreed. Both of them preferred different approaches to this issue but they were now in unity as their sinister plan took shape in the darkness.

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They came for her before daylight. Abeke was abruptly jolted awake by the cacophony of voices outside her gate. Disoriented and alarmed, she strained her ears to decipher the source of the commotion. It didn't take long for her to recognize the familiar baritone of her Chief Security Officer engaged in a heated exchange with an unknown intruder. The intruder insisted that the gate should be opened but the CSO stood his ground and insisted that the visitors were unknown and they would not be allowed entrance into the compound until their identify was confirmed.

She quickly dressed up and waited for the outcome of the altercation. Rising from her bed with a sense of urgency, Abeke glanced at the bedside clock. The glowing digits displayed a grim reminder of the unusual hour. It was 5:13 am. With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, she hastily dressed while her mind raced with apprehension.

Abeke wasn't sure whom the visitors were but she was afraid. She couldn't shake the nagging suspicion that these unexpected visitors could pose a grave threat to her safety. The recent upsurge in political tensions had cast a shadow of paranoia over her, leaving her hyper-vigilant to any signs of danger.

At precisely 5:25am, a grim-faced security officer entered Abeke's chambers. His expression betrayed the gravity of the situation. With a heavy heart, he delivered the heavy news—armed men clad in military garb were in front of her compound in a convoy of fearsome army vehicles. And they claimed to possess an executive order to apprehend her.

This news sent a shiver down Abeke's spine as the implications of their presence sunk in. Her worst fears had been realized—she was under siege in her own house. Her very freedom was hanging in the balance. The argument outside eventually died down and an eerie silence descended upon the compound. It was a silence punctuated only by the distant hum of engines and the stifled whispers of her security detail.

In the stillness of the dawn, Abeke braced herself for the inevitable confrontation that was sure to come. Her resolve hardened as she prepared to confront the forces arrayed against her. She put a call to Maggie explaining the situation. Maggie didn't think know what to think about this but she was alarmed. She promised to make a couple of calls on Abeke's behalf and to send her news crew to investigate. Abeke made her own calls to some other friends, family members and key party members. Then she continued to wait for events to unfold.

At precisely 6:07 am, the tranquility of the early morning was shattered by the furious roar of a vehicles's engine. Abeke's heart leaped into her throat as she raced towards the window overlooking the entrance, her pulse quickening with fear and uncertainty. Yanking aside the heavy drapes, her worst fears were confirmed in an instant.

Before her eyes, a monstrous truck plowed through the double gates, sending shards of metal and splinters of wood flying in different directions. The collision resulted in a deafening crash that reverberated through the compound. The vehicle careened into the compound with reckless abandon and its engine roaring with unchecked power as it skidded to a halt amidst the chaos.

A swarm of men clad in green khaki uniforms poured forth like a relentless tide. Though their faces were obscured by the shadows of the early morning light, their intentions weren't hidden. They were here to get Abeke and nothing was going to stop them. With military precision, they fanned out across the compound, brandishing sophisticated rifles and barking orders with chilling authority.

Abeke watched in horror as her security men were swiftly overwhelmed. Their valiant attempts to defend her was met with brutal force. The intruders wasted no time in disarming them. They viciously beat them into submission with the merciless fury of their fists, boots, and the butts of their guns.

As the chaos unfolded, a lanky and brutal-looking officer emerged as the apparent leader of the operation. His steely gaze was fixed on Abeke's home only for a moment. With grim determination, he led a small contingent of his men towards the building, their movements purposeful and methodical.

Inside, Abeke's heart hammered against her ribs as she braced herself for the inevitable confrontation. With a sense of resignation, she opened the door as the intruders knocked. She watched as they closed in, their presence a menacing reminder of the power they wielded. She had to drop her phone on the table at the request of their leader. Escorted out of the building under armed guard, Abeke was ushered into a waiting Honda bearing the proud emblem of the Republic of Nigeria. Beside her, the commanding officer settled into the back seat, his demeanor as cold and unyielding as the metal of his rifle. He never bothered to engage her in a conversation neither did he attempt to explain whom they were, where they were taking her or why they had abducted her. Responding to the sharp command of the officer, the uniformed driver ignited the engine, propelling them forward with a surge of adrenaline-fueled speed.

As they sped away from her home, Abeke's mind raced with a whirlwind of emotions—fear, anger, and a steely determination to fight against the injustice that had befallen her. But it was hard to be courageous when you are being carried against your will to an unknown destination by mysterious gunmen in military uniforms. Through the tinted windows of the Honda, she caught a glimpse of the three jeeps that had lain in wait outside her home since dawn, their occupants grim-faced and resolute.

In that moment, Abeke knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that these were no ordinary soldiers—they were the enforcers of a corrupt regime, wielding their power with impunity and showing no mercy to those who dared to defy them. She became more worried about her fate but the cold and menacing silence in the vehicle neither offered her answers nor comfort.

Eventually, after an hour's drive which led them to a secluded and highbrow section of the city, they drove into a massive compound. The gates swung shut after them and then two of the men led her inside the immaculate and palatial looking mansion in the middle.

She found herself face to face with a grey headed and hawk eyed man at the tail end of breakfast. He gestured at her to seat directly opposite him at the dinning table and then ignored her as he tried to finish his meal. She studied him while he continued to eat. With a start, she recognized him. He was Senator Richard Omeruwa, an extremely cunning and influential figure in the corrupt political clique that ruled the country. She judged him to be around sixty five years of age but he exuded an aura of limitless power and he seemed to carry the heavy weight of a million unsaid secrets.

He wiped his mouth with a napkin and waited while a maid cleared away the plates. Only then did he smile and spoke. "Morning, Abeke. I'm so glad you honoured my invitation."

"I beg your pardon?" She blurted out in annoyance. "I didn't honour any invitation. Some animals in uniform barged into my house, destroyed my gates, assaulted my guards and then forced me against my will to come here."

The smile faded from his face and the air became thick with tension as the powerful politician regarded her with a stern expression. "I'm sorry about that my dear, but that is what happens when I want to have a chat with people and they choose to be stubborn."

They stared at each other in silence while cold fear spread from the pit of her stomach upwards. At last, she found her voice. "I'm supposed to be living in a democracy. I'm supposed to have certain fundamental rights as a bonafide citizen of this country."

An amused smile crinkled the corners of his mouth. "Oh, you still have those rights, madame. It's just that in certain contexts, one person's rights can exceed the rights of others. I'm sure you've read animal farm by George Orwell. A popular maxim there says 'all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others'."

She was shocked to her marrows. Surely this man was mad. But the intellectual aspect of his mad doctrine multiplied her fear. She could feel the fear eating at her gut like acid.

"What do you want?" Her voice was strained and it trembled.

"Abeke," He drawled her name in a low tone. "you're treading on dangerous ground." He sounded almost like a father rebuking his daughter. But there was a sinister undertone to his words that sent shivers down her spine. She instantly understood that she was dealing with a very dangerous man. She began to remember some of the things she had heard about the senator. He was a kingpin in the political world. He enthroned and dethroned politicians at will. There were whispers as well that he was the major force that helped the former president to perpetrate himself in power until his death. It was supposedly his political manuvering that enabled victor Hara to succeed the late president.

His voice jarred her out of her thoughts. "Why are you being so stubborn? You, a mere woman with neither a mentor nor a pedigree are challenging the established order?" He fixed her a gaze that made her flinch on the inside but she decided to stand her ground.

"Senator, I believe in a different future for our country. One where integrity, good governance and transparency prevail over corruption and deceit. I won't back down."

His smile was taunting as he leaned forward. "So, you do know me?"

She nodded. "Yes, I do. Why am I here sir? You used to be a good friend of my ex husband until both of you drifted apart. Your daughter was like a daughter to me too. I don't understand why she decided to stay away from my life. I haven't heard from her in fourteen years."

"The only reason why you're still breathing is because of my daughter."

That last declaration from him stunned her. She stared at him in shock. "I don't understand."

"Let me tell you how close you were to death." He told her. "Your followers equate you with Jesus Christ. But you had at least a Judas in your camp."

"I don't understand."

"You can't. How did an assailant enter your compound in the middle of the night to successfully issue a warning to you?" He leaned forward, his eyes twinkling without humour. "How did he pull it off despite the presence of your two ferocious and well trained dogs? They never gave off a warning. They never did their job that night. Most importantly, they and your gateman died without a noise. What do you think happened?"

"How should I know?" The pain in her voice was raw as she thought about her dead gateman.

"Your gateman was the Judas in your camp, Abeke. He was paid three million naira to allow your assailant into your compound which he did. Then he became greedy and demanded for an extra one million before he could allow the man do his job. He was messing with the wrong man. Your assailant got rid of him and the dogs. The rest is history."

Abeke stared open mouthed at the man. The revelation was a chilling one and yet his voice rang with a note of truth as he narrated the event.

"Are you sure you're telling me the truth sir?" She demanded.

"The gospel truth." He replied.

"Aren't you afraid of indicting yourself through this confession?"

He smiled again. It was the smile of an arrogant demigod being challenged by a mere mortal. "My dear, who will dare indict me? What will you accuse me of and which court of law will entertain any charge against me?"

While they stared at each other, she began to understand that this man was somehow untouchable and he knew it. That explained his absolute arrogance.

"Did you orchestrate the night assault on my person?" She demanded.

He looked offended. "What do I have to gain by that?" Once again, she detected a note of truth in his words. "But I was there when the decision was made."

"You were?"

"I was. Three people out of six actually wanted you dead but I sternly warned them not to try it."

"So you agreed to allow a monster to break into my house and assault me?"

He wasn't rattled by her anger. "I did. And you should be glad. A living dog is better than a dead lion. Stop whining. You're still alive."

That stopped her cold. The man and his brusque manner both angered and sobered her.

"Why this interest in me?"

"I never forget my friends and my enemies." He replied like he was discussing the weather but his tone sent a chill down her spine. "I know how kind you were to Lola. But your husband took advantage of my daughter and impregnated her."

"You must be mistaken sir."

"Why do you think your husband and I went our separate ways? Why do you think Lola opted to cut her ties with you?" The elderly man's pain seeped through his voice.

Abeke felt agony knifing through her heart again at this ugly revelation. For a brief moment, a sense of humiliation swept over her and threatened to overwhelm her.

"I never knew about that." She said at last. "I'm sorry."

He waved her apology aside. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I guess Lola owes you an apology but she's probably too ashamed to offer you one."

"What are you going to do about this, sir?"

He pondered the question for a few seconds before attempting a reply. "I don't know. For years, I entertained thoughts of revenge but I'm no longer sure it's the best thing. Jerome Anthony is in God's hands, my dear. He will definitely pay for his sins someday. Now, shall we continue our interesting discussion?"

"Surely I'm no threat to the ruling party." She argued. "Why don't they just allow me to fail at the poll? After all, your people have been insisting that I stand no chance at the polls."

His eyes narrowed and he began to pick his teeth with a toothpick. "You're too smart for your own good. I told them how extremely dangerous and smart you are for a woman. They wouldn't listen. Now, you've become a far bigger problem than even I envisaged." He grinned at her. "I admire your smartness and your spunk, Abeke but you'll be stupid if you think you can change the status quo. There's a political equation here that you don't have a formula that can alter. I assure you, this is likely to cost you everything. And that might include your life."

She felt a chill in the air. The man spoke like he knew it all. He sounded totally sure. She understood that he was literally a political demigod worshipped by multitudes. He was aware of his massive clout and the extensive reach of his influence. She was but a political neophyte while he had become an institution in politics and corruption. His ability to bring her here against her will was a testament to the awesomeness of his power and influence. Should he decide to murder her in this secluded mansion tucked away in the middle of nowhere, she had no doubt he would get away with it. Despite this, she resolved that he wasn't going to intimidate her into submission. She knew she was currently in a game with him. It wasn't yet a physical game but a psychological one.

"It's simple enough for me, Senator. I've seen the suffering of the people, and I want to do what I can to help."

The political juggernaut chuckled with contempt. "I know you. You're an idealist, a fanatic. People like you are extremely dangerous "

"But why? What makes me so dangerous?"

"Common, Abeke, look at what you've done. The country is now divided, thanks to you. Apathetic voters are warming up to exercise their civic duty at the polls. Many upstarts have become critics of the government overnight. You're making our candidate look bad all of a sudden. You've got to stop it. You're becoming an institution and a movement. We can't allow that. And yet, I'm loathe to make you a martyr. Each time I think of making a move against you, it's like making a move against Lola." A pause followed his last sentence and then he spoke again. "What shall I do with you, Abeke?"

She stared at him in amazement. He spoke like he was God. Like he owned the power of life and death but sounded unsure of how to exercise it in her case. "Just let me go." She pleaded at last.

He shook his grey head. "It's not that easy. Will you promise to drop out of the presidential race?"

"No!" She protested. "I'll be betraying those who have placed their hope in me."

He dropped the toothpick in a silver tray and shrugged. "Let me make things a bit easier for you then. Forget your presidential ambition and team up with Victor Hara. He has agreed to bump the vice president aside and pick you as his running mate."

It was her turn to shake her head. "No. I'm not for sale."

He laughed without mirth. "Count yourself lucky that you've been so nice to Lola. Otherwise, you'd be already dead." His tone sent another wave of chill up her spine. This man had a remarkable ability to scare her without raising his voice or issuing a direct threat.

"You have only two options in this matter. I encourage you to join us and play by our rules. I assure you of wonderful rewards. But if you continue this futile quest, the consequences are beyond your imagination."

Abeke gritted her teeth and she found herself clenching her fists. "I won't sell out my principles for the rewards of corruption. My people deserve better, and I'm willing to fight for that."

Senator Richard Omeruwa sighed and his erstwhile humorous expression subtly changed to something ominous. "I admire your resilience, Abeke. But let me make this clear – your family, your friends, everyone close to you – they're not immune to the consequences of your decisions."

She felt her heart racing and she remembered the night the intruder threatened her in her own bedroom. She had to struggle to keep the tremor out of her voice. "Are you threatening me, sir?"

The man's smug grin reappeared on his face. "Consider it a friendly warning. The Nigerian political terrain is a game riddled with landmines, my dear. A game where you can lose more than just an election. I've tried so far to play the role of your angel among the wolves intent on tearing you to pieces. But now, I fear I might have reached the limits of my ability to keep you safe." He picked the tiny silver bell on his table and rang it. The soldier who led the assault on her home reappeared and stood at attention while the senator gave him an instruction. "Return this woman to her house in one piece."

She was without security aides again since her guards had been hospitalized. Her party had to secure the service of new security men for her.

In the days that followed, the weight of the Senator's threats hanged over her consciousness and even tormented her in her dreams. Some of her associates deemed it too dangerous a game to continue if the likes of Richard Omeruwa were involved in the current political war. However, her best friend Maggie told her not to be discouraged. With determination, they continued the campaign, rallying more supporters and gaining greater momentum. However, the shadows of danger loomed over her, infiltrating every aspect of her life. There were times she wondered whether she would live to see the election day. There were times her resolve wavered but then she would feel her internal fire propelling her to press on.

News filtered to her about the opposition party from a few people who defected to support her. They warned her to be careful. They told her about power crazed politicians who would stop at nothing to maintain their grip on power. She heard tales about families that had been torn apart, dreams that had been shattered, lives that had been ruined and hands forever stained with blood as a result of the unbridled quest for political power and relevance by these people.

She would have given up then but that fire burning within her propelled her on.

TWENTY: BOOMERANG

The man tossed to and fro in a restless manner on his king sized hotel bed. He was unable to sleep and unable to stop the unending flow of unwanted thoughts in his mind. He stared at the ceiling in the darkness, irritated at the emotional turmoil he felt on the inside.

He was a man used to wealth and its trappings, a man used to dinning with the high and the mighty in the society. He was accustomed to rubbing shoulders with the most successful business magnates and the multibillionaires of the business world. And he was well known, acclaimed and reckoned with in that world and in his own country.

He owned a bank, an insurance company, an air freight company, a car assembly plant, and a food processing industry just to name a few of his business interests. He initially ventured into the business world as a web provider, thanks to his ex wife. She came from a family that rolled in great wealth and enjoyed all its trappings. Their resources had helped to fan his entrepreneurship skills into flame. And all his dreams had come to pass as a result.

He had money and fame. And he was a friend to quite a large number of the politicians that mattered in the corridors of power. But he was a philanderer and his former marriages lacked peace on account of his unfaithfulness. He had divorced two other women since parting ways with Abeke many years ago. Now he felt desperately unhappy. His ex wife was making a liar out of him. It angered him that she was growing bigger and bigger everyday. His attempt to destroy her credibility had backfired and helped her cause rather than result in a setback. He wondered what would happen if she ever succeeded in becoming the president. The thought that she might want to use her acquired position as a means of striking back at him gave him enough food for thought.

His current marriage was in shambles again. He had moved out of his matrimonial home and was currently living in a five star hotel from where he conducted his business. He hadn't visited his home since the past seven months and he had thought he was happy. But he wasn't sure of that any more.

The woman beside him was his secretary but she had captured his heart and was now his live-in lover. And they had been talking for a while about taking the relationship to another level. Marriage. Neither of them wanted the noise it would generate and so they were planning something quiet. It would be unelaborate, attended by only a very few within their closest circle of friends.

A couple of friends had cautioned him against the move but he wasn't ready to listen. It was his life and he'd be damned if he allowed anyone to dictate how he lived it. But now he was beginning to have his doubts. A quiet voice at the back of his mind was demanding his attention and whispering accusations in a tone that was becoming more insistent. And he was becoming irritated with that background voice for nagging him relentlessly.

These days, sleep eluded him in the nights. In his dreams, a woman’s tear stained and anguished face haunted him. Her heart-broken sobs and shrill accusations pierced his heart like an arrow. It was Abeke as she was fourteen years ago. It was the face of the woman he had cheated on and treated so badly. The faithful spouse he had used and dumped in his quest for success. The woman he had called derogatory names and lied against in court and whom he had publicly slandered in recent times.

Each night, he would toss and turn on his bed until he eventually fell into an uneasy slumber in the wee hours only to eventually wake up drenched in sweat. His bed sheet would feel like a bucket of water had been poured on him while he was asleep. That night wasn't much different. He eventually fell asleep around 2:00am. And then he had a very frightening dream.

He dreamt that he crossed the barrier of time. He found himself standing between heaven and hell. An angel stood next to him. The sun was rising in the east and the full moon in the west. He stood trembling as he considered his life because he realised that the hour was for judgment.

As the angel flipped pages of the huge book before him open, the details of his life began to flash past his eyes like the scenes of a movie. Jerome couldn't help thinking of and seeing all the friends, family and others that he'd let down. All his past crimes began to pop up at the back of his mind like soiled goods dredged up from their place of concealment in a septic tank. He became scared and began to wonder whether he'd died and was about to enter hell.

He stole a look at the judge's eyes. Like the colour of danger, they were red. He began to frantically look for somewhere to hide as the judge slammed the gavel on the massive desk. The court session was about to begin and he was the man on trial.

Jerome felt himself trembling with terror as he gazed into the judge's eyes. Those eyes were all knowing. Like powerful searchlights, they drilled into his heart and began to expose all his dirty contents. This wasn't a judge one could lie to because he already knew the whole truth.

Jerome found himself praying in a panic. ‘I need a second chance. I've done wrong. I’ve been bad. Before you judge, I’d like to make things right.'

He felt like he was standing on a time bomb with the clock ticking towards his doom. His guilt weighed like a ton. He didn't feel he could endure it any longer. Thoughts of those he'd hurt troubled his heart. His lips were dry as he struggled with his conscience. The judge said nothing. He just kept staring until Jerome felt that he was going to die.

Then he woke up panting like he'd been in a race for his life. His bed was drenched in his sweat.

He sat upright in the darkness, propped up by his pillows and reached for the bedside light switch. Soft lighting replaced the gloom. He threw aside his bed cover and stood up from the bed. The clock said the time was 4:25am. The beautiful woman who shared his bed stirred and mumbled something in her sleep. He ignored her and began to pace up and down.

Images from the past rushed through his mind. And the voices on the inside of his head were no longer whispering. They were thundering now. A face flashed past his disturbed mind. His mental decoder sorted and singled it out amongst the chaotic array of thoughts. An estranged face from the past. Conversations played themselves out like scenes on audio tapes.

“Jerome, be careful. I think you’re going too far. You might live to regret it if you follow this course to its logical conclusion.”

“It’s my life. I’ll live it the way I want it. If there are consequences, that’s my business, not yours.”

“No my friend; everyone bears the consequence, not just you. I’ll feel the pain because what you’re thinking of doing is embarrassing. Your wife will be heartbroken. She hasn’t done anything to hurt you. I mean you don’t have a case.”

“You think…”

“Sorry for cutting you short…But what about her unborn child? He'll eventually grow up to know you for the irresponsible man who betrayed his mum. He'll understand that you’ve been selfish and uncaring. He’ll know you sold him and his mum for a mess of pottage…that you dumped your family because of a strange woman! It won't be funny if your own son or daughter grows up to hate you.”

The two men were seated face to face over lunch in an exotic restaurant in town. Their meal was mostly left untouched. They glared at each other across the table like dogs about to go for each other’s jugular with deadly fangs.

The shorter of the two men was Jerome. He stared down at his untouched tumbler of red wine for a few moments while icy quietness descended on the scene. He spoke eventually with quiet resentment. “How dare you Fred! I didn’t inform you about my decision so that you could be my judge. I bared my heart to you because you’re my best friend.”

“What kind of a friend would I be if I can’t tell you the very blunt truth?” Fred countered.

Jerome shook his head in a very solemn manner. “We’ve been friends since we were kids, Fred. All through our university days we remained best of pals. We stuck together through the good and the bad times.” He bit his lower lip. “We’ve had several seasons of bitter disagreements, but I think you went too far tonight.”

Fred sighed. “Sorry if I seem to be harsh and judgmental. But I can’t just fold my hands and watch you ruin your own life.” He placed both palms face down on the table before him. “She’s a good woman, Jerome. She loves you. She’s endured a lot of ill treatment from you without retaliating. And remember, she made you what you are today. Why dump her...?” He could not hide his contempt. “Why dump her for a mere gold digger?”

Jerome’s fist thudded with savage force on the table, upsetting his own tumbler of wine and drawing the attention of those seated at nearby tables. He ignored their curious stares and rose to his feet as if stung by a serpent. He fixed eyes that blazed with anger on his friend. “You know what? You’re not exactly a saint yourself.”

“I know.” Fred concurred. “I’ve played around a couple of times and sowed my wild oats without restraint… with your support of course. But that’s all in the past.” He shrugged. “I love my wife, Jerome. I’m not going down that path anymore.”

“Congratulations Reverend.” Contempt laced the shorter man’s voice and the sarcasm was like a slap across Fred’s face.

“I didn’t get religion! Anybody is capable of making a decent decision.” Fred protested.

“Leave those of us who are prodigals alone.” Jerome sneered as he adjusted his tie. “Self righteous freaks like you think you have the right to consign the rest of us to a flaming hell because we aren’t good enough to walk your heavenly path, isn't it?” He pointed an index finger towards his friend. “But I am warning you. The day you ever dare again to call Pat a gold digger, I’ll make you eat your word!”

And with that he turned and left. That was fourteen years ago. He and Fredrick had not crossed paths since that night.

He and Pat had parted ways a long time ago. But tonight, he remembered and his distress had gotten worse. Now here he was in his hotel suite pacing up and down the room at half past four in the morning…like a madman. And that was his latest concubine fast asleep on the bed they shared.

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Heavy silence pervaded the atmosphere and the Catholic priest adjusted his garment as he took a long and intense look at the man before him. Jerome Anthony was seated on his massive and thronelike executive chair. The office drapes were down and soft light bathed the room from bulbs. The company staff were gone except for the security staff on night shift. It was 7:07pm according to the massive digital wall clock.

Father Samuel knew that he was in the presence of a very wealthy man. The sheer opulence of this office alone passed that message across. That was aside the fact that this man was a patron of the church even though he was hardly ever in church. He attended church services probably twice a year. And that happened only during the Easter and Christmas festive periods. The man had requested for an audience with the father in his own office and the clergyman had agreed. In his heart of hearts he wondered what the business magnate could want with him.

"Welcome father." Jerome said. "Thanks for coming to see me at short notice even though I know it couldn't have been comfortable."

"It wasn't comfortable but it's my job to attend to the needs of the Lord's flock." The priest replied somberly. " And I must confess, I'm intrigued about your request for an audience with me."

"I won't waste your time sir." Jerome told him. I'm passing through hard times and since my experience isn't a conventional one, I'm seeking answers from unorthodox sources. Hence my decision to consult a man of the cloth."

"Speak then. I won't betray your secret." The priest encouraged him.

"Father, I'm a hard headed man who lives primarily for himself." Jerome began. "I've lived my life as a predator who feasts on others. I'm remorseless and totally ruthless. I'm a competitor to the core and I've never been governed by conscience."

The priest was taken aback. "Surely, you're being too hard on yourself, sir."

"On the contrary, I haven't painted a complete picture, father." Jerome was emphatic. "I told you those brutally honest truths because I'm about to make some confessions. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't be able to make those confessions because of my ego. But I've reached that point where I'm willing to admit that I'm confused and scared and willing to ask for help."

The priest was fully at attention now. "I'd be glad to be of assistance if I can." He replied.

"I used to have a wife who wholeheartedly loved me. She sacrificed everything to make me who I am today."Jerome began to explain. "But I cheated on her and repaid her with evil before eventually divorcing her. I didn't care about the effect of my actions on her and her daughter. I even rejected the only child she had for me and labelled her a bastard." He exhaled slowly. "I told you I'm a man without a conscience. What scares me is that I now have an overly active conscience. It won't let me rest. I have no peace, father. There's an inner voice accusing me of wrongdoing day and night. I feel like I'm going crazy. I can't concentrate on my business. I'm not enjoying myself. All the things that used to give me pleasure have turned bitter." A lone tear rolled down his right cheek but he angrily brushed it aside. "My mind is in a turmoil and I have no rest within. I feel like I'm about to lose my mind. What should I do?"

While the priest pondered on his confessions and debated within himself about what to say, Jerome filled in the details about the quarrel between him and his firstborn son, Chiji.

An uncomfortable silence followed Jerome Anthony's confession. Father Samuel pondered deeply on the man's heartfelt confession. That Jerome was deeply troubled was evident. The sin of the past had obviously become an unbearable burden for the man. The priest felt deep compassion for him. He understood that this was a lost man in need of redemption.

Father Samuel's tone was calm and reassuring.

"Mr Anthony, I can feel your pain and I salute your courage in confessing your shortcomings. In most cases, human conscience is a reliable moral guide that help us to navigate life in relative safety. Yours was obviously asleep for years but is now apparently awake. That is a signal that you're not destined for perdition and that there's hope for you. This is a wake up call for you to arise and make necessary amendments where needed."

The priest looked past his host at the wall clock again. The time was 7:23pm. He continued his speech. "You threw a boomerang through wrong actions and it has come back to haunt you. I'm of the opinion that God is trying to get your attention. I'm afraid there's no dodging around this issue. If you truly want your peace of mind to return, you're going to have to confront the consequences of your actions with honesty and humility. You've started well by acknowledging to yourself and to me the hurt you've caused your ex wife and your current family members. You're going to have to express your remorse to them. You need their forgiveness and this is crucial to your healing and the complete restoration of your peace."

Jerome's struggle with guilt and anguish was apparent on his tortured looking face. "That's not going to be easy, father."

"I know, but think about the end result which is inward tranquility and outward peace between you and those whom you offended."

Jerome's struggle was becoming more intense. "You mean for example, I'll have to apologise to my ex?"

Father Samuel nodded. "I can't deceive you, Mr Anthony. You need to make amends. Seek her out and apologise for your misdeeds. Ask for her forgiveness."

Jerome laughed like a demented man. But it wasn't a happy laughter. "Is that even possible?" He queried the priest. "You don't know what I've done to this woman. She won't forgive me and she won't ever believe that I've changed. The last time I visited her at home, she almost killed me with my own gun. The last time she visited me with her daughter, I called the girl a bastard and denied being her father."

Father Samuel grunted as he pondered the gravity of all these past actions of his host. "This is a very remarkable case." He said. "However I'm convinced that God is orchestrating a reconciliation. But it won't come about if you don't make the first move. Reach out to her and let's see what happens after that."

The priest arose as he gave his final advice. "Reach out to your children too. Like your son's letter says, all they crave is your love and approval. Apologise for the pain you've caused and turn a new leaf in your relationship with them." On an afterthought, he added. "Spend some time to pray. Ask God for help."

"I don't think God is interested in listening to a bloody sinner like me, Reverend."

"You're wrong." The priest told him. "Prayer is nothing but the cry of the soul to an almighty and benevolent saviour. You are missing out if you refuse to tap into this limitless power."

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It was past ten o'clock in the night when Jerome drove into his home which he had abandoned for months. He had called earlier to inform his wife about his intention to come home, so Chiji came out to open the gates at his arrival. After the gates had been shut, the boy turned to hurry back inside but his father called him back.

"Let's talk here and right now before we go inside. What exactly do you have against me?"

"Nothing sir." The boy replied sullenly.

"You think I'm a bad father, don't you?"

The boy didn't attempt to answer.

Jerome leaned against the trunk of his car and gave his son a long and hard look. "I know what you're thinking. At least you made it clear in your letter. I've never been there for you. You've practically had to be a father to yourself due to my irresponsibility."

"Dad..I..."

"It's okay boy. I was wrong and you were right." He sniffed sharply and suddenly his mood changed.

"What is this strange smell hanging around you?" He waved his right hand like a fan in his quest to blow the unpleasant odour away. "I know this smell. "Chiji, have you been smoking weed?" He queried his son.

Chiji turned his back and attempted to walk away. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't you dare turn your back on me boy!"

His tone hinted at danger. The boy, conversant with his father's fearful temper stopped and slowly turned. But the fire of resentment blazed in his eyes.

"Are you smoking weed?" His father queried once more.

"Yes I have. And I tried colos last week but I hate its effect. A friend promised to introduce me to shishal later this week. But I don't think it's anyone's business. It's my life, after all." Chiji replied with a level of calmness that scared his father.

"You're not even sober. Don't you know these substances can ruin your life?"

"Since when did you start caring about my future?" Chiji retorted.

Jerome's expression revealed boiling fury as he furrowed his brow and gave his son a look over but he brought his anger under control with an Herculean effort. Chiji was seventeen and was in his first year studying business administration at a private university. "Christ!" Jerome exclaimed in a voice laced with a mixture of anger, disappointment and concern. "What has come over you?"

Chiji was unperturbed. He shrugged, stuck his hands in his pockets and gazed at his dad with an air of defiance. "It's my life." He insisted.

There was tension in the air. The atmosphere seemed to crackle with it. Jerome remembered that this had been his favourite maxim all these years. He took a deep breath, attempting to contain his emotions. "Chiji, I may not have been perfect, but I've always wanted the best for you. A life of dependence on drugs will only lead you down a destructive path You're smarter than this."

Chiji's tone was saturated with his resentment. "You've chosen your own path. Leave me to choose mine."

Jerome seemed to be hearing echoes of his own favourite assertion in the boy's stubborn insistence. "Unfortunately, you happen to be my son and I'm still the one paying your bill." He replied. "I can't leave you alone to destroy your own life."

"You abandoned me and the family a long time ago." The boy scoffed. "Let's stop the playacting."

Jerome's jaw tightened and he looked pained. He could feel that terrible anger of his bubbling on the inside and threatening to erupt but he knew he had to try harder to reason with his son. "I worked hard to give you and your siblings a better future. Stop judging me."

Chiji's bitter laughter startled his father. "Better future? Who wants a future when the agony of the present is so unbearable. You're never around. You're always too busy with your job and your numerous women." He spread out his hands. "Who cares about a future filled with wealth and all those other stupid things? All I wanted was your love, respect and acceptance. But you were never there for me."

Chiji's accusation was like a slap on Jerome's face but he only sighed. His anger melted and regret was evident in his voice when he spoke again. "I admit I made mistakes but can't we start all over again?"

Chiji's resentment fuelled his outburst. “Daddies aren't gods but for me, you were the closest thing to one. My mom was always there and ever dependable. But you? You've always lived in a faraway mental heaven. I bet you see me and my siblings as nothing but puppies; good for kernels where you feed us with bones and starve us of meat..."

"No, son..."

"We sought affection, understanding and friendship. All you ever offered us are good education, fine clothes and a beautiful house to live in. Well, pardon me if I'm not impressed by those things."

"Chiji!"

The boy wasn't done. "I've stopped' seeing you as my father. I only see you as a benefactor to me.”

A heavy silence brooded between them. Jerome was at a loss for words. Chiji wasn't a talkative person but his deep seated feelings had fired him with a level of eloquence that startled his dad. Despite the boy's hard hitting words, Jerome desperately longed for reconciliation. "I'm sorry, son." He reached out his right hand.

Chiji pulled back and shook his head. "It's too late for that. You had your chance to be a father, and you blew it."

"I'll try again if you give me a second chance."

"No."

Jerome could detect a pang of loneliness in his son's defiant tone. Dropping his pride, he called out in desperation. "Chiji, I know I failed as a father, but I love you. I want to be there for you now, if you will let me."

The boy hesitated. There was a note of sincerity and humility in his father's voice which he had never encountered in the man before. His dad was fiercely proud and had always been aggressively unrepentant in his actions. This broken man trying to reason with him stunned him. He slowly sighed.

"Please." Jerome's plea was in a cracked voice.

The boy nodded. "Okay dad. If that's what you want."

"Oh thank you."

They were both silent pondering the significance of what had just happened tonight.

Eventually, Chiji spoke. "Goodnight, dad."

"Chiji." His father called out.

The boy waited. "Yes dad?"

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"I haven't given up on the drug issue."

The boy fought to hold back a smile. "I know. Let's just say I'll try my best."

Jerome shook his head. "That's not good enough for me."

The boy thought about that for some moments. "Okay, I promise. I'll do away with drugs."

"Good." His father said. "If you need medical attention or a counsellor, let me know."

Chiji shook his head. "it's not necessary. It's a recent habit I picked to provide me with escape from my heartache. I believe I can do away with it at will."

Together they walked into the house.

TWENTY ONE: STORM IN THE PENTHOUSE

Jerome's heart raced as he unlocked the door to his hotel room apartment, his mind preoccupied with thoughts of his secret lover, the woman he had forsaken his family for. She was the latest woman to capture his heart and he had been intent on tying the knot with her until his present crisis of conscience. He had left her in the hotel for days now, loathe to have to explain himself to her. But he had eventually resolved on what he was going to do. He would send her away from his life and pay her off handsomely. He believed a couple of millions of naira should take care of any protests she might have. He was ready to focus solely on his family from now on.

He turned the key in the lock and opened the door to the penthouse suit. He knew she wasn't expecting him now. He hadn't bothered to inform her that he was coming because he wasn't yet sure about the best way to break the news to her. There wasn't anyone in the outermost room but he heard a moan. His blood ran cold. Was the woman hurt. He hurried forward and stepped inside the second room. The scene before him shattered his illusions with brutal force. His briefcase dropped from his hand without his knowing and the contents spilled.

There she was, locked in embrace with another man on the bed that Jerome had always shared with her. Their passion was at a climax and a sadistic mockery of the love he had once thought he had for her. Rage exploded through Jerome's brain and surged through his veins. It overwhelmed him with a primal fury that shut down all reasoning except the need to strike out in revenge.

He stormed towards them, screaming his lover's name as he confronted her and the intruder whom she had brought to defile this sanctum of deceit that he had rented for both of them for months. She cowered before him as he brutally lashed her with words. The stranger wasn't sober at all as Jerome challenged him. His response was hot tempered. At a point, he called Jerome an old horse, unable to satisfy a woman. With uncharacteristic disdain, he told the irate Jerome to go to blazes. Words turned to blows as Jerome and the man grappled with each other while the woman whimpered and begged them to give peace a chance. There were ugly snarls and grunts and the thuds of struck blows as they fought while the room bore witness to their violent struggle.

Furniture toppled, glass shattered, and chaos reigned as they fought for dominance. And each blow was fueled by the searing pain of betrayal and the contempt of a younger man for an older rival. Blood stained the expensive bed sheets. They mingled with tears as Jerome's lover watched in horror while her cries echoed in the turmoil.

Despite his wounds, Jerome fought with a ferocity born of desperation and the bitter rage of betrayal. He fought with unyielding resolve even when his strength began to falter. But in the end, it was the intruder who emerged victorious. However, it wasn't a total victory because he had to flee from the room dressed only in his underwear while the battered and broken Jerome struggled to his feet holding a shard of glass in his hand. He wasn't just ready to continue the fight, he was also prepared to commit murder.

Alone with his betrayer, Jerome's gaze hardened as he looked upon the woman who had shattered his world. Her pleas for forgiveness fell on deaf ears, drowned out by the echoes of his shattered trust.

With a cold detachment, Jerome sent her packing, banishing her from his life with a finality that left no room for remorse. As she fled from the penthouse, Jerome stood amidst the ruins of his once-gilded existence, a broken figure reeling in the pain of betrayal. However, a tiny voice at the back of his mind reminded him that several years ago he had given the same treatment to the woman who once loved him. He remembered vividly the day Abeke caught him and one of his lovers on their matrimonial bed. He recalled how he had teamed up with his concubine to humiliate his wife. That inner voice spoke to him again and insisted that he was only reaping what he'd sown. He sat on the bloodied bed with a realization that his heart was shattered. His earlier plan to send his lover away hadn't reduced the jealousy he felt and the pain of her betrayal. The price he was going to pay now wasn't money he would have to pay the hotel for damages. The price wasn't the wounds he had sustained in his fight with the stranger that had intruded into the sanctuary that he shared with his lover. The price was his broken heart. For the very first time in his life, he understood how Abeke must have felt when he betrayed her.

TWENTY TWO: THE REJECTED DAUGHTER

Margaret requested for a very important meeting with Abeke. They fixed an appointment for Margaret's office at the Jericho area of Ibadan. They made small talk for minutes until Abeke got impatient and requested to know the reason for their meeting.

Margaret didn't answer immediately. She cleared her throat as she sought for the best way to start. Then she spoke. "You've got unresolved issues from the past and I think you need to lay this case to rest."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Abeke wondered.

Margaret was smiling but the look in her eyes warned Abeke that the issue at hand wasn't a laughing matter. "Serious matters my friend."

"I'm listening."

"Doctor Franklin wants me to talk to you."

"Oh."

"What have you got to say, girl?" Margaret clasped her hands and stared at her friend through knowing eyes. "I know you love him."

"No. You assume that I love him. That is incorrect. I like him very much, but only as a friend."

"You're a horrible liar." Margaret chided her.

Abeke frowned. "Okay, but I'm scared."

"Of what? Common, the past is gone for good. How long are you going to keep living in its shadow?"

Abeke took a couple of deep breaths. "I don't know how to trust men again, Maggie." Her voice had become small and vulnerable all of a sudden.

"Not all men are monsters. Surely you know that."

"My heart knows that but my mind won't accept it."

"Look at me," Margaret said. "'For almost eighteen years, my husband has pampered me silly with love and understanding. He gives me total support in my career and accepts me despite my weaknesses. Not all men are destroyers o. I'm sure Doctor Franklin won't compete with you. He'll rather complement you. Your successes and your social clout won't intimidate him."

"You have it all figured out like maths." Abeke scoffed.

"Yes I do." Maggie responded. "You know I've been watching over you for decades. I refuse to stand aloof concerning this case."

"Seems like you already made a choice for me."

"No!" Maggie disagreed. "It's your choice. All I'm doing is trying to point you in the right direction. You just follow your heart."

"I'm not sure about following a heart that's been so broken and damaged and mercilessly trampled upon." Abeke complained.

"You know what to do. You're just too much of a coward to do it." Margaret playfully rebuffed her friend. She leaned forward and touched her own heart with a finger. "Okay, tell me; how do you feel right here about Franklin?"

Abeke shrugged. "I feel love struck, like a teenager whenever we're together. Whenever we part ways, I feel a void in my heart. I keep feeling the urge to marry him but.."

"There are no buts, Abeke. This is your chance to be happily married. Ignore those little voices from the past trying to discourage you. Just do it. You know the doctor is a gentleman. He won't let you down."

Abeke didn't say yes or no as she pondered the most momentous decision she had to make since she declared her intention to become Nigeria's president. She got up and began to pace. "Why is it that my life is always riddled with so many complications?" She exclaimed in frustration.

"Maybe it's because you're the hurricane woman." Her friend teased.

Abeke frowned. "These tempests in my life are too severe. God, please give me a sign."

"I think the signs are all around you but you're just not paying attention to them." Margaret declared.

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Rosa was in total support of her mother's wedding to doctor Franklin. She told her mother she had been expecting it.

As mother and daughter discussed the doctor's marriage proposal, the girl began to reflect on the tempestuous events of her early childhood. The memories were like fragments of a shattered mirror, each piece holding a different facet of the journey that had shaped her life.

She was born after her parents' divorce, therefore she could only imagine the days when laughter echoed through the house, a time when her parents were still a united front. Those moments were but distant dreams, wisps of a past that she had never seen nor experienced. But she had spent years yearning and praying for those days to return. She grew up passionately hating divorce because her own parents' divorce, like a storm, had swept away the stability she craved. And there were no fragments left behind that she, even as a child could cling to or piece together.

Her earliest recollections of her mom were of a very unhappy woman who woke up many nights sobbing in the darkness. Also etched in Rosa's memory was the frequent visits of her mother's best friend to their house. Rosa always looked forward to those visits because even as a child she instinctively understood that Maggie always brought a ray of sunshine into her mother's depressed existence. Whenever Margaret Timein came around, Abeke's confusion and sense of abandonment were always dispelled. It was as if Margaret had become her very life.

When Rosa turned seven, she understood the extent of her mother's transformation over the years. In that particular year, like a butterfly newly emerged from its cocoon, Abeke finally separated from the tyranny of her past. She was like a woman reborn.

Whereas, she had once been consumed by grief and an urge to self-destruct, she became more jovial and more social. She began to actively plan a future for herself and her daughter. Margaret's constant encouragements and her regular sessions with a therapist seemed to have paid off.

Rosa remembered the conversations between her mother and Margaret, the remniscinng about their childhood, their arguments about the poor state of the Nigerian economy, the criticism of government policies and even their moments of laughter over nonsensical issues. It was a fellowship of twin hearts that filled the house like heavenly music. Those talks and the rapport did a lot to fill the hollow in Rosa's young heart with assurance that the world wasn't filled only with rejection and sorrow and danger. And whenever she and her mother went on a visit to Margaret's household, the love shown to her and her mother there by the entire family made her feel that she had a family too.

Sometimes on those visits, she and Margaret's children would sit and listen as the two women talked about their dreams of a better Nigeria and the possibility of joining the political race in order to bring much needed reforms to the nation. It was through their discussions that Rosa began to understand the problems likely to be faced by women vying for the highest political offices in the nation. The two friends didn't focus on the problems alone. They also brainstormed about the best way to go about effecting needed change.

Margaret, in Rosa's eyes, wasn't just a family friend—she was a guardian angel who had intervened when the storm threatened to tear apart the fabric of their lives. Rosa often found solace in Margaret's presence, a confidante who understood the complexities of their shared history.

As the years passed, Rosa acknowledged the miracle of her mother's transformation. Abeke had once been a broken woman drowning in the aftermath of a failed marriage. But now, she had transformed into a strong and self reliant woman with a dream to govern her nation.

The scars of the past still showed up occasionally in those moments when Abeke's eyes reflected the burden of the raw pain she'd been through. Yet, it was clear to Rosa that her mother had healed, and was still healing.

It wasn't surprising then that in that season of her life, Rosa had only two mentors she looked up to. Her mother and her Aunty Maggie.

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"What on earth are you doing in my house?" Abeke's voice was icily cold but the visitor felt the quiet fury that it conveyed to his marrow.

"I came to see you." He declared hesitantly. "I hope you'll give me a few minutes of your..."

"You're not welcome. You will never be welcome here. Get out!" She yelled.

"Please. Just a few minutes." Jerome looked sick. He was sweating and this encounter was getting worse than he had anticipated. His ex wife glared at him, obviously unmoved by his plea and unwilling to give him a chance to speak.

Rosa emerged from one of the bedrooms. "Mom, he's not asking for much; just for a few moments. Why don't you give him what he wants?"

Abeke frowned while he turned grateful eyes towards the girl. She decided to listen to her daughter. "Fine. Now, what do you want, Jerome? Haven't you done enough damage to my life already?"

He swallowed with difficulty as he struggled to get the words out. "I'm here to apologise. I'm sorry for all the pains I caused you and my daughter."

"You're sorry?" She scoffed. "Your apology is fourteen years too late. And Rosa is my daughter, not your daughter."

"I know." He told her. "You have the right to hate me. I was a monster."

"That is the understatement of the century. But why use past tense?" Her sarcasm cut through his heart like a knife and he winced. "You are still a monster. And you'll always be a monster. Now you can leave. And please close the door on your way out."

"Abeke, I beg you in God's name, please forgive me for all those horrible things I did to you and... "

"Save the poetry for another gullible woman and another day." She cut him off. "I'll never forgive you for treating me like scum, for sleeping with another woman on our matrimonial bed and for dragging me through a humiliating divorce. Oh yeah? Did I mention how you tried to use the media to destroy my political ambition? But above all, I'll never forgive you for calling my daughter a bastard when you knew in your heart that you are her father."

Her daughter decided to wade in. "Mom, please forgive him."

"Shut up, Rosa." Abeke snarled at her. "He called you a bastard and referred to me as a whore. Have you forgotten so soon?"

"Mom, please."

"He doesn't deserve it."

"I know but it's your prerogative to give forgiveness to him all the same.."

Abeke clenched her fists. "I can't." She said through gritted teeth.

"You are better than this, Mom. You've always taught me not to repay evil with evil." Rosa reminded her.

"I take it back. It's easier said than done."

"Mom, don't allow his past actions to destroy whom you really are."

"Stop preaching at me." Abeke snapped at her daughter. "Look at him. Can you honestly tell me that you have forgiven him?"

They stared at him. Abeke at her ex husband and Rosa at her father. He was a fair complexioned and handsome man with robust cheeks even though there were some wounds on his face like he'd recently been in a fight. He looked weary and beaten. And he looked sincerely sorry.

Rosa couldn't believe that this was the man who had almost destroyed her sanity a couple years ago. Before today she'd only met him once in her entire life. And that single encounter almost destroyed her. In her heart, she'd hated him for years.

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As Rosa grew up into adolescence, an overwhelming desire to see and know her father began to overwhelm her. She was surrounded by children whose fathers she saw from time to time. Some of those fathers were very caring. The love they displayed towards their children made a lump to form in her throat sometimes. Those were the times Rosa cried in her room and wondered why her own father would abandon her. One day when the ache for that missing piece became overwhelming, she summoned the courage to voice her desire to her mother.

"Mom," Rosa hesitated, her voice holding a mixture of fear and desire. "I'd like to know my dad." She gazed at her feet instead of staring at her mother. "Can you take me to him? I want to see him."

Abeke, who had been watching the news on the TV turned to look her daughter. The request had clearly taken her by surprise. "Rosa," She began gently. "I understand you want to see your dad, but things are a bit complicated. It might not be as easy as you think it is."

Rosa, fuelled by a determination to bridge the emotional gap she felt, persisted. "But he's my dad. I need to see him. I feel he'll be happy to see me too. Please, Mom. I just want to talk to him, see if we can have some kind of connection."

Abeke, torn between her daughter's heartfelt plea and her antipathy towards Jerome nodded reluctantly. "Okay, we can try. But don't get your hopes up too much." She warned sharply. "The last time your dad came to this house, I almost killed him with his own gun. Therefore, don't be surprised if he isn't too eager to see me."

"Surely, his quarrel is with you mom, not me. Please, I need to do this." Her daughter's appeal made sense to Abeke even though she feared the outcome. So she agreed to her request.

With a mixture of excitement and apprehension, Rosa accompanied her mother to Jerome's office the next day. Abeke was stunned. A lot of changes had taken place since the year of the divorce. The office had relocated to a different section of town since business had grown so fantastically. It used to be a one storied building but now the business had expanded to fill a ten storied structure. Abeke felt like a total stranger in the premises of the business that she helped her ex husband to successfully kickstart. Only a few staff members recognized her now. There were lots of new staff in place. The few old staff members who knew her gawked at her and her child. Some of them came over to say hello. The receptionist fixed her in the CEO's appointment list and even bumped her forward.

Eventually, it was the turn of mother and child to see the big man. Rosa's tight hold on her mother's hand was like the grip of a vice. So great was her nervousness. They went up by a lift. They walked through a passage made of polished and exquisitely designed tiles. They walked through a double door into the most beautiful office Rosa had ever seen. The secretary was a petite woman in her late twenties. She welcomed them with a plastic, ready made smile and waved them to the waiting lounge. Then she picked the receiver of the landline on her table. Like a twittering bird she spoke into it through lips excessively painted pink. "They're here sir." Dropping the receiver, she bade them to go into the inner office.

Rosa's nervousness was off the charts by now. It made her obvious to the massive size and the opulence of her father's office. All she had eyes on was her father. She had never met him in person but now their eyes met for the very first time.

He was a middle aged man with robust cheeks and a face that glowed with life. He was fair complexioned and handsome but his eyes lacked warmth and the expression on his face looked impatient.

This visit was supposed to help Rosa get acquainted with the mysterious father she had never seen nor met. But now, she felt very scared of this man before her. So great was the hostility in his eyes.

When Jerome fixed his unblinking gaze on both of them. The tension in the air was tangible.

"Welcome, Abeke." He said without warmth. "Why are you here? I had it in mind to throw you out of the premises but my curiosity got the best of me." Something akin to a mocking smile twisted the corners of his mouth. "They say curiosity killed the cat. I hope you're not here with a gun."

"I'm here because your daughter insists on seeing you."

Rosa, eager and yet nervous managed a smile and then burst out before her mother could explain further. "Hi, Dad. I'm Rosa, your daughter. I told mom to bring me because I wanted to know you."

Jerome's eyes reflected his irritation and there was an intense contempt that shocked her.

"I wasn't talking to you, brat. Didn't your mother teach you some manners?"

"Jerome!" Abeke exclaimed. "She's your daughter. She just wants to know her dad. Please show her some respect."

"I just... I wanted to see you." Rosa muttered in a half whisper, her voice betraying a vulnerability she had kept hidden.

Abeke, standing beside her daughter, seethed at the exchange. How could this man be so unfeeling? She was concerned about Rosa's feeling. She had nursed a little hope that this visit might bridge the gap between father and daughter. But now she was regretting her choice to bring her daughter here. Just like she had envisaged, events were already getting out of hand. Her ex husband was obviously unrepentant and his brutal disregard for his own daughter was shocking to both mother and daughter.

"Dad," Rosa implored. "can't we try to have some kind of relationship? I want to know you. I don't understand why you and mom separated but I don't care. I just want you in my life."

A bitterness crept into Jerome's tone as he looked at her. His words were potent with cruel rejection. "Understand this, girl. Your mother lied to you. I'm not your father. You're nothing but a bastard. Your mom is nothing but a prostitute. She's hiding the truth about your father from you. I'm not your daddy and I don't owe you anything."

The impact of Jerome's cruel words stunned Abeke and ripped open Rosa's heart. Abeke, quickly acted to protect her daughter. She grabbed the girl's hand and began to drag her away. "Come Rosa, let's go home."

Rosa wept all the way home. She refused to eat throughout that day. She wept through the rest of the week until she fell sick. She spent the next week in the hospital. It was evident that her young heart was broken. Abeke was worried about what was going to happen to her daughter but it seemed that Rosa was stronger than she had imagined. After spending a whole week in the hospital, she came back home. She recovered quickly but she never spoke about her father again.

Abeke could only imagine Rosa's anguish. She knew the girl must be wrestling with the harsh reality of her father's brutal rejection but it was as if Rosa had buried it somewhere so deep and far away it couldn't bother her anymore, at least for the moment. That didn't stop the surge of pain and anger that Abeke felt whenever she thought about her ex husband's callous action..

After that painful encounter, Rosa retreated into a shell. She became extremely introverted. The wounds inflicted by her father's treatment obviously ran deep. The scars left behind by his cruel words continued to fester. It took her a couple of years before she reverted to her happy go lucky persona. Nevertheless, she would never totally heal from those scars. However, it was clear to Abeke that her daughter was a very tough lass. She continued to survive.

On Rosa's part, she had passionately hated her dad for years. She never permitted herself to think about him and she quickly cut off any conversation that included talking about her father.

But as she stared at him now, instead of hatred, she felt sorry for him. He looked so weak and vulnerable. He wasn't like the pompous, heartless and smug looking person who had humiliated her and her mom in his office years ago.

"I forgive him Mom." Rosa declared. "Not because he deserves it but because I choose to be better instead of being bitter."

Tears cascaded down Jerome's eyes. The more he wiped them with the cuff of his shirt, the more they fell.

Abeke was angry. She wept bitterfly while Rosa hugged and petted her. "Mom, please forgive him."

"He almost destroyed me." Abeke sobbed. "He used me and then dumped me. He..."

"Shhh... Mom. It's okay. He's sorry now."

"Look, I can't undo the past." Jerome told her in a shaky voice. "God knows if it's within my power, I'll turn back the hands of time so that I can undo all the horrible things I've done. I've offended a lot of people and I'm trying to make amends. Please find a place in your hearts to forgive me."

"Why are you doing this?" Abeke asked him.

He sighed. "I don't fully understand." His eyes were dry now but they were still red. "All I know is that I haven't been at peace for weeks. I've been praying, seeking counsel from a man of God and asking God for forgiveness and direction. I feel like a man trying to put his house in order before he dies."

"Are you sick?" His ex wife probed with a hint of concern.

"No." He told her. I'm physically okay. The only sicknesses I have is in my heart."

Abeke sat on the nearest sofa before responding. "In that case, I guess it's out of my hands. It's between you and God."

He looked eagerly at her. "So, do you forgive me?"

She nodded. "Yes, I forgive you. But it doesn't mean I trust you."

"I understand." His voice was tinged with relief. "I swear, I'll do all within my power to make It up to you. Most especially to my daughter."

Then the three were crying again.

Abeke made the headlines again three months before the elections. This time around, it was on account of her wedding to doctor Franklin Fadaka. It wasn't an elaborate affair. Only a handful of carefully selected witnesses graced the occasion.

Rosa stayed with Margaret's household throughout the two weeks honeymoon. She considered herself weird as she thought about her relationship with her mom and Aunty Margaret and doctor Franklin and her biological father and concluded. "I now have two dads and two moms."

It wasn't long after Abeke's return from her honeymoon that she received a message on her phone that made her blood run cold.

'Congratulations, Abeke. Happy married life to you. Enjoy your marriage while you can and every good thing in your life.

Since you have decided to turn deaf ears to our warning to drop out of the presidential race, it's only fair to warn you that we're going to destroy the things and the people that you cherish most. Enjoy them while you can.'

TWENTY THREE: BLACK SATURDAY

Franklin lodged an official report about the troubling text message with the police who promised to investigate.

"They won't do anything. You already know that." Margaret told him. She made it public news on her network. The social media began to buzz with the news once more. New security men were recruited once more to watch over Abeke and her husband since she had now relocated to his house.

Even though Abeke had been seriously shaken by the threat on her life she decided not to back out of the fight. She sent Rosa out of the country to temporarily live with some relatives residing in Ghana. The girl would stay there until the elections were over. Abeke received death threats through numerous text messages and voice calls on her phone. But she was growing in confidence and resoluteness.

She made the headlines again when her multimillion naira warehouse mysteriously went up in flames and was mostly left in rubbles. Goods worth millions of naira were destroyed in the blaze. Different groups arose and pledged their financial assistance to her. Their opinion was that the arson was part of the ploy to distract and destabilize her so that she wouldn't be able to continue the presidential race. With their support, she pressed on.

The final round of campaigns took her to the East. She went with a large entourage which included her best friend Margaret. As the owner of ‘THE BLACK NATION Consortium which published one of the some of the most popular dailies and magazines in the country she had used her news network which included the award winning Black Tribe T.V station, some of Abeke's opponents had accused her of being biased in her report of Abeke's campaigns. Since Abeke's declaration of her intention to run for the presidency, Maggie had used all her media assets to tell the truth about Abeke’s ambition and to expose the hypocrisy of government owned media.

After it was all over, Maggie was in a hurry to get back to the hotel where they lodged in order to give a last minute briefing to the team of reporters she had brought along. She would be sending them back to Lagos afterwards. At least that was her intention. Abeke was eager to leave with her friend but she was detained by a group of traditional rulers who wanted to have a few minutes discussion with her. So without even knowing it, she made a life changing decision by sending off her friend in her own SUV.

The car blew up sixteen seconds after the driver kicked it to life. People fled for dear life as pieces of the exploded vehicle rained down as flaming metals on the tarmac. The nearest building caved in. The window panes of other buildings shattered. The concussion rocked the earth and the brutal force knocked people down.

Later investigation revealed that a remote controlled bomb had clearly been planted in the car and those responsible had thought Abeke was the person in the car when they detonated it.

Abeke had escaped another callous attack on her life but her best friend and her chauffeur had been unlucky. Ten people in the immediate vicinity of the car when it blew up were killed. Thirteen others were seriously injured. A man lost his eyes to flying shrapnel. A woman’s right leg was cut off. Four people suffered different degree of burns. A man would have to undergo immediate surgery on account of small fragments of metals that had lodged in his stomach. Two other cars were burnt to ashes due to their proximity to the exploded vehicle.

Margaret Timehin became hot news for many days to come but it was for the wrong reason.

TWENTY FOUR: ORIGIN OF A FRIENDSHIP

Abeke’s grief could not be quantified as she stood by the freshly dug grave a fortnight later and watched the casket being lowered into the earth. The heartbreaking wail of Margaret's husband and children reduced everyone present to tears. She felt a oneness with the bereaved family in their grief but her heart was too numb to weep. For two weeks she had wept herself hoarse and she didn’t feel like she had any more tears left to shed. All she could feel was an aching vacuum as she recalled her journey of friendship with the late woman over several years.

Her friendship with Margaret dated back to their childhood years. Their parents were friends. They had sent their daughters to the same school. The girls found it very easy to get along and thus, a friendship was born. Margaret was a spirited tomboy and a thorn on the side of boys. Abeke was more outgoing and always found it easy to win people's confidence and affection. It was in their second year in school that she discovered her gift as an orator while participating in the activities of the Literary and Debating society. While Margaret had always had a dream of being a broadcaster on T.V. Abeke’s dream was to become the Governor of her state.

Their dreams survived past their teenage years and followed them into different higher institutions. Maggie held tenaciously to her dream by getting a scholarship to study journalism in the prestigious Sheffield university, United kingdom. Adulthood and the complications of an abusive marriage robbed Abeke of hers. Margaret succeeded and had been running her own private media outfit for fifteen years after a stint with a couple of high flying electronic and print media outfits within and outside the country.

Abeke had concerned herself mainly with helping her husband run the family business and trying to have a baby. Her husband fought her tooth and nail over her political ambition. He couldn’t understand her obsession with politics. As far as he was concerned, it wasn’t a playground that a housewife should dabble into. In the interest of peace, she had to let go her ambition. Most of those years, she and Maggie had drifted apart and it was mostly because Jerome had completely separated her from her friends and family.

Now as she stood at Margaret's graveyard, the memory of her late friend's contribution towards her recovery flooded her mind again.

Abeke's life, once an exotic drape decorated with the vibrant colours of love and success faded to a drab grey when her marriage crashed. Slowly, her life began to unravel in the aftermath of the divorce. It was true that the courtroom had granted her legal separation from her tormentor but the emotional trauma that she underwent were massive and the wounds inflicted on her psyche were extensively deep. And they were festering.

Left alone in the house that once echoed with the laughter that she shared with Jerome and forced to face the long cold nights alone with the realisation that her man would never ever come home to her again even if it was to quarrel with her, Abeke struggled with the devastation of a broken heart and a desolated marriage.

Days blurred into nights as she navigated the tempestuous sea of loneliness in a mental and emotional fog. The house, once a paradise had now become a hell-hole of memories that haunted her every waking moment. The absence of Jerome's warmth left a void, and the weight of solitude pressed heavily on her shoulders.

Unable to escape the pain that seemed to permeate every corner of her life, Abeke sought solace in a bottle. Alcohol became her refuge, a temporary balm to numb the ache of her fractured heart. Each sip was a desperate attempt to erase her visceral pain; an attempt to drown the memories of what she once had, which had slipped like water through her fingers. But the more she drank herself to a stupor, the further she descended into a numbing haze.

She was unable to care for her infant daughter, Rosa. The little girl cried and cried because she craved attention and affection which were not forthcoming. She threw a tantrum and became restless and sick. On the day that Abeke would have killed herself, she roamed through the lonely house in a fog of confusion. She was tired and partially drunk and scared. She had not bathed for three days. As she aimlessly wandered through the empty rooms of the house, hardly aware of her reeking body odour and the stench of alcohol that hanged around her, she entered her ex husband's bedroom. It wasn't a place she entered freely in the final years of her marriage. She abandoned it after her divorce because it seemed to be the gateway to many painful memories. But on that particular day, she entered the room and came across the pistol that belonged to Jerome. That gave her the inspiration for the perfect solution. Why not just end it all?

The first and only time she had ever held the gun was after Jerome came back to demand for a divorce from her. That was three weeks after he had teamed up with his whore to beat her senseless. And it was twenty two days after their cruelty had sent her to the hospital. They had been days filled with confusion and heartache since he moved out of the house for good.

When he requested a divorce from her, she flatly refused. When he wouldn't stop pestering her, she went inside and returned with the gun. Her intention was to spill his brain all over the floor but she lost the nerve to pull the trigger. He fled the house and communicated with her afterwards only with the aid of his lawyers.

Now she was in possession of the same weapon again. This time around, she resolved she wasn't going to fail. Her daughter had cried herself to sleep and dusk was fallen. Abeke stole into her own bedroom in order to steal one final look at her daughter. "Forgive me." She whispered and then moved towards the mirror. Her gaunt and emaciated features stared back at her. There were circles and pouches under her hollow and vacant eyes. She was shocked. This scarecrow gaping back at her was the exact opposite of the young, beautiful and vivacious woman she used to be.

She put the muzzle of the pistol against her temple, her finger coiled around the trigger and...

Rosa's shrill cry pierced the silence. It was a cry of protest that pierced her mental fog. Dropping the gun, she rushed to her daughter and held her to her chest. As mother and daughter wailed together and the minutes crept by, the doorbell rang.

It was Margaret. When the distraught and disheveled Abeke opened the door. Margaret was standing there looking at her with concern. Abeke clung to her like she was a lifeline in the midst of the ocean while Maggie just held her and comforted her.

When Abeke was done crying, Margaret entered the house and began to clean up the chaotic rooms one after the other. She wasn't put off by the overwhelming stench of liquor, Abeke's wretched appearance, the glazed look in Abeke's tear stained eyes and the crying child. She brought paid cleaners to properly clean the entire building the following morning.

The two friends had not been in touch since the divorce because Margaret was outside the country to complete the course she had enrolled for in public administration. So Abeke's deterioration really shook up her friend. Margaret, recognizing the urgency of the situation, decided to personally oversee her friend's recovery. She opted to stay with Abeke in the house for a whole week. In the process, she gently soothed and then encouraged her friend to confront the pain that she had been literally drowning in. Abeke began to come to her senses. She acknowledged that she had been on a downward spiral since the divorce. She understood that it was loneliness and pain that drove her to alcohol, suicide and and the unintentional neglect of her infant daughter.

With Margaret's staunch support Abeke began to recover although it was an uphill task. There were days she felt great and there were other days when she felt like crawling under a bedsheet to die.

Recognizing that Abeke needed more than just emotional support, Margaret encouraged her to seek professional help. She connected her with doctor Franklin who was a family friend. Franklin linked her with a therapist who gave her professional help. Margaret always ensured that they attended those therapy sessions together. Slowly, Abeke was able to overcome the emotions that had been slowly driving her towards self-destruction. Gradually, the fog of alcohol lifted and the beautiful woman trapped in the labyrinth of addiction was able to emerge. Abeke returned to her senses with a determination to reclaim her life. She swore never to put herself in a situation that would ever allow her to be at the mercy of any man again.

Margaret had been there to nudge her towards marriage again. Abeke couldn't imagine what her life would have become without the influence of her friend.

It wasn’t until five years ago when the deceased Maggie reminded her of her childhood dream. Abeke wasn’t initially enthusiastic about picking up that dream. Margaret eventually managed to prevail on her friend after several weeks of pestering her.

But after thinking things through, both of them were unanimous that Abeke should never have anything to do with the corrupt ruling party. Their analysis was that there was no credible opposition on ground in the nation. As a result, the ruling party had grown comfortable, short sighted and ineffective. The plan was that Abeke would attempt to bring badly needed reform to governance style as well as the economy. Though they didn't think it was a dream possible in their lifetime, they decided to do their best to at least give the corrupt government in power a thorough shakeup and a run for its money in the coming elections. This was what propelled her to join the Commonwealth People’s Party which in alliance with others had now transformed into the H4T-C.

Maggie had been the inspiration behind Abeke's dream all along. And now Maggie was dead, murdered by wicked folks who weren't afraid to shed innocent blood in their quest to maintain a stranglehold on power. Abeke knew they hadn't yet given up their quest to kill her in cold blood. She vowed at her friend’s graveyard to continue the fight. She also promised herself that all those involved in her friend’s death would be exposed and made to answer to the law for their deeds…if her ambition to rule the nation ever became a reality.

But now Abeke was gone.

TWENTY FIVE: HURRICANE ABEKE

International outcry against the wave of violence, brutality against opposition party members, intimidation and cold blooded murders that characterized the election year in Nigeria soon became deafening. Various African heads of states criticized the repressive policies of the government of Victor Hara. Traditional bastions of democracy like the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France and some other European countries denounced the various human rights violations going on there. They appealed to the government to allow a free and fair election to take place.

The youths weren't interested in mere talk to express their displeasure. They went on a rampage to protest the death of Margaret as well as the continuous attempts on Abeke’s life. Riots broke out like wildfire in different parts of the nation. Huge cities like Lagos, Abuja, Ibadan, Kano, Kaduna, Warri and Port Harcourt boiled with unrestrained violence. The security operatives who clashed with the rioters were unrestrained in their use of brutal force. A lot of people were arrested. Scores were killed and wounded. Many of the protesters ended in hospitals. Abeke's continuous appeal for calm and peace was ignored. It was clear that events had grown bigger than she was. Nigeria was boiling and Abeke was no longer a Zephyr. She had become a full blown hurricane rocking the nation to its core. A tabloid aptly referred to her as “HURRRICANE ABEKE.”

The last proverbial straw that broke the camel's back was the arrest of Abeke on the charge of inciting the populace to violence and acts of sedition. Her arrest didn’t douse the tension. As a matter of fact, it fanned the violence to a raging inferno that became totally out of control. The protesters would not go home to rest now. They roamed the streets with numerous placards that either denounced Victor Hara or called for Abeke's release. Primary and secondary schools hastily closed till further notice and economic activities gradually shut down. The police began to suffer setbacks in their attempt to curtail the violence. The enraged protesters' fought with cops, maimed scores of the law enforcers and killed a few others. The police force had to call in the army for support when it couldn't manage the situation anymore.

Civil servants embarked on an indefinite strike to protest Abeke’s arrest. Higher institution students went on a rampage and every University, Polytechnic and College of Education in the country had to be shut down. The national president of the National Association of Nigerian Students came out in the dailies to soundly denounce the federal government for trying to bribe him and other Student Union activists with ten million naira each if they could guarantee their non participation and that of the student body in the current nationwide protests. He declared that the era of money politics was over in the Nigerian polity. Then he called on all patriotic Nigerians to come out and join in the fight to entrench democracy in the nation.

Within twenty four hours, the young man was picked up by law enforcement agents and accused of sedition and hate speech.

Protesters began to attack prominent government officials in their homes and in their offices. The Inspector General of police barely escaped with his life when gunmen attacked his home and killed some members of his security detail.

In addition to the crisis was the hardship imposed on the populace by the recent hike in the price of petroleum fuel. The price of transportation and foodstuff had skyrocketed astronomically making life unbearable for many.

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On the day things further escalated, a mammoth crowd had converged at a popular filling station to buy fuel amidst increasing scarcity and the cutthroat prices being demanded by the petrol dealers. The queues at the filling stations were unbearably long. Motorists and motorcyclists, desperate to keep their vehicles running, were forced to buy fuel at the exorbitant prices. Filling station attendants charged extra from the buyers who wanted to have the products sold to them in a hurry. Tempers were high and nerves were frayed as people queued for hours, hoping to get even a few liters of the precious liquid.

Among the restless crowd, murmurs of frustration and anger could be heard. "This is outrageous." A man shouted, his voice barely audible over the hum of engines and the din of complaints. "How long are we supposed to endure this?" Another woman, wiping sweat from her brow, responded, "They're making us pay through our noses for something that should be a basic necessity." The sentiment was shared by many. A young commercial motorcyclist, barely out of his teens, added, "I can't make a living if I can't get fuel. What do they expect us to do?"

Then, suddenly, a convoy with shrieking sirens sped into the overcrowded filling station. Uniformed men emerged from the vehicles, armed with whips and truncheons. Without warning, they began to stampede the crowd, mercilessly flogging the tightly packed masses. "It's the governor's convoy!" Someone shouted, and a wave of recognition and anger swept through the crowd. People scattered in all directions, abandoning their motorcycles, tricycles, and cars, but they didn't go far. They hung around at a safe distance, eyes blazing with fury and resentment.

Governor Yaya Haruna was a stalwart of the ruling party. He was one of the state governors most sympathetic to the president's cause. Just three days earlier, he had called the current protests unlawful and referred to them as the action of miscreants. In fact, he advocated the death penalty for anyone caught partaking in the protests which he referred to as unpatriotic and rabble rousing activities.

The governor's convoy continued to fill its vehicles with petrol, the loud sirens blaring continuously and annoyingly. For about forty minutes, the crowd watched, their anger boiling over as the cars in the convoy guzzled more and more fuel.

"This is an insult!" An elderly man exclaimed, his voice trembling with rage. "We are the ones who voted for him, and this is how he repays us?" Another onlooker, a young woman with a baby strapped to her back, shouted, "They treat us like animals while they live in luxury. Enough is enough!"

As the convoy's tanks filled and the vehicles began to drive out of the filling station, there was a palpable tension in the air. The onlookers' conversations grew louder and more intense. "They think they can just come and take whatever they want." One man said, gripping a piece of wood tightly. "Not today." Another responded, holding a makeshift club. The crowd's anger had reached a boiling point, and they were no longer willing to stand idly by.

Several youths had already taken action, barricading the highway. Armed with all manner of improvised weapons, they were waiting for the convoy. The governor's men, sensing the danger, tried to intimidate the crowd with their sirens and threats, but it was too late. "We've had enough of their oppression!" A young man with a scar on his face shouted. "Let's show them we won't be pushed around any longer!"

As the convoy approached the barricade, the youths stood their ground. The tension was electric, and for a moment, time seemed to stand still. Then, with a collective roar, the crowd surged forward. The governor's men were taken aback by the ferocity of the response. "Back off!" One of them yelled, but his voice was drowned out by the angry shouts of the mob. Improvised weapons clashed against the convoy's cars, and chaos erupted.

The filling station, once a place of frustration and despair, had become a battleground. The governor's convoy, once a symbol of power and authority, was now besieged by the very people it had oppressed. "This is our fuel, our right!" someone shouted, and the cry was taken up by others. "We won't be silenced anymore!" This wasn't a fight directly related to Abeke's arrest. It was a fight for justice, sparked by the desperation of a fuel shortage ignited by a governor's insensitivity. It had begun in earnest; it was about to escalate the Abeke's crisis and there was no turning back.

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Three days before this hour, it was business as usual and despite the current nationwide protests, governor Yaya was a sort of political demigod with vast, mind boggling powers. His influence within the current government was so great that he had once refused to obey a court injunction and had gotten away with that. But now, his convoy was ambushed by a mob that blocked the highway while his security escorts made desperate calls for immediate backup.

The enraged mob swarmed around the convoy and pelted the governor's car with rotten eggs and faeces and sachet water while they angrily chanted on top of their voices. "Ole! Ole! (Thief! Thief!)". Youths ran towards the filling station and chased away the attendants. Then they began to fill several empty bottles with petrol and fixed either makeshift wicks or strips of rags to their caps. In a matter of moments they had fashioned these into the crude but formidable contraptions called Molotov cocktails also known as petrol bombs. And then, they rushed back to the conflict scene with those bottles.

The governor's security aides let loose a volley of shots into the air to scare off the mob but it was an exercise in futility. These ambushers seemed on a suicide mission. They sped undeterred towards the governor's convoy with all manner of improvised weapons. These included machetes, wooden clubs, stones picked up from the ground and bullwhips.

The governor's security detail members eventually awoke to the danger and opened fire on the assailants at a close range. As people began to fall and corpses littered the ground, staining it with blood and gore, their expectation was that the attack would waiver and scatter. It didn't quite happen that way. While a few of the attackers broke rank and fled the scene, the rest refused to hesitate or stop. It was a scary scenario. Those who fled for dear life were called cowards by the others. Many of those who fled stayed at a safe distance and watched the confrontation that followed. An eyewitness later recounted the horrific events in a newspaper interview. "Just imagine the governor's fifteen car convoy stuck in the middle of the highway, like a boat marooned on an island. The police operatives have lost their composure and I believe the governor is himself stuck in his big car, sweating profusely inside the air conditioner and hyperventilating."

The mob was unrelenting in its attack and the governor's security would not stop shooting. Inspite of the scores of the dead, the attackers did not waiver in their determination and momentum. And despite the fact that more people were falling before the hail of bullets, the crazed mob drew nearer. One of those at their forefront struck a match and set fire to the wick of the Molotov cocktail in his hand. Then he lobbed the flaming object towards the convoy. It struck the roof of the governor's car and instantly blanketed it with flame. The next landed on the tarmac and splashed a line of flame towards another car. The sound of several breaking bottles filled the air as the crowd hurled several bottles of the contraptions towards the convoy. A petrol bomb landed on the next car to the governor's and splashed flame on the vehicle. Another crashed against the windshield of a security vehicle and sprayed flame across its frame. Several more bottles crashed on ground and tongues of flames leaped up in between the cars. Car doors flew open and cops leaped out to engage the attackers. A thunderstorm of gunshots exploded through the air and more victims fell in pools of their own blood. More petrol bombs crashed among the shooters and liquid fuels splattered on the uniforms of the governor's escorts setting them on fire.

Temporary confusion set in as the policemen scattered. Some ran while tearing off the clothes on their bodies. Some unlucky ones whose bare bodies had caught fire rolled on the ground and yelled in obvious pain and panic while their partners tried to help them douse the flames.

Those unlucky guys never had the chance to recover. The mob literally crashed into them like a massive wave smashing into defiant but flimsy barrier. Maniacal yells and angry roars like the thunder of a cataract filled the air as the two groups engaged each other in a fight to the finish. The governor's security men had absolutely no chance against that mob at close quarters. The crowd swarmed around them and struck with blind rage. The two sights fought maniacally among burning vehicles. More attackers died but like a resilient vermin invasion, even more of them kept rushing to the arena of war. The attack had become a vicious and relentless tsunami pouring in from all corners of the street and highway. The governor's security crumbled and his men fell as the crowd overpowered them with sheer number. The mob attacked with every weapon in its possession. The destructive human tsunami struck down Yaya's men and clubbed them to death. They unleashed their wrath on even the vehicles, overturning cars habouring cowering governor's aides within.

By the time it was over, the dead, twisted, broken and burning bodies of uniformed policemen littered the ground around the convoy cars. Most of them were battered beyond recognition. The governor himself had been dragged out of his now burning vehicle and forced to kneel down while his nemeses converged around him like vultures getting ready to feed on a carcass. Nobody needed to tell Yaya that these guys meant business and worst of all, mercy had become a deleted word from their dictionary. They drenched the governor with gasoline from head to toe while he kept begging for mercy. They laughed as he appealed to them in the name of God. He wept and snivelled while he reminded them that he had children at home who would become fatherless. His assailants pointed at the several corpses of protesters and told him that they also had families who would have to mourn them as well. One of them struck the match and threw it at the man's agbada. The billowing robe caught the flames with an enthusiastic WHOOSH!

And the rest is history.

The man who told the tale explained that he could not sleep at night for several days after the incident. He kept having continuous nightmares.

Of course news headlines eloquently told the tale of how a state governor fell before the rage of commoners or self styled revolutionaries and lynched like a common criminal. The tabloids and electronic media quoted the only surviving eye witnesses among the late governor's entourage who had managed to escape the angry mob's by pretending to be dead. The man described how the governor ran while clothed with a literal robe of fire. He told the tale of how that robe both hampered and smothered him. Eventually, he had fallen and burnt to a horrible death while screaming on top of his voice.

To add weight to the reports, the video of the lynching surfaced on the internet two days after the event. But it had been so edited that the faces of the assailants were blurred.

One thing was becoming clearer day by day though. The collective anger of the common people had gotten out of hand and was terraforming the land with darkness, devastation and hopelessness. And transforming itself into a dangerous ensemble of wrath and a vast orchestra of destruction. Abeke's rallying cry had been hope. But now hope seemed to have fled the nation.

TWENTY SIX: LEAGUE OF SPARTACUS

Abeke was quick to publicly denounce the display of savagery that resulted in the death of a state governor even if it was done on her behalf and that of her late friend. But many felt it was poetic justice for one of the enemies of the masses. A new movement seemed to be at the forefront of this new wave of violence now in the country. Their existence began as a whisper and mere rumour which eventually took concrete form as THE LEAGUE OF SPARTACUS.

They claimed to be revolutionaries but the government labelled them terrorists. They announced their sympathy for Abeke’s cause and accused the federal government of murdering Maggie. They threatened that there would be no peace until Maggie's murderers were brought to the book. They called on all patriotic Nigerians to come out and make the country ungovernable for Victor Hara. Abeke's condemnation of their methods did not deter them from calling her their mentor and heroine. They kept insisting that she was the inspiration behind their uprising and they vowed never to relent until she was allowed to take her rightful position as Nigeria's president.

The league began to target key government officials for attacks. It didn't matter whom they were, senators, house of representatives members, state governors, military officials; none was safe. Some were merely humiliated and then released. A handful were abducted and never seen again. Others had family members abducted.

Abeke's detractors used that as an excuse to call her an hypocrite who sponsored sedition behind the scenes while pretending to condemn it in public. She was accused of instigating the current wave of ‘mindless’ violence against government officials and the unending public unrest that had engulfed the whole nation. Many of those wolves called for her arrest and prosecution. One of such critics labelled her the female Spartacus. He predicted that just like Spartacus who had success for a brief period of time and then fell, Abeke was also destined for an eventual fall and disgrace.

All students of history know that Spartacus was a Roman slave and gladiator, and leader of a famous slave revolt. Over the span of several centuries since his now famous revolt, he has become a modern-day inspirational figure.

Little is known of the early years of Spartacus. He is thought to have been born in Thrace (modern day Balkan region) and it has been suggested he was in the Roman army. He was sold into slavery and trained at the gladiatorial school in Capua, north of Naples.

Spartacus escaped in 73 BC and took refuge on nearby Mount Vesuvius, where large numbers of other escaped slaves joined him. Their insurrection came to be known as the Third Servile War, or the Gladiators’ War. Leading his army of runaway slaves, which has been estimated to have reached over 100,000 men, Spartacus defeated a series of Roman attacks using tactics which would now be called guerrilla warfare.

In 72 BC Spartacus and his army marched north towards Gaul (the Roman term for a region covering France, the Low Countries and northern Italy). They fought off a series of attacks from Roman forces, but then turned south. By the end of 72 BC, they were camped at Rhenium, (now Reggio di Calabria) probably intending to go on to Sicily.

The administration in Rome now began to take the threat from Spartacus seriously and the Roman politician and general Marcus Licinius Crassus led an army south. The slaves managed to break through the fortifications that Crassus had built to trap them, but were pursued to Lucania where the rebel army was destroyed. Spartacus is thought to have been killed in the battle. Around 6,000 of his followers who escaped were hunted down and crucified. Thousands of others were killed by the army of the Roman general Pompey, who then claimed the credit for suppressing the rebellion.

Spartacus's struggle has been inspirational to revolutionaries, politicians and writers since the 19th century. An example was the Spartacist League which was a revolutionary socialist group formed in Germany in 1916. It unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow the government in 1919.

It was no longer a secret that this current revolt was also inspired by Spartacus' rebellion against the government of his time.

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The president paced back and forth in evident agitation, his footsteps echoing through the opulent halls of the presidential palace. The grand chandeliers overhead seemed to tremble with each heavy step, casting a flickering light on the anxious faces of the major officials gathered there. General Jeremiah Hara, the chief of army staff, stood stiffly, his eyes following the president's restless movements. The other high-ranking officials exchanged nervous glances, fidgeting with their uniforms and shuffling their feet, the weight of the crisis pressing down on them.

"Your Excellency," General Hara called out, his voice breaking the tense silence. "Nigeria is boiling. Things are speedily falling apart, and mobs are taking over everywhere. Chaos and madness are engulfing our nation. What are your orders before things get out of hand?"

The president stopped and sighed deeply, his eyes burning with determination. "I will not allow my country to be taken over by miscreants. I will never allow mere hooligans to hijack the power I fought with sweat and blood to acquire." He paused, his gaze sweeping across the room. "Kill them."

The officials froze in horror. The gravity of the command hung heavy in the air. Before anyone could respond, the inspector general of police, with a face etched with worry, stepped forward to deliver his report.

"Your Excellency, we've arrested the key leader of the protesters. She's in our custody." He began, his voice trembling slightly. "But instead of quelling the unrest, it has only fanned the protests into outrageous proportions. The streets are filled with anger and defiance, and the numbers are swelling by the hour."

The president's eyes narrowed with fury, but before he could speak, the minister for information, his face pale, dared to protest. "Sir," He said cautiously, "let's be careful. We can't kill the whole nation. We have grandmas and grandpas, teenagers, secondary school and higher institution students among them, as well as civil servants and artisans."

The president was unmoved. His voice was cold and unwavering. "They are all rogues and lawbreakers. I won't let them take over my country."

The room fell into a stunned silence, the gravity of the president's words weighing heavily on everyone present. General Victor Hara took a deep breath, steeling himself to respond.

"Your Excellency," He began, his voice measured but urgent, "ordering the military to kill indiscriminately will lead to catastrophic consequences. The international community will condemn us, and we will lose the support of our own people."

The president glared at him, but General Williams pressed on. "We need to consider other options. A heavy-handed approach will only escalate the situation. Let us impose a curfew, increase our security presence, and initiate dialogue with the protest leaders. We can restore order without resorting to such extreme measures."

The president's expression softened slightly, but his resolve was clear. "You think a curfew and dialogue will be enough to quell this rebellion?"

"It's a start," General Williams replied. "We can show strength by maintaining order and discipline while also addressing the grievances that fuel these protests. We must demonstrate that the government is willing to listen and act justly."

The president paused, the tension in the room palpable.

"How do we negotiate with people we don't know?" The inspector general of police wondered aloud. "This is a protest without any recognizable leader or groups of leaders at the forefront."

"Yet there has to be leaders." The Navy Admiral in the gathering voiced out. "You can't have a nation wide protest this huge without organizers."

"My men are working day and night and literally burning themselves out to fish out the rabble rousers. They have failed to identify even one." The inspector general answered wearily. "So who do we really meet to negotiate with? We know their demands. They want his Excellency to vacate his seat and they want that blasted woman, Abeke in power."

"Let's not conclude that it's impossible to identify the leaders." The air marshall said. " Let's try harder. And when we find the leaders, let's see if they can make concessions or if they can be bought over." He smiled. "Some millions of naira in the bank account of a man who's never handled vast wealth can change his perspective."

"And what if they can't be bought?" The vice president official asked.

"They can be blackmailed and forever discredited." The air Marshall replied.

"We are overlooking the League of Spartacus." The vice president said. "Perhaps the actual danger comes from them. They're not the protesters but their aim is to forcefully topple the government. They're getting bolder and bolder everyday.

The Rear Admiral nodded. "I agree. If we aren't careful, they'll bring actual war to the nation."

"I'm not negotiating with them." Victor Hara declared. "I'll make sure they're crushed."

The room became quiet as they pondered on that. Finally, president Hara nodded. "Very well. Implement the curfew, locate the leaders and initiate the dialogue. But remember, if this fails, we will not hesitate to use force to restore order."

The officials nodded in agreement, relieved but aware of the delicate path ahead. They knew they had bought some time, but the challenge of resolving the crisis peacefully remained daunting.

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As the convoy of the executive governor, Dr Wole Adeyemi approached the metropolis, he was unaware of the turmoil that was ahead. He had been on the road since 3:00 am on a return trip from another state where he had gone for his political Party's convention since the previous day. He wasn't the type who listened to radio first thing in the morning which explained why the car radio was not switched on. Instead of the radio being tuned in to a radio station to pick the news broadcast, soft ‘rhythm and blues’ music from the compact disc player filled the interior of the governor’s sleek Mercedes. It was how he liked to relax when on the road. He was bone weary this morning and fast asleep.

The convoy drove into the Ojota outskirts of Lagos around 06:12 am. The convoy encountered a checkpoint which wasn't there the previous day. Men in military fatigue were doing a stop and search. Cars were already forming a queue as they waited for their turn to be searched. The soldiers at the checkpoint refused to accord privileged status to the state governor. Neither would they allow him to pass without subjecting every vehicle in his convoy to a thorough search.

Because it was unheard of and actually an insult, an argument ensued.

“Don't you people know whom you're speaking with?” His Excellency the governor fumed.

“Who you be?” The military officer in charge, a tall and wiry soldier whose face was plastered with a perpetual frown challenged him in pidgin English.

“If you're too stupid to understand, let me tell you that I’m the chief executive of this state. Remove your blasted barricade and let my convoy pass!” He stuck his head out of the window and addressed the soldiers. “Someone is definitely going to pay for this gaffe!”

“Mr man,” Switching from pidgin to fluent English, the military officer in charge called out without an iota of respect. “your ignorance is a danger to you and your escorts. All the same, I'll let you pass but don't embarrass yourself next time.” He turned to his men. “Raise the barrier.” They obeyed.

The governor wasn't impressed. He was infuriated. He opened the door of the car and stepped down in order to face the man. His police and military escorts also alighted from their vehicles. “What gives you the right to embarrass a state governor?” He challenged the man. “Wait until I inform your superiors about this incident. I'll not rest until you're rot in jail. You’ll see!”

The officer's eyes turned red. He faced his men and reversed his prior order. “Lower the barricade.” He commanded. The barricade went down in a hurry. He turned towards governor Adeyemi and threw a bombshell that was to rock not just the state of Lagos but the entire nation. “Oga governor;” meaning master governor. “lie down.”

The governor was struck speechless. His entourage members could not believe their ears.

“Are you crazy?” A police sergeant challenged. “Aren't you smart enough to understand the implications of what you’re about to do?”

The officer strode past the governor and towards the outspoken cop. Swiftly and brutally, he knocked him down with a vicious kick to the gut. The policeman fell with an agonized howl. He rolled on the floor and stayed there like a man half dead. The members of the governor's escorts reached for their weapons with outraged yells.

The soldiers at the checkpoint were ready and beat them to the punch. Twenty five machine guns roared into life. Flames from their muzzles stabbed upwards as they shot into the air.

Adeyemi and his escorts quickly forgot about avenging the humiliation of the brutalized man. They raised their hands to signify their surrender. The soldiers confiscated the weapons of the escorts and forced them to lie on the ground. Then savagely, the soldiers attacked them. They kicked the prostate escorts everywhere; on their heads, chests, buttocks and groins. They hit them with the butts of their guns. They jumped on the ribs of the outspoken policeman and flogged him until he lost consciousness.

The governor, the rest of his entourage and onlookers could only watch helplessly. The cries and groans of brutalized escorts men filled the air.

His Excellency the governor cringed on the inside and various thoughts rolled through his mind. Had these soldiers gone mad? Were they intoxicated with kainkain, a very potent locally brewed gin? Were they even soldiers at all? Could they be political thugs disguised as soldiers and sent by the party in power to humiliate him for being one of the most outspoken critics of the government in power at the centre? This was unthinkable.

He was already thinking ahead. He would lodge a formal complaint with the president. And then his lawyers would take the case to court. If this was a ploy by Mr President to harass and him ahead of the oncoming just because he didn't wholeheartedly support him during the last election elections, then he would show him how the game was being played in this political turf called Nigeria. He would fight back by every legal and illegal means at his disposal. He would...

The military officer in charge of the checkpoint turned to the governor and repeated his prior order. “Oga governor, make una lie down now now!”

They glared at each other in the rapidly increasing daylight. Longer lines of cars were forming on both sides of the barricade by now. There were a few people who discreetly used their phones to video-record the face off. They knew that the risk was great if they were caught but they still risked it because the event was unprecedented.

The man cocked his pistol and made an announcement that shocked Adeyemi and everyone present. "This isn't the Nigerian military you're dealing with. We are the League of Spartacus. We are taking back our nation from leeches like you."

In a hurry, Dr Wole Adeyemi, the executive governor of Lagos state lay face down on the tarmac while in his heart he cursed the man who humiliated him. The news would hit the internet within minutes and the controversial videos would be broadcast in most private television and radio stations before the day was over. It would stir up great panic and outrage on the corridors of power and reveal how bad things were beginning to get for the government.

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Those among the privileged class calling for Abeke’s head began to swell in numbers until their clamour for her arrest became deafening. They obviously had everything to fear from someone like her who had managed to inspire a nationwide civil disobedience and escalating violence of such magnitude even though she neither called for one or intended to. In addition, the shameful and brutal death of that late governor had alarmed and woken up all political vultures in the nation. None of them felt safe again. They all decided in unison that Abeke must become the sacrificial lamb for their peace. Just like those who killed Jesus, the collective and figurative cry from their camp was: CRUCIFY HER.

The Nigerian government decided to learn from the Spartacus saga. Those who were conversant with history among her detractors recalled that Rome initially did not send its best armies to crush Spartacus’ revolt because it never took the slaves serious. And then the rebels inflicted crushing defeat on different armies sent against it. The revolt remained a threat to Rome until the Roman government took it serious and changed tactics. Only then did it send Marcus Licinius Crassus to quell it.

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Senator Omerua clasped his hands and watched from his seat, his sharp eyes never leaving the upset President Victor Hara, who nervously drummed his fingers on the mahogany table. The room was dimly lit, the heavy curtains drawn to keep out prying eyes. A tension hung in the air, thick and palpable.

"You acted like a fool, Victor. You shouldn't have taken her for granted." The senator admonished, his voice a mixture of disappointment and frustration. He took a cursory look at his blue bowler hat perched on his knees, a symbol of his old-fashioned but steadfast political stance.

President Hara's face contorted with regret. "How was I to know she was going to become this big?" He replied, his voice cracking. The rise of Abeke, a formidable businesswoman and her subsequent metamorphosis into a political powerhouse, had taken him by surprise. The explosive events that followed the failed assassination attempt on her life had left him confused. Now, confusion and anger was beginning to cloud his judgment.

He had underestimated her then despite his political mentor's warnings, and it was proving to be a grave mistake. Now he was feeling panic.

"You should have listened to me," Omerua continued, his tone stern yet tinged with a hint of sympathy. "This is a mess. A governor murdered by a mob and another governor humiliated in broad daylight. The country descending into pure anarchy and you still call yourself president?"

"I regret that I downplayed your warnings." The president acknowledged, his shoulders slumping. "But what do I do now?"

Omerua shrugged, a gesture that seemed to bear the weight of his years of political maneuvering. "I'm done counseling and guiding you, Victor. This is now your burden, and you must rise to the occasion." He said, his voice firm. "But understand this fact: one woman can destroy a nation. Helen of Troy is a key example." He grimaced, recalling the ancient legend. "Isn't it ironic that Abeke's middle name is Helen? Be careful of this Helen, or she'll destroy you."

The president clenched his fists, his face a mask of determination. "She'll never have the chance to destroy either me or my country. I'll..."

"You're already going down. You just don't know it," Richard Omerua interrupted with certainty, his eyes boring into Victor's. After observing the shock on his political godson's face, he smiled, a thin, knowing smile. "Yes, you are already going down, and no amount of threats can change that."

Victor Hara sighed deeply, the weight of his predicament pressing down on him. "You're saying I'm doomed?"

Omerua arose from his seat, placing his bowler hat back on his head with a practiced air of finality. "No, I'm saying you're about to be doomed. Do something fast, or it'll be over before you know it." He paused, looking at Victor one last time. "Remember, every great leader faces their Helen. It's how you handle her that defines your legacy."

With that, he turned and walked out of the office, leaving the president alone with his thoughts. The room seemed colder, emptier, as Victor sat there, pondering his next move. The ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner marked the passing seconds, each one a reminder of the urgency of his situation.

Victor Hara knew he had to act swiftly. Abeke had now proven to be more than a mere political rival. She had become a force of nature. Her influence had grown exponentially, and her ambition knew no bounds. If he didn't find a way to neutralize her, everything he had worked for would crumble.

As he stared at the closed door through which Omerua had just exited, his mind was in a turmoil. For now, he had no choice but to prepare for the battle of his political life.

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The Nigerian government changed, tactics in its quest to quench the current rebellion permanently. Its next response to the current upheaval therefore was with maximum force, meeting fire with fire. Scores of protesters across the country were arrested and clamped in detention. Suspected ringleaders were hunted down by security operatives. Several of them were killed and buried in mass graves.

In spite of that, the violence showed no sign of abating. Total chaos threatened to engulf Nigeria. While the common people were bent on venting their frustration without restrain, the government wasn't ready to tolerate any further form of dissent. And so things deteriorated.

Miscreants took advantage of the protests and unleashed their own form of mayhem. Houses were looted, vehicles vandalized and government buildings were burnt to ashes. Many of the prominent officials of the ruling party were mobbed and killed by irate demonstrators. State governors, Senators, House of Representatives members and other public holders dared not go out or travel in official vehicles or expensive cars. Those types of vehicles now attracted assault from the masses just like excreta attracts flies. Indeed many of those prominent politicians had gone underground with their families. Others had managed to flee the country. But their properties had been burnt to ashes by vindictive mobs.

Eventually, the army rolled out armoured tanks and other weapons. Scores were massacred. The protesters multiplied their improvised weapons like Molotov cocktail, bows and arrows, catapults, machetes and guns obtained from the black market. A section of society aptly named the Molotov uprising on account of the unlimited number of Molotov cocktails contrived and used during the disturbances. Fireworks and bangers were also reportedly used even though their effectiveness as weapons of war was nil.

TWENTY SEVEN: EXECUTIVE DECISION

The president gazed across the conference table at the five-star generals seated on the other side. A plaque before him spelled out his full name and rank: VICTOR F. HARA, EXECUTIVE PRESIDENT OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA. He turned his attention to Daniel Dan, the Inspector General of Police. "Let's have your report, Inspector."

The man ignored the bottle of water before him and leaned forward. Despite the chill of the AC, he was visibly sweating. "Your Excellency, we're at risk. Our defense is being overrun." His voice was almost panicky. "The police troops at the central are holding their ground, but the northern and southern regions are strongholds of dissent. Our defenses are caving in."

Victor Hara nodded thoughtfully. "Hmmm. I propose we elevate the threat level to One." He turned his gaze to the Chief of Defense Staff. "What do you think, General Jeremiah?"

Jeremiah Hara shook his head in disagreement. "No, sir. We can't do that now. While we are indeed at risk, as the Inspector General indicated, there are other ways to handle this situation."

"You mean like negotiating with the protesters?" Victor asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, sir," Jeremiah replied firmly.

"I won't do such a thing," Victor retorted.

"Listen, Mr. President—"

"No, you listen," Victor interrupted, placing both palms upside down on the well-polished surface of the table, revealing well-manicured nails. "We're past all that. We're going to Level One. What do you think, Air Marshal Danjuma?"

The dark-skinned and imperturbable-looking Danjuma exhaled slowly. "Sir, I think you need to rethink that option."

"Why?"

"The reasons are obvious and many," Danjuma began calmly. "Once we cross that bridge, we can't go back. Most nations will see you as a monster. You'll lose the goodwill of the superpowers. ECOWAS and the African Union may ostracize our nation. Things are already hard for the common man. Economic sanctions will definitely cripple the nation. I don't think that's a battle we're going to win."

Victor pondered that for a few heartbeats. "And have you considered what happens if these protesters win?" His voice was softer but no less dangerous. Danjuma thought to himself, 'This man has iron fingers hidden inside velvet gloves. He appears soft like honey, yet he's given many opponents chronic indigestion. He's hard-boiled and dangerous to mess with.'

Victor's gaze swept across the room. "You're going to be kicked out of your offices. You will be subjected to intense probes. You will have to explain yourselves to panels of inquiry. Contracts you inflated, which I deliberately turned a blind eye to, will be exhumed. The army chiefs and the Inspector General of Police will have to account for the hundreds that have died so far in clashes with the masses." Victor shook his head once more. "Think about this carefully. Some of you may spend the rest of your lives behind bars. One or two of you may be subjected to death by hanging." The room grew very quiet.

"But a lot of people are going to die if we do as you say," the Chief of Army Staff protested.

"And so what?" Victor Hara retorted. "It's a war, okay? Maybe you should start seeing it that way."

The Inspector General of Police cleared his throat and addressed Jeremiah Hara. "Wake up, General. The country is on fire. This flame could consume all of us if we aren't careful."

Another decorated officer raised a hand. The president nodded. "Yes, go ahead, General Mark."

"Hundreds of people have died already. If we take this to the next level, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, may die. When the history of the nation is written, you'll be remembered as the president who butchered his subjects. Are you sure you can cope with that?"

"Well, they're not my subjects. They're an army of rebels."

"Yes, but—"

"General, there are no buts," the president's voice hardened. "I'm giving an executive order to activate the Lucifer Protocol immediately."

"Sir...!" Half of the defense cabinet members blurted out at the same time. The Lucifer Protocol was a declaration of war, using every asset of the state.

"I'll brook no arguments on this issue," the president growled.

Jeremiah rose abruptly. "On what grounds?"

"On the grounds of national security."

"I'll be damned if I'll agree with your decision!"

"General Jeremiah Hara, you're immediately relieved of your duty as the Chief of Defense Staff of the Federal Republic of Nigeria." The president announced with chilling calm.

They glared at each other for a couple of seconds before Victor Hara broke the frosty silence. "Be careful, or I'll have you arrested for treason."

""You can't do this!" General Jeremiah Hara's voice thundered through the opulent conference room, filled with the echoes of past decisions and future uncertainties.

"Oh, I already have," President Victor Hara replied with a cold smile. He turned to the guards flanking the entrance. "Security, please escort the general out of the presidential palace."

Jeremiah stood firm, unyielding as he delivered his parting shot. "You'll have thousands of civilians bombed to hell just because they disagree with your leadership style?" His voice was a mixture of disbelief and contempt. "Their blood will be on your hands!"

A shocked silence followed as the presidential guards took hold of the general, leading him out of the room. The officials present exchanged uneasy glances, unsure of what to do or say.

"Your Excellency...?" One of the remaining officials called out.

"Yes, General Abass Gandu?" Victor responded, his tone deceptively calm

"Surely, this can be settled amicably. He's your brother."

"He'll always be my brother," Victor acknowledged. "But he's no longer Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces."

"This can't end well," Gandu warned.

"Stop whining," Victor snapped. "If you men are afraid to do what needs to be done, let it be on record that this nation has a man with the courage to make hard decisions."

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing?" Another official demanded. "You can't just take a unilateral decision on an issue as sensitive as this! What about the constitution?"

Victor released a pent-up sigh. "The constitution gives me the power to make hardcore decisions like this one in the interest of national security, especially in a time of war."

The defense cabinet members exchanged uneasy looks as the president arose from his well-padded seat and made his way towards the exit. They sat in stunned silence as he walked out of the chamber.

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Three days later, President Victor Hara stood outside his brother's quarters. The tension was palpable as he knocked on the heavy wooden door.

Jeremiah opened the door, his face a mask of controlled anger. "What do you want, Victor?"

"We need to talk." Victor said, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation.

"About what? Your latest power play?" Jeremiah's voice dripped with sarcasm.

Victor ignored the jab. "About your disloyalty. Why are you undermining my government?"

Jeremiah's eyes blazed. "Disloyal? I've been loyal to you for years, through thick and thin. But there are lines no one should cross... and you're crossing them with impunity."

Victor's expression hardened. "There's a war going on, Jeremiah."

"A war that doesn't justify the massacre of civilians and innocents!" Jeremiah retorted. " "It's a crime to attack non-combatants with apocalyptic weapons. Engaging the League of Spartacus is one thing, massacring civilians is a different kettle of fish entirely."

Victor's face reddened with anger. "We’re at war, and I will do whatever it takes to protect this nation."

Jeremiah stood firm, his voice resolute. "You're not making rational decisions, brother. A governor was burnt to death and what did you do in return? You ordered the use of phosphorus bombs on your own people! An entire two-mile radius in that city burnt to the ground with its inhabitants just because some of the aggrieved ones murdered a governor? Did you think of innocents and children! Did you consider the babies and the elderly when you ordered that hit? You specifically ordered the use of a weapon like that because you wanted revenge?"

Victor's eyes narrowed. "When did you start caring about things like this?"

"Since I discovered that I'm a human, not some prehistoric beast." Jeremiah shot back. He shook his head in disbelief. "Everything within two miles of that detonation is engulfed in a fire cloud. It's pure fire, Victor; your fire. It's started, and nothing can put it out."

"Isn't that the point?" Victor's eyes glowed maniacally. "They've unleashed hell and its fire is going to keep burning them until they give up their antagonism to my government."

"Has it crossed your mind that this could be the fire that destroys you and your political career forever?"

Victor's expression darkened. "Why don't you just pull off your uniform, pick a Molotov cocktail, and join the rabbles out there fighting to oust my government?"

Jeremiah shook his head. "Quit deceiving yourself. This isn't about protecting the country. It's about your ego and our unending rivalry. You’ve always wanted to prove you’re better, even from childhood."

Victor's voice softened slightly. "This isn’t about us. It’s about the country."

"But your decisions are tainted by our past," Jeremiah countered. "You’re letting personal feelings dictate national policy. That’s dangerous."

The brothers stared at each other, the air thick with unresolved tension. Victor was fair and slender while his brother was dark and somewhat plain looking. Finally, Victor turned away.

"Think what you want, Jeremiah. But I’m doing what I believe is right for this country, my country.."

"The country isn't your personal estate. It belongs to us all. And I’ll do what I believe is right to stop you," Jeremiah vowed.

Victor paused at the door, a mix of sorrow and determination in his eyes. "Don't you dare stand in my way, Victor. I'll crush you if I have to."

"I have no skeleton in my wardrobe, brother. And I'm not afraid of a probe." Jeremiah had an amused smile on his face. "An audit of the defense ministry will show that I'm squeaky clean. I'm a disciplined soul. What are you going to use against me?"

"I'm warning you again, do not stand in my way." The president growled. "I'll bury you alive, Jeremiah. You are not going to be the only one who suffers my wrath. Your wife, your children, your entire family."

"Am I still your brother?" The general shook his head. "Was I ever your brother? Did we share the same womb before we came to this world?" A deep sigh escaped his throat. "Mom must be turning in her grave."

"Be assured that she's the only reason why I haven't had you locked up in jail."

You claim to love the country, but you're ruining everything and spoiling our family name."

"You're blaming me for trying to restore order in a season of chaos?" President Victor Hara's voice was a mixture of incredulity and exhaustion as he faced his brother.

"No," Jeremiah responded, his tone calm but firm. "I blame you for trying to kill off everyone who disagrees with your style of governance." He sighed heavily again, the weight of his words hanging in the air. "Within the past couple of weeks, you've deployed law enforcers to quell the current cycle of protests. What have they accomplished?" He paused, staring steadily at his brother, his eyes reflecting a mix of disappointment and sorrow. He ruffled his greying hair, a habit he had picked up in moments of deep frustration. "They've killed not just miscreants but teenagers hardly out of high school. They've massacred elderly people who came out of retirement to protest against your government. They've killed like weasels unleashed in a chicken coop. And now, you've fired me as the Chief of Army Staff and okayed the use of weapons of mass destruction on your own people."

Victor's face hardened, his eyes narrowing. "Your desperation to label me a monster isn't going to change anything, Jeremiah."

Jeremiah's expression softened, but his voice remained steady. "Your hands are already stained with the blood of thousands."

Victor's composure snapped. "What the hell do you want me to do?" He exploded, his voice echoing through the grand office.

Jeremiah didn't flinch. "Do the honorable thing," he retorted. "Resign."

Fury blazed in Victor's eyes, contorting his features. "Now I know how much you hate me."

"It's not about hate." Jeremiah said quietly. "Must you die on the seat of power? Must you kill half of the country's population just because you want to rule for life?"

The room fell into a tense silence as the brothers glared at each other. When Victor refused to respond to his questions, Jeremiah voiced his conclusion. "You are the most selfish individual I've ever seen in my entire life."

Victor Hara opened the door, a symbolic gesture of their ongoing conflict. "This isn’t over."

"You'd better believe it isn’t." Jeremiah agreed.

Victor left, leaving the door open behind him. The disagreement between the two brothers remained unresolved, their childhood rivalry now spilling over into the fate of a nation.

The general bowed his head and considered the past and weighed his options. Victor and Jeremiah Hara had been inseparable as children. Growing up in a modest home, they had shared dreams of making their country a better place. Victor had always been the ambitious one, driven by a desire to lead. Jeremiah, in contrast, had been the protector, the one who always looked out for his brother and the family. Their paths had diverged significantly as they grew older, with Victor pursuing a career in politics and Jeremiah joining the military. Each had nursed the ambition of making the country great but right now, Jeremiah was totally convinced that his brother had descended into madness and was about to destroy the country.

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Rumours of war were spreading. Revolution seemed imminent. There were tales in town about a resistance group emerging whose intention was to engage the government in guerrilla warfare. And then, the resistant movement calling itself The League of Spartacus began to engage the military forces with better ordnances and bombs.. The battle for the soul of Nigeria was fought in major cities like Lagos, Abuja and a few others. Military planes went on strafing runs and entire city blocks vanished in flames as buildings exploded, vaporising multitudes.

Many structures became derelict husks. Droves of Inhabitants escaped the urban centers in their quest for safety. Dusk to dawn curfew was imposed all over the country. Rural areas became flooded with refugees as the escapees sought refuge in their home towns and villages of origin.

In the midst of these troubles, Abeke and several others were hastily arraigned before a special tribunal. They were charged with treason and sedition. Their prison terms varied. Abeke was sentenced to twenty five years behind bars.

TWENTY EIGHT: THE FIST OF GOD

Two military wardens came for Abeke Abeke at sunset. She heard their footsteps steadily drawing nearer and clicking on the stone passageway of the corridor outside her cell. She didn't know who they were or whom they were coming for but she knew that wardens came from time to time to take away prisoners. It was either to transfer them to a worse section of the prison or to a far more terrible prison. Sometimes they were even taken away to be executed.

Her cellmate had died before daybreak just two days ago. She was an activist from the north. The woman had been a vociferous critic not just of Victor Hara. She didn't like Abeke, neither did she believe in Abeke's dream. Aminat Ahmed was the most renowned female critic in the nation. Despite her ambivalence towards Abeke, she had thrown her weight behind the mass protests and had been eventually arrested and thrown in the same cell with Abeke Anthony. Overtime, the two women had grown close as Aminat gradually discarded her dislike for Abeke.

She suffered from occasional bouts of asthma. It was something she had learnt to cope with even in incarceration until the powers that be denied her access to a new inhaler after exhausting the last one she had. She died gasping in Abeke's arms. That only fueled Abeke's hatred for Victor Hara and his government. His government had been responsible for the murder of two dynamic women better than himself. Margaret and Aminat.

Abeke had been here for eight weeks. She knew she wasn't going to come out of this place alive unless by a miracle. She had considered all options and none of them was appealing. Escape was impossible. She would either die of sickness and undernourishment like her late cellmate or she would be executed one of these days. Thoughts of such gloomy future filled her with depression from time to time but she tried to get along. And thoughts of Maggie's death filled her with murderous rage each time they came to mind.

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The steady cadence of approaching footsteps became louder and she beheld two uniformed soldiers, a male and a female as they drew near. That got her attention because this prison was run by wardens and the staff of the Nigerian Prison Service. Soldiers never came here except there was trouble or somebody was about to be executed. She got up and moved towards the bars of her cell. One of the newcomers stuck a key in the keyhole of Abeke's cell and turned it. The other stood with her Kalashnikov levelled. The door slid back with a grating sound. The first soldier addressed the prisoner. “Follow me.” The other soldier motioned with her AK-47. The prisoner had no choice than to obey. Abeke went out and her cell door was locked again. Then the soldiers escorted her towards the exit. Abeke went ahead while the men followed behind.

With racing heart, Abeke wondered whether her execution day had come. Victor Hara's men had on different times threatened to have her killed when she least expected it. Maybe they would make good their threat today. Abeke checked her heart to ascertain whether she was ready to meet her maker or not. She didn't know for sure but she’d tried her best within these past few weeks to be closer to her maker. Though it'd been hard to be close to a God that she couldn't see, Abeke had really tried hard. She’d been raised as a devouted member of the Anglican Church. She had done a lot of praying though she hadn't visited church in years. She'd been taught to believe in a Supreme God who was benevolent even though hidden from physical sight.

At the entrance of the prison facility, there were military wardens at the reception area. One of them got up and drew back the iron door. Abeke and his escorts emerged into the sunset. The well manicured field seemed to stretch out in all directions. Rows of buildings that served as prison complexes, prison hospital and the office of the warden dotted the landscape.

A black Toyota Prado Landcruiser was waiting and a man leaned casually against the trunk. Waiting. Abeke's heart did a somersault and she felt raw fear coursing through his heart. The man waiting by the Landcruiser was familiar. He was tall and dark with a pronounced scar on one side of his brutal looking face. Abeke recognised him as Victor Hara’s number one hatchet man. The man known as the Fist of God. Abeke cringed inwardly. If Hara had sent the Fist of God to get her, then she was surely going to die. Maybe before the night was over.

Jeremiah Hara straightened from the car trunk and grinned. “Welcome, Abeke.”

Abeke nodded curtly. “What do you want with me you murderer?”

Jeremiah Hara’s tone was unruffled. “Business.”

The captive sounded bitter. “I’ve got no business with you, Jeremiah Hara. You're nothing but a monster and a merchant of death. If your master has sent on a quest to murder me, then go ahead and get it over with.”

“Stop talking like a fool and hear me out.” He retorted impatiently.

"What's so special about what you've got to say?" Her face was contorted with anger. "You'll just threaten me like many others before you. For your information, I won't be intimidated by your..."

"Abeke! All I ask from you is just two minutes to have my say. After that, you can do whatever you feel like doing."

She took a deep breath and tried to calm down. “Alright, I’m listening.”

“The first thing you need to know is that you’re free.”

Abeke broke into wild derisive laughter. She laughed until tears came out of her eyes. Eventually, she stopped and turned to the escorts that brought her out of her cell. “Hey guys, I’m ready to go back to my cell. Kindly take me back.”

“I meant what I said, Abeke. You're free. You can go home.”

“And who authorized my freedom?” She sneered.

“I did.”

“You lack the power. Only your brother, the president can do it and I know he’ll never do it.”

Jeremiah Hara smiled. “He's no longer the president.”

The captive stared at him in shock. “Are you sure?”

“I toppled his government.”

She was speechless for a few minutes. "So now we've exchanged the civilian dictator for a military one. What's the difference?"

"You don't have to understand right away but you soon will."

"You want my endorsement, don't you? You want a measure of legitimacy for your banana regime, don't you? Well, count me out."

"I need nothing from you." He retorted. You're the one who need something from me."

"I don't need a thing from you." She replied with chilling calm.

"Except your freedom." He reminded her.

“And you personally came to effect my freedom?” Abeke marvelled.

“You don't have to go back to your cell tonight.”

She sighed. “So tell me, who's the new president?”

Jeremiah Hara’s smile widened. “I am by default, but I’m going to ensure the country holds an election very soon.”

“You're insane.”

“I'm not disputing the fact but I’m dead serious.”

The captive stared at him in disbelief. “What do you want? What’s in this for you?”

“I want nothing except to be left alone...if you ever become president.”

“If I become the president, I’m going to touch a lot of untouchables. Surely you know that.”

“Let me educate you a bit.” The Fist of God replied. “Firstly, you don't count your chickens before your eggs are hatched. You're going to need me if your government is to succeed. None of my brother's former military backers will ever respect or listen to you unless you have a strongman backing you up. That's where I come in if you're not averse to having a devil like me rooting for you.”

Abeke was silent as she considered Jeremiah Hara’s word. If it was true that Victor Hara had been deposed, then the only person strong enough to command respect from the military was the Fist of God. He had the undivided loyalty of multitudes in the military ranks. The senior officers feared him but most of the junior officers had implicit confidence in him. Jeremiah Hara was making sense but the only thing that bothered Abeke was that the man was making no demands.“

“You haven't made any further demands.” She told Jeremiah Hara. “Tell me what you actually in addition to being left alone.”

He said nothing but that impudent smile was back on his face.

He didn't bother to give her a reply. They stared at each other in silence for a few more moments. While Abeke gaped at the man before him, Jeremiah Hara had a devilish smile on his face.

The general known as the Fist of God opened the passenger door of the Prado and beckoned at the former captive. “Get inside. I'll personally drive you to your home.”

He waited until Abeke was seated, then he climbed in behind the steering and slammed the door shut. The car purred softly as it came alive. General Jeremiah Hara reversed the Prado and sped off into the twilight while his passenger sat stunned and stared unseen ahead. Lost in thought. It was an understatement to say that she was still in shock.

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It was only after her release that Abeke fully grasped the final and unexpected twist in the nation's unfolding drama. Just three days before General Hara's anticipated visit, the military struck without warning, toppling Victor Hara's government in a bloodless coup d'état. The swiftness of the coup left the nation reeling, but for political prisoners like Abeke, it marked an unexpected liberation. The new power structure was headed by the general Jeremiah Hara, known as the Fist of God who had emerged as the coup's backbone,. But the majority of the plotters were young, ambitious military officers. These officers compelled the Generals and senior military leaders, who had been staunch supporters of the ousted regime, to retire immediately. In an attempt to restore a semblance of order and legitimacy, a new date for national elections was promptly set, bringing a tentative and fragile peace to the land.

Despite this newfound peace, the atmosphere remained charged with tension. The ringleaders of the League of Spartacus, a formidable insurgent group, declared their unwillingness to lay down arms until the election results were made clear. This declaration cast a shadow over the fragile peace, as citizens who had fled the conflict-ridden cities began to trickle back. Major urban centers such as Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt, Kaduna, Kano, and Abuja had transformed into disaster zones. As Abeke drove through the ruins of her city, she was confronted with scenes of devastation. Overturned and burnt-out cars dotted the streets, while bombed-out skyscrapers loomed as grim monuments to the recent strife. Corpses in various stages of decay littered the sidewalks, a stark reminder of the human toll. Abeke found herself muttering prayers of gratitude for the safety of her husband and daughter, who had somehow escaped the worst of the violence. News reports from other parts of the country confirmed that this grim tableau was not unique to her city.

The devastation testified testament to the people's determination to achieve democracy at all costs. Despite widespread skepticism, many held on to a fragile hope that the upcoming elections could mark a turning point. However, only a handful of people truly believed that the military would conduct a free and fair election. Abeke, in particular, harbored deep mistrust towards General Hara. The fact that he had overthrown his own brother did little to change her impression of him. She couldn't shake the suspicion that he had ulterior motives. Rumors circulated that the junta intended to entrench itself in power indefinitely, casting further doubt on their intentions. Yet, political parties across the nation began feverishly preparing for the elections, driven by a desperate hope for change.

In the midst of these preparations, the air was thick with political maneuvering and backroom deals. Candidates emerged, each vying for the support of a weary and wary populace. Campaign posters plastered the walls of crumbling buildings, and rallies drew crowds despite the lingering dangers. Abeke watched these developments with a mix of hope and cynicism. She knew the path to a truly democratic nation would be fraught with challenges, but she also understood that the people’s resolve had been steeled by their suffering.

As election day approached, the nation held its breath. The streets buzzed with anticipation, fear, and cautious optimism. Abeke and her fellow citizens knew that the outcome of these elections could either herald a new dawn of democracy or plunge the country back into chaos. For Abeke, the journey had been long and arduous, but she remained determined to see it through, hopeful that her beloved nation could finally find the peace and prosperity it so desperately needed.

In the meantime, the Hope For Tomorrow Alliance was bursting at the seams with new members while the ruling party’s membership dwindled to only a handful of stalwarts. At the same time, other candidates arose who hoped to capitalize on the current situation to upstage Abeke and her political party.

Victor Hara had fled the country, so his party had to field a new candidate. Senator Richard Omeruwa had supposedly travelled to the UK on health grounds and wouldn't be returning anytime soon. In the meantime, Borang Sisalo's return to Nigeria became a highly publicised and celebrated event.

When the elections were eventually held six months after the coup, Abeke won eighty five percent of the votes. On the day she was sworn in, she dedicated her victory to Margaret Timein and the hundreds of common people who had made the ultimate sacrifice in an effort to bring true democracy to Nigeria. It was her day of joy but she couldn’t stop the tears from flowing because Maggie wasn’t around to see it.

TWENTY NINE: THE LAST ENEMY

The wedding ceremony unfolded with all the pomp and grandeur befitting the occasion. Franca, radiant in white, felt like she was floating as she glided down the aisle accompanied by her father. The air literally tingled with excitement. She had never been this happy before. Indeed, today was a dream come true. Borang, resplendent in his tailored suit, stood at the altar, his heart pounding with excitement and nerves.

The priest led them through their vows and the church broke into applause as the couple kissed. And then chaos erupted as a group of men clad in red stormed into the church and made their way to the front. They were dressed in red and armed with cutlasses and pistols. The ushers quickly scampered out of their way as the newcomers marched through the aile. An apprehensive hush descended over the church and a feeling of dread replaced the joyous occasion.

Borang's heart missed a beat as he sighted their leader. They hadn't met in over a year but the man hadn't changed at all. It was none other than Cyrus Boro. The Cyrus who had imprisoned him in his enclave and almost succeeded in feeding him to crocodiles.

The man shoved the priest aside and fixed Borang a look that made his blood run cold. "Hello Borang." He called out, his words echoing through the stunned silence. "So we meet again."

"What do you want?" Borang demanded.

"You." The man demanded without hesitation.

"What do you want with me?"

The imposing man didn't bother with an answer. He simply waved his pistol at Borang and told him to start moving.

The bride, her parents and the groom's parents were bewildered and hurt by this sudden interference. They pleaded with the man to let the groom go.

He ignored them all and blew Franca a kiss. Then he told her. "I was paid for his execution but he escaped before I could do my job."

"Please don't kill him." Franca sobbed.

"He's a dead man walking." He replied as he ordered the groom to walk down the aisle while his men followed him.

He forced Borang out of the church at gunpoint, leaving a trail of fear and uncertainty behind. The sun was shining merrily outside, but the cold glare of Borang's abductors brought nothing but depression into his soul. He wondered whether it was going to be his last day on earth. He felt sad. After all he'd been through. After doing his part to bring democracy to the country and after cheating death in Cyrus's enclave and after succeeding in getting the approval of Franca's parents to marry their daughter, was he to die like a chicken on his happiest day on earth?

Borang knew this man. He was cold blooded to the core of his being. This man who fed many captives to crocodiles and shot others dead wouldn't hesitate to kill him. Borang made the same decision he had made a year ago all over again. If today was to be his last day on earth, he would rather die fighting although there were no guarantees that he was going to survive. A white Liteace bus was waiting among the several vehicles at the parking lot. A couple of men in red clothes loitered around it. They were obviously waiting for Cyrus. Borang instantly knew that if he entered that vehicle, he was a dead man.

Cyrus pushed him towards the bus but he refused to budge. Cyrus's expression became unpleasant. "Move, damn you!" He yelled.

"No, I'm not going anywhere." Borang was emphatic even though he was apprehensive that the man might shoot him dead anytime.

"You want to die?"

"You're going to kill me anyway, aren't you?" Borang's tone was defiant now. "You'd better do it here."

Cyrus pointed the pistol at him. "Move now."

Borang faced his adversary with a calmness that he didn't feel. He stared down the barrel of the pistol with a racing heart, nonetheless he refused to cower in the face of intimidation. "No."

Cyrus struck swiftly with the butt of the weapon in his hand. Borang stumbled backwards and fell. Blood flowed from a cut on his face and stained his suit. Despite the brutal assault, he rose to his feet, bloodied but unbowed, his voice a defiant challenge to Cyrus's cruelty. "I haven't wronged you yet you're after my life. Like a crouching beast, you've waited until the best day of my life to destroy my joy. Pull the trigger if that's what you want, Cyrus. I'm not going anywhere with you."

Cyrus struck Borang with the gun again and he fell. "You bastard!" The crime lord raged. "Nobody ever escapes me and you did. You ran away with my car and knocked down one of my men, killing him as you fled. You exposed my half brother to the authorities and he's going to hang for sure. And because of you, a twenty million naira bounty is on my head from none other but the president herself." He pulled back the safety catch of the gun and levelled it at Borang's bloodied head. "You're daring me to shoot you?" He lowered the weapon a moment before the gun belched flame and thunder. The crowd yelled and rushed to a safer distance. Some people fled back into the church sanctuary. Borang's scream pierced the air as the bullet plowed a furrow through his left shoulder. Blood spurted from the wound and further stained his wedding suit.

A woman in white wedding gown broke through the crowd and ran towards the trouble spot. She threw herself between Cyrus and Borang, shielding the wounded man with her body. "No." She sobbed bitterly while Borang's blood soaked and stained her white bridal gown.

"Understand me, rich girl," Cyrus spat. "you're nothing but trash standing between me and my target. I'll crush you. I mean I'll shoot you if you don't move now."

She was adamant. "No!"

He shrugged with a toothed grin. "Then nothing will give me more pleasure than to hurt and kill Borang Sisalo's girl."

Rather than budge, she placed her face on Borang's heart. The roar of engines filled the air as a group of bikers dressed in leather jackets rode into the church compound. More and more and more bikers kept pouring into the church premises until the roar of their vehicles sounded like a thousand industrial engines at work. Borang kept counting them as they rode in until he stopped at the last man who was number sixty two. The gang of bikers quickly surrounded the parties in the current face-off while their menacing presence washed over the environment like a tidal wave. Among them, the unmistakable figure of Timba emerged. He stopped at the head of the vast throng and alighted from his Harley motorcycle. The other bikers brandished pistols and said nothing as they took in the sight before them.

Cyrus's men were starting to fidget at the presence of this massive throng.

A terrible silence settled on the place and then, Timba bellowed. "Who dares assault my sister and her husband on their wedding day?"

Cyrus, his face contorted with rage, leveled his pistol at Timba, his finger trembling on the trigger. "Get the hell out of here!" He spat, his voice dripping with venom.

In response, almost every biker in the place raised their weapons in unison, the metallic click of safety catches being pulled back echoing through the air like a chorus of impending doom.

But Timba's laughter cut through the tension like a knife, its harsh edges belying the merriment it sought to convey. "You messed with the wrong family, dude." He declared, his voice laced with a deadly seriousness that sent shivers down the spines of all who heard it.

Turning to address Cyrus's men, Timba's voice took on a chilling edge. "A second batch of my men are coming." He announced, his words carrying a grim finality. "They'll be here very soon. You have the opportunity to drop your weapons and surrender." He taunted, a cruel smirk playing at the corners of his lips. "If you're so loyal to your leader, you can stay and die with him before the police arrive."

Cyrus pointed his pistol at him. "Get the hell out of here!"

"Go ahead and shoot." Timba merrily replied. "I might die with a bullet through my heart but you will certainly die with over sixty bullets in you if my men shoot once. If they shoot twice, that equals a hundred and twenty bullets. Imagine if they decide to shoot five times..."

A sound like the buzz of a million bees interrupted him and drowned out their conversation. A few heartbeats later, the newcomers arrived at the church. They were a new set of motorcyclists dressed in leather jackets like their predecessors.

Their arrival resembled an unstoppable wave of metal, flooding every corner with their imposing presence. The roar of their engines echoed through the air, resembling the relentless buzz of numerous chainsaws. As they claimed every available space, their aura of dominance permeated the surroundings. With each rev of their engines, they announced their arrival with an unmistakable intensity, leaving no doubt about who was in charge.

This frightening development and Timba's taunt sobered the crime lord. The air crackled with tension as Cyrus, his hatred for Timba burning like a wildfire, lowered his weapon and glared at his adversary with undisguised loathing. The arrival of the new batch of bikers only served to heighten the sense of impending violence, their presence a tangible reminder of the formidable force arrayed against Cyrus and his men.

As the bikers continued to pour into the church premises like a tide of iron and steel, Cyrus's men realized the futility of their situation. With resignation, they began to throw down their weapons, their faces grim with defeat as the bikers closed in to disarm them.

Meanwhile, the groom rose to his feet, his protective instincts kicking into overdrive as he led his bride to safety, his mind racing with thoughts of how to extricate themselves from the dangerous situation unfolding around them.

Timba, his eyes burning with righteous fury, approached Cyrus with measured steps, his voice cold and commanding. "You should have stayed hidden in your dirty forest hideout," He admonished, his words dripping with disdain. "instead of pursuing a vendetta with people who did nothing to offend you."

But Cyrus, consumed by his thirst for vengeance, remained unrepentant. "This isn't over yet." He snarled, his voice a guttural growl of menace. "I'll kill you."

"Drop your weapon and stop making silly threats." Timba ordered.

"You're only lucky you have all these guys backing you up." Cyrus's frustration was evident as he spoke. He dropped the gun but there was defiance and bitterness on his face over the fact that his vendetta had been thwarted.

"Understand me, Cyrus, it ends today and it ends now." Timba declared.

"What are you going to do?" Cyrus taunted. "You going to arrest me? Why don't you face me like a man and allow me to kick your butts?"

Timba chuckled merrily. "Kicking you around would have been my greatest pleasure today. But I'm trying to clean up my acts. Besides, it's my sister's day of joy." He was grinning now. "Sorry dude."

Cyrus turned in Borang's direction. "Understand this. I'm coming back for you. And when I do, I'll kill you and your wife and everyone you hold dear."

"I'd better kill you first." Timba said, raising his gun and taking aim at the crime lord.

Cyrus visibly cringed and raised both hands. "Are you crazy?" He yelled.

"Prepare to meet your God." Timba replied without remorse.

Cyrus looked frantically around for possible avenues of escape and then remembered that he couldn't outrun a bullet. He began to sweat.

He yelled and closed his eyes as Timba pulled the trigger. There was a loud click and nothing else. After a few moments, he opened his eyes in confusion. He was clearly surprised that he was still alive and unwounded.

"You and your guys just got suckered." Timba merrily announced.

"I don't understand." Cyrus Boro said hesitantly.

Timba flung the gun at the crime lord's feet. "We captured you and your boys with nothing but toy guns." With a grin, he explained further. "I'm an actor. Me and my boys are just coming from the location of my latest project. Those guns were for our use during the shoot."

There was stunned silence at first. Then most of those present broke into laughter as the bikers waved their toy guns in the air. There was an expression on Cyrus' face that eloquently testified to the humiliation and anger that he felt. He had been effectively tricked by this individual and then robbed of getting his revenge. And now he was an object of mockery. There wasn't much his men could do again because they had been disarmed and were vastly outnumbered.

With a fierce determination burning in his eyes, Cyrus tore himself away from Timba and charged towards Borang and the bride, leaving a chorus of surprise and alarm in his wake. His mind was consumed by a singular purpose: Borang must die, and he would see it through to the bitter end.

As he closed in on his target, Borang's instincts kicked into overdrive. With lightning reflexes, he pushed Franca aside and deftly evaded Cyrus's swinging fist, narrowly dodging the deadly blow aimed at his face. Cyrus staggered with the force of his attack and he struggled frantically to regain his balance.

In a swift and calculated move, Borang struck back, stamping his foot down hard on Cyrus's right foot, eliciting a gut-wrenching howl of pain from the crime lord. As Cyrus stumbled, Borang seized the moment to deliver a decisive blow, sending him crashing to the ground with a resounding thud.

Cyrus writhed in agony, his face contorted with pain as he attempted to rise to his feet. But it was clear that his leg had been severely injured in the altercation, rendering him incapacitated and vulnerable.

Meanwhile, a group of bikers from Timba's faction swiftly approached, their expressions hardened with resolve as they closed in on the fallen crime lord. They seized Cyrus and hoisted him off the ground, carrying him towards the waiting bus that had brought his men to the scene.

With Cyrus safely secured inside the bus, Timba's men wasted no time in dealing with the remaining threat. They swiftly rounded up Cyrus's bewildered and disoriented men, forcefully ushering them into the bus. @@@

As the sound of fast approaching sirens filled the air, signaling the imminent arrival of law enforcement, Timba's men swiftly sprang into action. With practiced efficiency, they secured the doors of the bus and deflated its tires, effectively immobilizing it. With the reality of police intervention looming, they knew they had to act quickly to ensure none of Cyrus' men could escape.

Turning to Borang, Timba handed him the keys to the bus, a gesture that caught Borang off guard. "What's this for?" Borang wondered, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"Consider it my wedding gift to you." Timba replied with a sly grin.

Borang's hesitation was evident as he struggled to make sense of Timba's unexpected gesture. "Are you joking? I don't need this kind of gift." He protested, his voice tinged with uncertainty.

But Timba was resolute. Gesturing towards the bus crammed full of Cyrus Boro and his gang members, he explained, "There's a twenty million naira bounty on Cyrus's head alone. When the police arrive, all you need to do is hand them the key to the bus. The whole world is watching. They'll be your witness that Cyrus and his boys were arrested on your account."

Borang's eyes widened in shock as he processed Timba's words. "But it was your doing." He exclaimed, his voice tinged with disbelief.

"Enough arguing." Timba retorted firmly. "You know I don't need the money. But I'm sure it can make a difference in your life. Take the key and ensure justice is served."

In that moment, all former animosity between the brothers-in-law melted away. Timba clasped Borang's hand firmly, pressing the key into his palm.

"I thought you hated me." Borang said to his brother in law.

"Oh, I really hated your guts. But I think I'm falling in love with that same gut now." The two men hugged affectionately.

As the bikers erupted into cheers, Borang's thoughts turned to the woman who had captured his heart and made his life worth living. Franca hurried towards him, her eyes shining with love and pride. She shared a 'thank you' hug with her brother and then threw herself into Borang's hands. He caught her without hesitation in his arms, holding her close in a fierce embrace. This was a love they had fought for from the very beginning, and now, on the first day of their marriage, they were determined to cherish every moment of it.

Amidst the cheers of the spectators, Borang and Franca shared a tender kiss, oblivious to the cameras capturing their moment of bliss. For in that moment, they were simply grateful to be alive and together. Their parents and family and friends converged around them as they gazed at each other. Nothing else and no one else existed in that shared gaze except the two of them.

The noise of multiple sirens drew nearer and became almost deafening. But no one minded now. After all, it was a new Nigeria and a new season in the life of Mr and Mrs Borang Sisalo.

THE END

AN ORCHESTRA FOR THE HURRICANE

In the heart of Nigeria's political arena, Abeke's bid for the presidency sparks a firestorm of opposition and intrigue. With her ex-husband and political adversaries determined to see her fail, Abeke's resilience is put to the test. But as the nation descends into chaos, her popularity soars, fueled by the passion of her supporters and the unwavering dedication of people like Borang Sisalo, a charismatic political activist and some other courageous souls. Together and individually, they defy the odds and confront the harsh realities of power and privilege that stand on their way to love and the building of a better nation. As they battle their personal and collective demons, they boldly forge a path towards a brighter future for Nigeria with the conviction that love and leadership can conquer even the greatest of challenges. But the price is steeper than anybody expected.

ABOUT AKINLOLU OLOWOOKERE

Akinlolu is a multifaceted creative force, seamlessly blending his roles as an author, musician, , and educationist. With an unparalleled flair for immersive and cinematic storytelling, Akinlolu intricately weaves together fiction and true life experiences to craft compelling narratives.

Under the pen-name Akinlolu, he actively contributes to the vibrant community of writers on writerscafe.org, enriching the platform with a diverse array of poetry and stories that captivate and inspire readers.

If you would like to contact Akinlolu, his email address is akinloluspeaks@gmail.com