

# **DUST DEVIL**

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to all who refused to give up HOPE.

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# CHAPTER 1



Citizens tiptoed around the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. It was a sunny Friday in November. The foliage of most trees was turning brownish. Early that afternoon, he sat on a bench, oozing sweat from every pore on his skin, 'watering himself' outside the car porch, as he termed his water sipping habit. A gust of hot dry wind swept all over the premises and around him. Dust, debris, and every other loose matter began to loft in an upward swirling column of wind some one hundred meters away. Jude squinting his eyes against the harsh rays of the sun, watching the swirling intensify, rising higher and higher. The swirling column was coming towards him. He could hear the sound of the rushing wind as it gathered speed. It whirled forward, and came too close towards him for comfort. Jude Started. He sprang up, glass in hand, and rushed into the adjoining room. He shut the door tight, surprised at his own apprehension and reaction. He stood so still with his back to the door, breathing. Was it the swirling wind, the debris in it, or the bright red papers thrown everywhere in the city lofting in it?

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Somewhere, at the back of his mind, he seemed to think it was the name.

However, a strong feeling of déjà vu welled up within him. It has happened this way before, he thought. So, what is next? Debris began to rain onto the roof. He knew the swirling wind was subsiding. Jude felt if he went out of the bungalow, he would find 'something,' as he did somehow, sometime in the vague past. What was that? When the violence in the wind ebbed, he opened the door and stepped out squinting his eyes against the brightness of the sun. Jude scanned the area for that 'something' with intense curiosity in his eyes.

Bright red flyers laid strewn among the rubbish delivered by the violent wind. He has seen them before. What else was there to see, he asked himself, picking up one of the crisp red pieces of paper? The clear text on it read, "This is a sacrosanct promise of a new dawn in Nigeria. A new dawn characterized by a 'phenomenal good..." Below, the words 'DUST DEVIL' stood out in ominous black letters. Jude dreaded the rubbish-laden dry wind in his childhood. It seemed inherently evil. He never thought it safe to walk through one. Now that he has grown a man, something more

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sinister lurked in the name 'Dust devil.' It meant something that made you hold your breath. The name, pulsating with a life of its own, spread cold fear nationwide. It referred to a secret organization that made its existence known in the country through its red flyers.

Dust devil encouraged separatist agitations in all parts of the country. It incited protests and undermined the incumbent government's credibility in many ways. It urged the citizens to see the moment as the darkest hour before dawn, after which the good life for all would begin. That is, if the country remained intact till then. It arrogated the mandate to institute good governance in the country to itself if the separatists decided to remain Nigerians. The Dust devil. Where was its lair? No one knew.

Jude was among the secret agents assigned to sniff out the mysterious members of the Dust devil. He thought the assignment was an unusual flame. The selected agents were moths. He; one moth to which this particular flame held no attraction. The organization dominated whispers and was never mentioned aloud anywhere. The members were neither seen nor heard, but their presence felt as real as labor-pain, nationwide. They were everywhere according to the country's rich grapevine information system.

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Whomsoever they were, the selected secret agents were to find them, the authorities would take it from there. The authorities credited most of the rampant abductions, kidnappings, and oil bunkering to their unseen presence. But It was no easy task tackling a faceless foe.

When an anonymous letter reached the presidency, threatening the 'phenomenal good' to Nigerians and Nigeria soon, it shook the very corridor of power in the country. It did not augur well for her constitution, especially as the country was gearing up for elections slated for early 2015. The chief security adviser to the president convened an emergency meeting with stakeholders behind closed doors. The outcome, a secret network of thirty-six agents, created to solve the 'phenomenal good' puzzle.

As secret as the authorities claimed to have made the network, each member received a letter from Dust devil. The letters, written on red crisp sheets of paper, bore the same message. Unseen hands to each member's abode delivered them. It was a combination of threats and an appeal to reason: threats of fire and brimstones, on the one hand, a plea to key into the 'phenomenal good agenda on the other hand. The bottom line, a warning of the consequences of meddling with an unseen foe. The warning came one week

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after the network was formed and was about to begin its operations and investigations. A fact that shows that the existence of the network is an open secret. The Dust devil knows of the network and its members! An index that means the presidency has a mole or more in it. Subsequently, the monster of deep distrust reared its ugly head at the presidency, eroding the very basis for the selection of the members of the network. One sunny afternoon, Jude found his threat letter tucked under the corrugated iron door of his rented apartment, addressed to him. He notified his superior and learned that every other member received the same letter. Three days later, he received a letter of discharge from service. It was highly publicized. Unexpectedly, it hit him very hard. The letter ordered him to return all the government property in his possession within forty-eight hours. He would get his entitlement in monetary terms thereafter it readd. End of the road in the service of the federal government of Nigeria. He did not like it, especially as they based his discharge upon unconfirmed suspicion. He knew better than trying to exonerate himself anyway. Jude began to prepare for his departure following the discharge instructions to the letter with a heavy heart...

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The next morning, he lay awake, his skin tingling from the still, cold air in the room. The alarm of his smartphone went off. It was 5:00 a.m. He got decisively out of the bed, took a quick shower, and dressed up. A white vest tucked into a pair of coffee-colored corduroy trousers stretched over his broad shoulders. He put on a black Nike jacket over it and slipped his feet into his favorite pairs of rubber-soled moccasin shoes. The fresh scent of Anaconda bathing soap still hung around him. Jude shrugged his shoulders. Picking up his nap sack, he looked at himself in the mirror. He could not read his poker face. By the front door of the bungalow, he cast a final glance at the things in the sitting room. The courier service would have them delivered to his hometown in a few days, he thought. On his own, he loved traveling ultra-light. He unhooked the security chain, turned the doorknob, and pulled the door open.

Cold odorless wind streamed in through the opening door. The muzzle of a snub-nosed .38 floated in, held by a whitish hand, pointed at his heart. Jude froze, surprised. The door pushed further open and a thirty-some man stepped into the sitting room. The perfume he wore overthrew the scent of Jude's bathing soap. Goldheart, Jude thought. He'd recognize its musky fragrance anytime anywhere. An albino

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stood before him. He was well short of five feet. The bulges under his tight-fitting leaf-green T-shirt made up well enough for what he lacked in height. Behind him, a seven-footer crowded through the door too, also, holding an automatic pistol. Jude took a few steps backward. He thought they looked too clean and healthy for some hungry scallywags. But gunmen were gunmen all the same. Their clothes, pressed, hinted at class. "Who are you?"

"I'm Oracle. That's Cross, " said the midget in a dead voice, pointing a chubby finger at his companion

"What do you want?"

"It's a pity you got unpopular. You were tossed off the bandwagon. Just like that."

"Just like that," echoed the seven-footer, "but someone thinks it'll hurt to miss you. Will you come with us, please?"

Jude's eyes roved over the duo as they talked. They were bizarre masses of muscles in their respective ways. Bodybuilders: a midget and a giant. That was all right, he told himself. The danger was in their guns, he thought and respected that. The enigmatic smile on the seven-footer's thick lips was both conspicuous and unnerving.

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“Whomsoever you are, whatsoever you want, I don’t have it. I’ve got to hit the road.”

“Of course. You will ‘hit the road’ with us,” said the midget. Still pointing his gun at Jude’s heart, he stepped around him, cool and calm as a frog. “Okay. Let’s ‘hit the road.’ There’s much risk in resisting, get it?” He nodded towards the door. Jude did not like the sound of his voice. He could not read his restless blue eyes. The seven-footer moved aside and Jude walked out of the door. The duo ushered him to a black 4-door saloon with tinted glasses. It parked right outside the gated fence of the yard, behind a cluster of cactus trees. Rays of the sun glistened on its polished black body. It was a Renault 21. The seven-footer stooped, opened the boot, and brought out a black snakeskin briefcase. Jude watched him undo the latches on it and brought out ten cellophane parcels of whitish powdery stuff, still smiling. The seven-footer smiled some more. “Pose for a shot or two, my dude,” he said in his husky voice.

The midget prodded him to the wall of the fence with the cold rim of his gun. Then, the seven-footer piled all ten parcels into Jude’s palms and stepped backward. Jude’s face

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was an emblem of perplexity. He quipped, "what are you doing this for?"

"We want to make you eligible for the penitentiary." He brought out a Samsung galaxy prime core mobile and snapped Jude. One, two, and three from different angles. "Good, let's 'hit the road.'" He pulled out a pair of handcuffs from beneath his black leather jacket, slammed them onto Jude's wrists, and led him to the other side of the car. He made him sit beside the driver as the midget got behind the wheel and started the engine. He got into the back seat, and the car eased off. Dr. Evil's 'We A Gangsta' spilled into the car from its speakers and the midget sang along in his dead voice. He stepped on the pedal and shot the car down Herbert Macaulay lane like a bullet, towards the highway.

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Unlike the two other convicts in the Black Maria, he did not come from the courtroom. They held him incommunicado somewhere he could not figure out for two weeks. The albino and his companion brought him blindfolded in a helicopter to a dual carriage expressway. They handed him over to the police officers in a Black Maria and took off. The police officers removed his blindfold just a stone's throw

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from the prison's gate. One of the police officers jumped down from the Black Maria. He took a video of their arrival at Afara Correctional Centre' in Umuahia.

Their admission was briskly processed. They showed the convicts into their cells. Jude could not identify with his incarceration without trial. He could not figure out who was behind it. They took pictures of him at every turn. Jude noticed how meticulous they were at recording his progress' down the drain. Who wants to ruin him, he wondered in vain.

It was getting to noon the next day. He sat on a stool in his cell, fanning himself with a folded copy of Tell magazine, brooding in a solid orange uniform. Across the secure walkway that separated his cell from the ones opposite his own, he could see into the other prisoners' cells. The ones with whom he arrived were nowhere in sight. A mountainous man, also in a solid orange uniform, sat on the bunk bed in his cell. Still, like a boulder, absorbed in the magazine in his hands, he looked sculptured out of a rock. The one in the next cell stood facing the iron door of his cell, looking intently at him with a pair of somber eyes. Jude thought he looked unhappy. The man stood still, eyeing him

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longer than was appropriate without pretense. When at last he looked away and backed further into his cell, Jude felt sure that the man was in abysmal despair. He gauged his feelings and decided not to remain in the mood like a rodent in its burrow. The sounds of footsteps and a mix of low rumbling voices reached his ears from down the walkway. A prison warder appeared first, jingling a bunch of keys. Following him were, to Jude's surprise, the chief of staff to the president, Idris Gambo , a thickset bodyguard and a fair-skinned beauty of a lady. As they approached Jude's cell, the warder turned around and said something to the party. They stopped. Then, he went to the melancholic man's cell and told him something in whispers. He slotted a key into the lock and opened the cell door. The chief of staff to the president and his companions went into the cell. The warder opened the big man's cell too. The man looked at Jude for the first time, winked at him smiling a bit and came along with the warder to fetch him. "Mr. Jude Ochada, no doubt you know the chief of staff. He will have a word with us right away." His voice sounded as if it came from within a big hollow barrel.

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Jude gave him a quizzical look and repeated, “us,” savoring the word for implication. “Yes, and probably save our asses.”

The big man’s smile broadened with a twinkle in his eyes. Jude’s brain kept browsing itself for the interpretation of the drama as he searched the big man’s eyes further. Silence makes no mistakes, he told himself and shrugged visibly. The warder opened the cell and Jude stepped out gingerly, burning with hellish curiosity. The big man took the rear as they crossed over and into the melancholic man’s cell. Another surprise. The melancholic man beamed a smile that brought crow's feet to the corners of his eyes. Jude wondered about the mood swing.

“Do have a seat, everybody.” It was the chief of staff. “Mr. Jude Ochada, the presidency owes you an apology. Our privacy has been compromised. And we have an unforgiving situation at hand. There’s no stopping us. We must find and identify the members of the Dust devil, and stop the evil they styled ‘The phenomenal good.’ How can we do that under their looking glass? We cannot. That is why we are hibernating: the media is full of the trumped-up charges against you, and news of your imprisonment. It’s all

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cosmetics. You will work with White and Bam here to solve this riddle. Like you, they are well trusted, but unlike you, they do not officially feature on the government's payroll. There was no need to disengage them. You have only just joined their rank and the presidency assures you of your full rights and privileges as usual. Your imprisonment being a decoy, nothing has changed other than that you now live here in the prison, until we succeed."

Jude was almost drunk in the rich baritone of the chief of staff's voice. It was suiting, and the content it delivered was elating: he has not been truly relieved of his job. That was okay in its way. What was not okay was the crisis of trust in his mind. He kept a poker face. What if these were the faces behind the iron mask on the Dust devil, he thought. I'll find out, he told himself. "Thank you, Chief. Is my director in the know about this?"

"Hibernation is, of course, his brainchild. Are you in?"

Jude gave the party a sweeping glance. "No."

"No? Add a 'w,' it becomes 'now' Jude," rumbled Bam, "we're the new network. Chief is asking you out of courtesy. You have no choice. Duty is duty, believe me."

"That, I appreciate, but no."

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“You seem to have a lot of doubts, Jude,” said White, “I’ll help clear your doubts. Here.”

White reached out a hand and pulled a grey silk curtain aside behind him. The image of the director of the State Secret Service, Adams Adigun, showed live on a laptop monitor. He has been virtually present all the while. His stentorian voice issued clearly from the external speaker attached to the laptop, “Jude, I’m with you. Your incrimination and imprisonment was an unavoidable evil. We had to get you underground to give you space to work your magic unobserved. You will be able to go in and out of the prison yard at will while you’re on it. Consider the yard a safe house. I’ll be coming to see you at my earliest convenience, Jude. In the meantime, start working. Bam and White will bring you up to speed, and work with you. Are you with me?”

“Give me some time to think, boss.”

“Think on your feet, Jude, we’re running out of time. You have the chief of staff with you to stamp the reality and urgency of the matter at hand. The presidency appreciates your sacrifice a great deal. Have I cleared your doubts?”

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“I can’t say yes, boss. You said I’ll be able to go in and out of here at will. I will answer you in a day or two, sir.”

“Have your day or two. Nothing more.” To the warder, the director said, “equip him.”

The chief of staff rose. So did his two companions. “I will see you again soon. Ask for anything you want from Roy.”

The warder who had been silent all the while extended a hand. Jude took it and felt the grip was stronger than the man’s looks. They locked eyes for a brief moment. The chief of staff nodded and stepped out of the cell with his companions. The warder ushered them out through the secure walkway, leaving Jude behind with Bam and White.

It was Bam who broke the brief silence. He rumbled, “You are as free as a bird on the first flight. You’ve heard it. stop running a ‘victim mentality’ and let’s get busy. As a trumped-up career criminal, my crimes are worse than yours. I’m a burst sex trafficker with links to the Middle East. A trade I’ve done for too long, and enough reason for long term imprisonment. Yours is just a first time offender with ten parcels of coke. Something a federal agent shouldn’t do.”

“Interesting, what’s White’s criminal history?”

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They both looked at White as he was shutting down the laptop. He in turn looked at them, froze, and switched on the melancholic look that Jude once saw. Jude thought his question touched some nerves, but Bam roared with such a burst of boisterous laughter that made White unable to continue the acting. His shoulders rocked violently as he burst out laughing too. Jude looked repeatedly from one person to the other, shook his head, and joined the laughter, catching on. When their laughter died, he did not drop the question. He spoke directly to White, "What's your criminal career?"

"Well, my past caught up with me. I have this knack for falsifying autopsies for money. Too bad."

"Too bad," Jude concurred, "are you a pathologist?"

"You can say it again. Let's take a break for now. See you both at night, I've got work to do."

The bunk bed creaked as Bam heaved his bulk up. Jude rose too. They went out of White's cell just as the warder was returning. He gave Jude the box in his hand, ushered them into their different cells, and locked them up. "Are you Roy?" Jude asked.

"Surely Roy," answered the warder on his way off.

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This wing of the prison yard was virtually untenanted, except for them. Jude could hear sounds from other wings. Seated on the bed bunk in his cell, he opened the box. It was full of clothes, toiletries, and a brand new LG G3 mobile phone. He dug further into the box. At the bottom, wrapped in a thick hand towel was a CZ-75. Jude thought the small gun was better than nothing. He crammed everything back into the box and lay on the bunk bed to reconstruct things. He slipped into a much-needed slumber from which Bam later awakened him. "I'm sorry, it's time to meet with White."

Jude dragged himself out of bed. Roy opened his cell and he went out. Bam followed him into White's cell. They sat on the bed as White spoke. "While Jude's having his time off, he has to keep abreast with whatever we plan. Time is running out. And we're tasked with identifying members of the Dust devil at the very least."

"Where do we begin?" asked Bam.

"I believe if you know what you're looking for, you can always find it. Now, you have no names, no descriptions, nothing. Well, I'm not in yet. But if you must begin, and you

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don't know how to start, start how you know." Jude was reluctant to commit himself.

Bam and White exchanged glances. "Okay, but feel free to suggest something off the record. You're being too careful, I see," said White.

"Anyway," answered Jude, "I may have something to say when I return from where I'm going." "You aren't going out alone. I'm coming with you."

"Capital NO! I'll not have you shadow me, Bam." "I'm not, but we can't afford to lose you."

"Besides, you're not in yet," said White with a lopsided smile, "You'll be free to roam when we're sure you're in."

"The outing will help me make up my mind," Jude said. He observed white's brow furrowed as he cocked his head to the right. Bam, squatting on White's bunk bed, a giant toad cast in stone, listened too. His eyes, mere slits on his taut pensive face. "Mamba's here," he rumbled.

The staccato of some female shoes reached them from the secure walkway and soon, a woman appeared. Her lips naturally pouty on her oval face told two tales at a time: sexuality and temper. She walked into the cell with

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something like a cat's cautiousness as Roy came running up. Her voice, when it came, was sonorous and strong. "Good evening everybody," she said, "Jude's in, White and Bam. He will go wherever he wants but disguised. Don't think for him." She looked at each man, in turn, buttressing her statement with a challenge in her smoky eyes. She continued, "I'm Lynda Onah, "I won't have you dragging your feet Mr. Jude Ochada. We're in this together, and I want proactive action. Make up your mind right away; the road to hell is paved with good intentions, you know."

Jude wondered how she knew what was transpiring among them. "What exactly are you?"

"The Director-General of the State Secret Service will tell you by himself, soon enough. Meanwhile, come with Roy to my cell. Let's see before you go out." She turned around and walked away like a woman who can go where no man can go, leaving the men impressed with her cat-like steps. "Mamba," Bam rumbled again.

"Does she have a criminal history too?" Jude was intrigued.

## CHAPTER 2



**M**any questions needed answers that were not forthcoming. Jude, feeling ratty, sat listening. He observed her every expression in the dimness of the cell. A fair face may hide a foul heart, he thought, as Lynda paused and ran her tongue over her lips. She sat exuding the mild fragrance of Happiness, an oil based top quality perfume, made in Nigeria. She raised the Dr. Pepper bottle in her hand to her mouth, drank from it and continued, "...understand the urgency of the matter at hand, and start working. We don't want a replay of the 11/11 USA saga here, do we?"

Jude exhaled slowly. His dirt brown eyes steadied on her own smoky eyes. "Why do you think such a thing could play out here?"

"The handwriting is all over the wall. The 'phenomenal good' is an ironic phrase. The Dust Devil threatened the thirty-six officers selected to find its members. Its members are closer to us than we knew, and they mean no good. Should we take that lying low?" She took another swig of the

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soft drink with her smoky eyes fixed on Jude. "How did they know about the network? "

"The infamous 'hand of God.'"

"Exactly," concurred Lynda in the middle of a smile that didn't reach her smokey eyes. She put down the bottle in her hand with a tiny clink upon the glass topped table. "Shall we be fiddling while Rome burns?"

Jude thought she was drop-dead gorgeous. He put her about the late thirties and fit looking. "I'll know my stance when I return. I said so."

"Come off your high horse, man. And if I may ask, what's so important about your outing and where are you going?"

"Private business." He locked eyes with her and seemed to look into an esoteric world. Jude dropped his gaze thinking, what a woman as he felt the slight stir of his blood.

"Well, there's no stopping you, but don't blow your cover. There might be repercussions," Lynda said.

"I won't," he answered. "The two guys that came for me in Abuja..." "Aha! What about them?"

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“One’s Oracle, the other’s Cross. May I ask out of curiosity? Who are they?” “They’re ‘Insiders,’ period. Forget about them.” It was an order.

Jude searched her smoky eyes again. Again, he saw only mystery. “Very well... Excuse me.” “Quite,” she said, reaching out with an ATM card, “the PIN’s 2345, you may reset it.”

He got up, collected it, and said, “thanks.” He walked out of Lynda’s cell and found Roy with Bam and White. It was getting to 6:00 p.m. “I’ll need a bike.”

“Available,” said Roy. He came out of White’s cell. “When do we expect you back?” “Before midnight.”

“Okay.”

Jude went to his cell. He picked the mobile phone, the CZ-75 handgun, and put on a blue hooded jacket from the box that Roy gave to him.

“Don’t go setting booby traps for stray girls, man!” It was Bam’s guttural rumble as he went along with Roy for the motorcycle. Jude was not in the mood. He went with Roy the opposite direction to the wing that held the real convicts, through a corridor that led into another. They came to the

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entrance of the prison yard. The guards let Jude out without batting an eyelid. Roy rolled out an old looking Honda CD 200 Road Master. Jude, surprised, sat astride it, wondering where Roy got it. He kick-started the bike just once. It came to life like a bull at action stations, vibrating under him as he revved it, engaged the first gear and rode into the night.

Preferring to be careful, Jude rode the bike between 40 to 50 km/h. However, the caution was more about the current assignment: to find members of the Dust devil. Basic trust shattered, made way for rabid suspicion. Everyone, he told himself, was a suspect. Oracle and Cross, Bam and White, Lynda and Roy. The chief of staff to the president and the DG-SSS were no exception. These people know him; he does not know them. This is where Idle comes in. He, Jude, wasn't going to sit with his back to the door. The LG G3 mobile phone and the SIM card given to him too, were 'suspects.' To reach Idle, he needed a new SIM card and phone, fresh from the store. A phone booth will do now though. He cruised for a while and turned onto the quiet traffickless highway. A sign-post read BENDE ROAD, UMUAHIA. He found a phone booth and parked. "Hi," he said to the young man in the booth.

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“Good evening sir...”

“I’ll make a call or two. Do you have SIM cards?”

“Yes.” The young man pushed the phone towards him on the counter. “Which network?” “MTN” Jude punched numbers from memory and waited for it to connect.

“Hello,” said a male voice that seemed to come through the nose. “Idle,” he answered.

“Jude. My goodness! I...”

“Hold it, man. I’m on transit.” Jude watched the booth keeper as he arranged some decks of recharge vouchers and thought he wasn’t listening. He turned around cradling the receiver as if talking to someone he’s fond of, perhaps a lover. He whispered, “this is a public line. We’ll talk soon enough though. I’m interested in the two fellows first. They work together, and it looks like they pump iron.”

“Got it. So?”

“Comb the presidency. Watch out for an albino body-builder and one that looks like a dark-skinned Goliath, body-builder too. The two, for now, I want to know everything about them if you find them: real names, what they do, and

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for whom they do it. Where they live, friends, everything, ASAP.

“Quite a search... If I don’t find them?”

“Keep searching... I’ll have a special number for you later.” “Will do. Are you okay?”

“Later.”

“Got it, man.”

The line went dead.

Jude pushed the desktop phone towards the booth keeper who came forward to put it in its proper place. He thought his carriage bordered on the effeminate. “Where’s the bank from here, man?”

“Library Avenue. Mainstreet bank. Just a stone throw.”  
“Thanks, I’ll need a new mobile too.”

“I’ve got some good ones.” The booth keeper brought some mobile phones out of his showcase. “Do you have any in mind?”

“Nokia Lumia.” “630.”

“Cool enough. How much?” “21k.”

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“Hmmm. Well. No big deal. The thing is, I’ll have to use the ATM first.” The booth keeper tilted his head to the right. “Hmmm.”

“Not to worry, I’m buying it. I’ll pay you for the call and the phone. The SIM card, process it before I return.”

“We don’t do that. I’ll need your details and capture your biodata.”

Jude scoffed. “No doubt, but I don’t have time. Name’s Silas Osin,” he said and wondered who named him so. “Give me a sheet of paper...”

“No sir, it’s...”

“Do it. I’ll add 3k to my total bill. I have to catch a night bus to Lagos.” “... when I see the color of your money...”

“Alright. Cash down, SIM card. Every minute counts. Do it before I return.”

Jude took directions from the young man and lurched towards his bike. He mounted, kicked and set off into the cold dark night.

The Honda CD200 was a well-oiled machine. It zoomed past a white Hilux SUV cruising in the opposite direction. Jude arrived at Mainstreet bank in about 8 minutes and

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transacted his business. Done, he started the way he had come. Rounding off the last corner into Bende road, the SUV bore into the street from which he was emerging. Again, at a cruise. Jude noticed the dark line that ran its entire length on the side towards him. He couldn't read the inscription on it. At last, he stopped before the booth, counted out a twenty-four thousand naira, and extended it to the booth keeper over a small counter. "See the color of my money."

"It's beautiful," said the young man with glee. He passed the phone and SIM card onto Jude who said his thanks and took off.

Jude, a stranger to Umuahia town, headed the other way along Bende road. He maintained a 40km/h, thinking. Twenty minutes saw him in front of a catholic church. Great, he thought and bore into the church gate. The security lights bathed the premises in white light. There was nobody in sight. Jude parked the Honda CD200 behind the gate and went into the unlit interior of the church. He loved its dark inside. for the first time, he powered on the LG G3 mobile phone that Roy gave him. There were few phone numbers saved on the phone. They included that of White and Bam.

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And of course, Roy and Lynda's. He replaced the SIM card with the one he just bought and dialed Idle's phone number.

"Hello," said the nasal voice.

"Yeah, this is the line. You can always reach me with it. I will send details of others to you for a thorough background check, and it's urgent."

"I'm waiting. What's cooking?"

"Business as usual. I'll give you the low down later. Drop dead." "Drop dead."

He removed the SIM card and slotted it into the Nokia Lumia 630, thinking he has to charge it soon. He returned the other into the LG G3 and sat back thinking. From where he sat in the dark interior of the church, he could see the well-lit frontage. Someone walked gingerly in through the gate. He seemed to be looking for something. Jude watched him looking this way and that way, then finally behind the gate where he parked the Honda CD 200. The fellow saw it. He took a brief look at it. Then, he went back out of the gate.

Jude wondered what was going on. He sprang up from his sitting position and sprinted to the church gate. He peeped to see where the fellow was and behold, he was

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walking towards the same SUV Hilux that cruised twice past him. Jude caught his breath. He wondered who the fellow was and what he wanted. He so much wanted to get a close look at the man, and the vehicle, without 'blowing his cover.' He watched the man get behind the wheel and started the vehicle. The SUV Hilux made a U-turn and headed slightly down the street. It bore right into an adjoining street and parked shortly. Jude stepped back into the church premises. No matter what, he would not let whosoever that was to have the inkling that he smelt a rat, and he has to watch his own back. He felt the CZ-75 in his waist for assurance. For the want of confidence, Jude made up his mind, started the motorcycle, and rode back the way he came. He rode at a cruise, came abreast of the street into which the SUV Hilux bore, and went past as if it wasn't there. although he was in a dire need to know what was going on. Shortly, Jude bore into a roadside school and parked beside a block of classrooms, and sat on the pavement, thinking things through. He saw the twinkling lights of a sea of glow worms on the school field to his left. By the expanse of the premises, it seemed like a public school.

Some twenty minutes later, a vehicle turned in and its headlights flooded the street. It came past the school gate at a

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cruise with a quiet rumble. Jude got up. He left the Honda CD 200 where it was. He hid himself behind a structure that seemed to be a security post. The vehicle was parked some hundred meters down the road by the low perimeter fence that surrounded the school. Jude saw that it was the same vehicle, the same fellow. He could tell by the driver's gait that the fellow was agile as he scaled the perimeter fence and crossed towards where he parked the bike. Jude pulled the CZ-75 from his waist and waited. He watched the fellow, sneaking and casting furtive glances everywhere. The fellow squatted by the Honda CD 200 and began to fiddle with the seat. Jude inched stealthily, keeping close to the wall of the long block of classrooms. When he was almost upon the fellow, he pointed his gun and said, "put your hands in the air," in a steely voice. "I mean to shoot if you don't."

Startled, the fellow sprang up, turned to face Jude. They were about seven feet apart. He asked in a terse voice, "You have a gun, uh?"

A bullet buzzed past Jude's right ear. More out of reflex action, he pulled the trigger of his own gun. He caught the fellow in the chest but he didn't go down. Rather, he returned fire once, twice, but Jude wasn't there. Jude's bullet

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again caught him in the chest. Nothing! Jude rolled over and planted a bullet in his ankle. The fellow's gun jumped out of his gun hand as another bullet caught his wrist. He cried, "Aah!"

Jude pounced upon him. He whacked his face with a backhand blow and felt the squelch of his nose bridge. He pushed him to the ground. "You asked for it."

The fellow, clutching his bleeding nose, whimpered. Jude jerked him into a sitting position and propped him against the wall of the school block. "Live or die. It's up to you. Tell me... who are you and why are you shadowing me?"

No response.

"Tell me. I'll spare your filthy life." "I'm... Jules...living... dead."

"Go ahead. Why are you following me?" "The goddess. She wanted ...to know..." "The goddess? Who's she and where's she?" "Dust devil...in the pond."

Jude sucked in a sharp breath. "Whoever you're, I didn't mean to kill you. Tell me everything, you'll live. Come on, you're losing blood..." Jude surmised that Jules or living

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dead would have the phone number of his associates, or whosoever has sent him. He felt for his phone in his pockets and pulled out a NEC e616v. He felt it vibrated as a message entered. To confirm Jude's suspicion, the message was from a GPS tracking device. A closer look showed that it was from the Honda CD 200. He rose to his full height and moved towards the motorcycle. Another message entered. The same location as the former indicated. Behind him, the living dead pulled out the device he wanted to install in the motorcycle. He removed the pin with his teeth. It went "Boom!" shattering the silence that ensued after their gun duel. Jude dived behind the motorcycle in a reflex reaction. The living dead lay disemboweled on the ground. Jude beamed the light of his phone to see. In a tearing hurry, he jumped onto the motorcycle and started it. It rumbled away into the pitch-black night, this time, like a terrified bull. Jude switched the Honda CD 200 into insanity mode the way he rode it. It surged away, rumbling its protest, for self-preservation's sake. But he slowed down not to alert the guards as he closed in on the prison yard.

They let him in without much ado, and straight, he sought out Roy. Roy was coming around the corner into his wing of the prison. "Back so soon?"

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“Green, green grass of home, was it Jim Reeves?” “Cool singer...” Roy’s breath reeked of tobacco. “You had someone tracking me, Roy.”

“Should I?”

“Search me. Who’s Jules?” “What happened?”

“Cruised past me once, twice, and came inspecting the bike where I parked it. I relocated. He came tracking the bike like a demon that never gives up.” Jude studied Roy for reactions as he spoke. “I caught him planting a bomb on the bike,”

“What happened? How did he trace you?” Roy seemed shocked.

“I said there’s a tracker on the bike. He tracked me. Did you install it? “No.”

“Who services the motorcycle for you? I mean your mechanic. I suspect him.’

“I’ll take a look. I’m sure I’m the target, Jude. Not you,” Roy said, his face, pensive. “Sure?”

“Sure. Nobody knows which prison yard you’re being held in.”

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“Okay,” said Jude, not believing himself, possessed more by the demon of rabid suspicion. “Let's check the bike for the tracker. Together, they went and brought the motorcycle out of where the guards parked it. An intense and thorough search revealed the GPS tracker. Jude detached it. “for your health,” he told Roy.

“Sure.”

Back in his cell, he observed Bam lying on his back on his bunk like a big log of wood . White was preoccupied with the laptop. He wondered what Lynda would be doing at that moment while Roy locked him up. Jude felt like a real prisoner.

The next morning, while he was stirring, he heard Lynda's strong and sonorous voice. “Good morning Jude... Wake up.”

“Good morning.”

“DG-SSS will talk to you by 9:00.” “Okay.”

“How was your outing last night?” “I told Roy.”

“Did anybody see you at the scene?” “Not a single soul.”

“Okay. Have you made up your mind?” “Well.”

“You've got nothing to lose. Later.”

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Jude watched her wipe sweat from her face with a hand towel. He thought she had curves at the right places as revealed by her blue tracksuit pants and white vest. Feline, noiseless, she walked away in her Reebok pump shoes. It was getting to 7:00.

After the morning things: bathing, brushing, breakfasting, Jude cut a hole in the breast pocket of his body-tight T-shirt. The camera lens of his Nokia Lumia 630 corresponded with the hole as he positioned it in his pocket to record video. He opened the camera/video recorder and propped it into his breast pocket. He heard Roy and Lynda's voices and foot-steps. They went past, calling on Bam and himself on their way to White's cell. It was 8:55 a.m. Jude went over.

All six gathered in White's cell. White set up the computer such that the image of the Director-General of SSS filled the monitor. Shortly, his stentorian voice issued forth. "Good morning to you all. Lynda Onah, thank you for your part. You too, White Olise and Roy Moga Bam Tito, you've been wonderful. Jude Ochada, you've always been. I heard you've had your day or two, and you have thawed. I need you in that state of mind. It is high time you did something

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to ferret out cues, no matter how little, about the Dust devil and its members. It is possible. Turn your attention to this issue with a laser-like focus and, you all report to Lynda Onah. You can only reach me through her or White Olise. They are good at what they do. The Dust devil just released another set of flyers the usual way. The red flyers dotted strategic locations all over the capital yesterday morning. It bore only one line. IT COSTS LESS TO EMBRACE THE ERA OF THE PHENOMENAL GOOD. It is a threat. It's ominous. It is high time you relocated to Abuja, work undercover, and see what you can do. The presidency appreciates. It is risky, be careful. Good luck."

Jude thought he looked like he fed on only honey and butter. However, the cleft in his jaws suggested physical strength, his steady black eyes, power. His image left the monitor and White began to shut the laptop down. The DG-SSS' "they are good at what they do," echoed in Jude's mind as he listened to Lynda. "We leave at dusk tomorrow. Make whatever you need known to Roy," she said to all. "Meanwhile, if you have any questions, direct it to me."

"Jules, the living dead, I need information on him," said Jude "What about him?"

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“Why would he want to kill you, Roy?”

“He was contracted to do it, maybe to settle an old score.” “By who?”

“I also want to know.”

Distrust gripped Jude’s heart and only his inscrutable face hid the fact from others. “You’d better watch your back,” he said, feigning satisfaction.

“We’ll find out whom,” Lynda said, and rose, signaling others that the meeting was over.

Later that evening, Jude made up a reason to go out. He went to Mainstreet bank to transfer funds to other accounts and withdrew one hundred thousand naira. He shoved the bills down the pocket of his hooded jacket and mounted the Honda CD 200. The motorcycle, grumbling into the night, did not bear back to the prison yard. Jude knew nobody in Umuahia. He knew nowhere to hole up. He decided to find his way out of town. The question was, ‘to where?’ He rode all night. By 4:00 a.m., he was on the Niger Bridge in Onitsha, which he recognized. He kept going until it was almost dawn. Jude refilled the fuel tank and sought out a cheap hotel where he stayed until it was night again. Riding by night, holing up by day, and so on, he made it to Lagos

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state. The Honda CD 200 could not be tracked now, and the LG G3 Roy gave to him was both in air mode and switched off in the pocket of his hooded jacket. That way, he hoped to stay untraceable until he knew all he needed to know. He turned a fugitive and there would be no exposure to the police, or whatsoever. He will trash the issue of his incrimination and incarceration. However, he needed to separate friends from foes first or be killed, at sight to cover up, no matter where.

It was a Sunday night. Jude sat in a dimly lit corner of a cheap hotel. He opened the in-box of his SMS app on the Nokia Lumia 630. A Message from Idle read, "Luck's in. Albino and Goliath spotted. Albino, home born and raised in Edo state, Goliath, home-born, Russian brought up..."

## CHAPTER 3



**L**ife in the Federal Capital Territory was existential. You never get to know all your next-door neighbours. They could have come from any of the 36 federating states, the territory itself or any other part of the world. Citizens and foreigners alike sought a bite of the national cake or just a crumb of it. They hustled, making the city bubble with life, doing all manner of work. Some of them maintained a single job. Others doubled as one thing or the other: a shift somewhere in the morning, a shift elsewhere at unsocial; and witching hours. It was hard to tell who was who or what.

It was 3:00 a.m. Monday morning. You could hear a pin drop in the dim room. Cradling a brown mug in his hands, with the aroma of tea around him, he reclined on the central sofa in the sitting room. He liked the tea, but he liked the 'other man' more. The sentiment was not about him, but the thrilling secrecy and gains he signified. Under his leadership, the inner caucus of the organization played their part. The Russian artificial intelligence company reciprocated in real

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time. And the pinnacle of their transaction was the 'other man' who sat with him. He sat with an aura of equanimity, in silence. Only a handful knew of his personage: the man with the brown tea mug and his men. There was one, as bald as a coot, in sky-blue pyjamas, with them, smelling of lifebuoy toilet soap.

"We have enough men in the red and green chambers," said the man with the brown tea mug. "I know," answered the bald man in sky-blue pyjamas with assurance.

"Things are falling in place in the judiciary. The presidency is our concern..." "Our men there can deliver."

"I'm sure, but let's not be too cocky. We can't afford to fail. So, we need more hands." "There's Dr Clifford Obi and the head chef."

"That's a good one. They're vital to the game."

Both men let the direct current of kinship gush from one to the other as they locked their gaze. The man with the brown tea mug leaned across the table between them. He whispered, "time and place are fixed."

"When and where?"

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“The inauguration of the new president. Eagle square.”

“Time’s good, the venue’s not good...”

“We’re installing. And for good reasons, the place is perfect.” “How can the installation be done in a crowded place?”

“Credence is vital. Con, is the name of the game, don’t forget. Done right, under the nose of the mark, is the best.”

“It’s very risky.”

“Yes. Just like breathing itself... risk is part of it.”

The man with the brown tea mug leaned backwards. He placed the mug on the table and extended his right hand to the ‘other man’ who gave back a firm handshake, “Very soon, your excellency.”

The ‘other man’ took his hand and said, “you’re right. It won’t be long.”

The man with the mug beamed, regarding the ‘other man’ with much awe in his eyes. He picked up his mug again. The tea, untouched, was as cold as ice, but not as cold as his power-hungry heart in which power was the dominant thought. “You’re the greatest of them in all history.”

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The 'other man' sensed his speech, estimated, and said, "that's a compliment. Thank you."

The man with the mug and the bald man in sky-blue pyjamas exchanged glances. They burst out laughing with mirth that bothered on sensual fulfilment.

"We've come a long way..." said the man with the brown mug, nodding in affirmation. "New Nigeria!"

"New Nigeria will flow with milk..." "...and honey, for those who believe."

There was a momentary silence. A gentle rap on the panelled door of the room broke it. A tall lanky man slithered into the room. He said to the man with the brown tea mug, "Jude has escaped, sir. He left the yard last night after someone tried to blow him up."

"Who tried to blow him up?"

"An unidentified youth clad in a bulletproof vest. He rather got blown up himself."

"Jude can't hide forever. We'll find him." "Find out who the dead fellow is. I smell a rat." "We're working on that."

"Good. Let Jude be for now. Let the black disciples by 3:00 a.m. tomorrow." "Will do, sir."

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3:00 a.m. the following day, the man with the breather's own tea mug was without his mug. He stood on a raised circular platform illuminated by a spotlight from above, addressing a group of his loyalists. These were special ones bound by forces stronger than love. Whatever those were, they were their ironclad secrets. As he spoke, his words rang true and authoritative, rebuking and spelling doom. Great awe overwhelmed his audience and they trembled like reeds in the wind before him. However, they were not without hope. It was a glimmer of hope. He reminded them of 'the promise', and after a brief pause for effect, he simmered down, and continued in his booming voice.,

"...I commend you all for your efforts. And, now that we have come this far, we'll all agree that the end of our struggle is near. A little more time, we clinch the power." He said, looking from one stolid face to another. "This is the time to become organized, and stay organized for the last lap of our journey. The 'inauguration of the new president' shall mark the beginning of 'the new dawn, the era of the phenomenal good.'" His audience went agog with a thunderous round of applause. He raised his hands in a signal. The applause died a sudden death. "That is, the national democracy day, is the

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dawn of phenomenal good. Our time has come. Let me hear from you before I continue.”

“All’s clear at the red chamber, my lord.” said a tall and lanky man in a well pressed caftan.” “So it is, my lord, at the green chamber,” said the man next to him.

“The Chief Justice is worse than a thorn in the flesh, my lord.” said yet another. “We pray you find a way around him.”

When there was no further submission, the man with the brown mug continued, “White Shadows, pick your flyers and spread it, as you go in peace. Victory is ours... Thank you”

The spotlight went off, bringing the room to a near total darkness.

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The sun was setting. Jude laid on the single bed in the quiet hotel room. The air smelt fresh as his chest rose and fell in breathing. He gave free reign to his thoughts. His thoughts fluttered over the ripples of the recent past up to the moment- the network, threat letter... Incrimination and incarceration... Bam and White... the Chief of Staff to the

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president... the Director General, SSS... Lynda and Roy..., "good at what they do" Jules, the living dead... "Dust devil-in the pond..." His thoughts hovered over the tracking for bombing, and who might be behind it.

Since he sent both names and video to Idle, he just got the second feedback. It was on Roy and Lynda... Roy was the son of a ship cook from Benue state who got to England with a Nigerian ship, went on land and never returned to his duty post. Ten years later, he surfaced in Liverpool. When he came back to Nigeria, he met a young lady who he put in the family way. He promised to return to marry her, but did not. Seventeen years elapsed in which a lot of water had gone under the bridge. The lady, pressured to carry on with another man, put the son under her own mother and followed her heart. The man returned from Liverpool. He sought out his son and took charge of his care. Eventually, he went with his son to Liverpool where he furthered his studies... The background check revealed a clean bill for his criminal records.

Lynda was the daughter of a pilot. Her Crossrivarian father and Yoruba mother, in a tug of love, separated her from her twin sister. Her mother was rumoured to have

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taken to the bottles somewhere in Lagos. She lost her father in a plane crash when she was sixteen. Her mother and sister were not found in all the nooks and crannies of the globe by then. Her father's sister brought her in from the cold, much aided by what her father left behind... Lynda also had a clean bill on her criminal records. Idle added that more was coming.

He picked up Jules, the living dead's NEC e616v mobile phone and powered it on for the umpteenth time. Something clicked. And he wondered why it took all this while to figure it out. The names saved against each number are, no doubt, pseudonyms: cupofsin, Topsy Priest and spirit-man, and so on. He began to dial each of the numbers saved into the LG-g3 mobile given to him on Jules' phone. The first, second and third. Then, Crossbones appeared against the fourth number he dialled. It belonged to Roy! Jude, jolted, sat up. A realization dawned on him: Roy had wanted him dead. The creepy feeling of walking through the valley of the shadow of death swept over him. He sat still, lost in thought; he looked like a baffled mannequin with no clothes on the torso.

Some ten minutes later, the doorbell rang. Startled, Jude heaved himself off the bed. He did not call for service; he

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thought and retrieved his CZ-75 handgun from its nest. The doorbell rang again. Jude went to the door and opened it, concealing the gun in the towel around his neck. Slender, dark skinned, stood in the dim passage. She looked like an early twenties by age in smart fitting waiter's uniform. "Mr Daniel Rotimi?"

Jude's dirt brown eyes x-rayed her as her Cool Breeze perfume wafted into his nostrils. He said, "Yes."

"Good evening, sir. I'm Eva," she said. "Sorry, you didn't call but..."

He cut in, "How may I help you?"

"I got an eyeful of you when you first came in here." Jude cocked his head. "Serious?"

"Don't you want some company? I want..." She twisted her voluptuous self in a show of availability. The air stirred, laden with the scent from her body.

Jude thought her type was everywhere in Lagos. "No. I'm busy. Thanks."

He made to shut the door. The waitress stuck a toe in the door. "Please. Be man enough to understand. Every woman

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wants... My man never does. Please... just a bite of my golden apple.”

Jude raised a brow in question, thinking, ‘Red flag!’ He snapped, “Get the hell out of here!”

She stood her ground. Jude made to push her out of the doorway and all hell broke loose. She shouted at the top of her voice, “Get your hands off me! ...O my God! Oh no!”

She grabbed Jude even as he tried to free himself from her clutches. Some waiters rushed into the long corridor with a bouncer at the lead. Another bouncer emerged from the opposite end. All together, eight people came running. Some other lodgers came out of their rooms too. The bouncers got hold of Eva as she struggled with a bewildered Jude. They yanked her off him, demanding to know what the matter was. Eva stood, panting, claiming she didn’t want, but he wanted, by force. While they were at it, two police officers arrived. They dispersed the people in the long corridor except Eva, and the two bouncers. “This is unusual in this place. Let’s see who you are, what you do and where you come from,” said one of the police officers, his voice, cold as ice. Together, they made to crowd Jude into his hotel room.

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He uncovered the gun from under the towel. "Keep your distance," he snarled.

"Respect yourself...don't respect us. We don't need it," Eva said, her voice, mellow. Her Glock G45 pistol pointed at Jude. So did the others' guns. It was like a five to one world cup score!

"Step back into the room, man," said one of the bouncers in a grating voice, seizing Jude's gun. "You made one mistake too many."

Jude stepped back, feeling like a mighty loser. "What was it?"

"The living dead's mobile. On or off, it's traceable." The bouncers put a handcuff on his hands and let him sit on the single sofa in the room. "You can hide from man but not from us. Jules died once, you'll die many times in one day."

"I didn't kill Jules."

"No you didn't. It would have been by the bullet if you had. Blasting himself was self-sacrifice to us... Ever met a 'Topsy priest, Jude?' I'm one."

"Why was he tailing me?"

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“You’ll have to ask the gods.” To his colleagues, he said, “Go and back the truck into position, you three. Eva and I will keep vigil on Jude.”

The other bouncer and the two police officers disappeared through the long dark passage. Jude thought of the handcuffs on his hands as his captors remained just two. His mind roamed some more, and he wondered if these were members of the dust devil... His mind gnawed at the idea of escape. He saw his CZ 75 on the bedside desk where the bouncer had placed it. “How do I take a crap in these shackles? ... I’m pressed.”

“Take a crap in your pants. That’s how.”

“I’m pressed, I mean it. Pull down my pants, in the Johnny.”

“You’d better do it before he shits himself,” said Eva. “See if he’s got a double headed taser, Topsy priest.”

“He doesn’t even have one,” chided, Topsy priest and rose up. “Did you hear that, Eva? What I don’t have, I can’t give.” Eva giggled “What I don’t want, I don’t take.”

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In the toilet, Topsy priest undid Jude's belt and zip, and pulled down his underwear. "Hurry up. We're pulling out of here."

"To where."

"You, to your death: we, away. You must pay the price of killing a shadow."

Jude grunted, feigning resignation. He lowered himself onto the seat of the water system toilet, holding his breath against the strong antiseptic smell of Dettol. First, he took a leak while Topsy Priest looked on. He grunted in an effort to discharge the 'rubbish.' But tipsy Priest's presence inhibited free evacuation. He told him so and Topsy Priest eyed him with manifest suspicion. "No games," he said sternly. He stepped out of the toilet and slammed the door with a loud bang.

Jude got up. He studied the chain link in-between the cuffs with some scorn and scoffed. Positioning himself, with brute strength, he strained the chain and it broke free... His grunt attracted Topsy Priest who opened the door and found Jude exactly how he had left him. He withdrew his head and shut the door again. Jude got up and pulled on his undies and pair of trousers. He sat back on the toilet seat and

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waited. When he didn't go out on time, Topsy Priest's patience snapped and he burst the door open. "You think we have all day, don't you? Get the hell..."

In a flash, Jude had him by the jugular. He drew him further into the toilet and twisted his Glock 45G out of his hand. Topsy Priest, surprised, put his power to test. He wriggled and threw wild punches that didn't hit their targets. Hearing the commotion, Eva became a wasp stinging with her gun. She rushed in, stung once, again, and again. Jude threw Topsy Priest in her line of fire. The three bullets lodged into his forehead, splashing out blood and brain, and life. He fell to the ground, gone for good, without saying goodbye. He was upon Eva before she could shoot again. However, the distant pattering running footsteps reached his ears from the long corridor. He wrenched her gun out of her hand and pinned her to the wall. Quick, he shut the toilet door and put the bolt in place. Jude put a gun to her head. "Don't respect me, respect yourself."

She fidgeted... She seemed to wilt. She stood still as the footsteps and voices approached the hotel room. Jude's Chief concern was escape. The footsteps drew nearer and louder. If he could, he wouldn't take murder in his strides to do that.

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He didn't kill Jules, the living dead. He didn't kill Topsy Priest. He wasn't about killing anybody. However, nothing would make him surrender to these people. They were by the door, trying to open it. Relying on sheer speed, he made to climb up to the ceiling, but Eva grabbed her gun that Jude stuck into his waistband. Jude let go of himself, taking her along as he crashed to the ground. Eva dropped the gun overwhelmed by his weight. While the newcomers struggled with the door, he tied Eva's hands behind her and laid her on the tiled floor. She shuddered beside the corpse on the ground. Jude stuffed some linen into her mouth, blindfolded and gagged her with the rest. Next, he climbed the wall to the ceiling, which he pried open at a corner and wriggled inside a second before the door burst open. He crawled as fast as he could towards the back of the hotel as far as possible. Gently, he pried open another part of the ceiling, and like a turtle out of a shell, he stuck out his head to see. There was no one at the back of the hotel. He lowered himself to the ground, and slipped through the back door into the open yard. He ran down the raised pavement by some steps into the lawn-covered ground that stretched for some fifty feet away. Next to the lawn-covered area, on the other side, was an area where what seemed like wild

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potatoes grew. Jude covered the ground in a flash to the perimeter fence. The concertina wire mounted length-wise the top of the fence challenged his climbing over. Out of no way shall come a way, he told himself. He raced to the powerhouse attached to the left extreme of the fence. Jude climbed, stepping on the windowsill to the rusting iron door and onto the roof. Just then, they spilled like wasps out of their nest from both flanks of the hotel, shouting and shooting. Jude fired a shot from Topsy Priest's Glock G45. They scrambled for cover behind whatsoever they found. But they kept shooting. One of the police officers took the left side, the other and the bouncer took the centre. Eva took the right. Jude dropped prostrate to the roof of the powerhouse. He watched them shooting and closing in on him, and felt no doubt they intended to do damage. Charged with the murder of their kinds they intend to murder him, he thought. "I'm sorry," he muttered and rolled on the roof to where he had a vantage view of the police officer to the left. Jude let him prance a while shooting, in the setting sun. Then, he sent a shot his way on a fatal errand. Minus one, he thought as the man jolted, collided with the wall on his side and slumped into a bed of the wild vines. Three left, he thought. A bullet grazed the wall right by his left side and

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sprayed fragments of the wall on him. Shortly, the sound of a distant gunshot caught everybody's attention. It was so different from that of their Glock G45. It was a game-changer. Jude reared his head and saw a newcomer on the right flank of the hotel. It was unmistakably Roy! "Alright boys, we want the game alive! Back off him!"

"Judas!" bawled the bouncer.

"Your father is Iscariot!" Roy retorted and dived for cover as the bouncer shot at him.

The remaining police officer, torn between aiding the bouncer and pressing on for Jude, dropped to the ground. Jude watched him crawling towards Eva where she knelt on one knee, taking an aim at the crawling figure. Roy and the bouncer exchanged fire. Roy, suppressing with his superior gun. Jude seized the moment; he directed two shots, one from the gun in each hand, Eva's way. She hit the ground seeking cover. Jude tore a longboard off the roofing of the powerhouse. He sent more shots Eva's way. The police officer was out of sight. Jude beat the concertina wire down and pushed most of it to the other side of the fence; He placed the long board against the wall from the rooftop. He worked his way onto the top of the fence using the board,

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sent more shots Eva's way, and jumped clear off the diameter of the concertina wire. Jude broke his fall and rolled over onto his feet on the other side of the fence. Terror as he never knew struck his heart as he found himself in the centre of a sinister trio. Their guns aimed at him. A gun-toting gorilla, a listless hooded figure and a female figure in a head warmer that left only her eyes, nose and lips visible. "A coward flees from the seeming evil that will deliver him," Lynda said in her sonorous voice. "You're safer in our hands. Why should you run from friends? Do you prefer foes?"

Jude's mouth dropped open despite himself. "Lynda? Bam... White!"

"They track you with something you know, we track you with something you don't know."

The DG-SSS' words echoed in Jude's ears like the still small voice, "They're good at what they do."

Bam slammed a pair of handcuffs onto Jude's hands. In the dwindling light of day, Jude saw that they were the same type that Oracle and Cross had when they first caught him. It has a strong bar instead of a chain or hinge in-between the cuffs. "Roy's in the soup," Bam rumbled.

## CHAPTER 4



In Bam's hand, the Toyota Hilux responded like an extension of his own self under his control. Handcuffed, Jude sat between him and Lynda who didn't wink in the name of sleep. It was 3:30 a.m. The federal capital territory, Abuja lay ahead of them, twinkling with luminous multi-coloured lights. They had less than thirty minutes to hit the capital. Jude observed that Lynda was chatty, like a weaverbird. He wished she'd give him a breather.

"That's not why I left," answered Jude.

"And Jules, the living dead, he scared the hell out of you?"

"No. Fear is an attitude I reserve for my maker. Not some scum like Jules, the living dead, who's dead. Anyway, what's the connection between Jules and Roy?"

"Roy infiltrated their ranks through him. He felt used. We thought initially that they were members of the Dust devil."

"If they aren't what are they?"

## DUST DEVIL

“Black swamp-men, a rival group based in the Niger delta, but with tentacles everywhere.” “Why would he want to blast me off the surface of this earth?”

“He tracked the bike thinking it was Roy driving it. We traced the installer of the GPS tracker. He confessed when Bam put the fear of God in him.”

Jude shrugged. “How did you find me?”

“How we found a fugitive golden fish. None of us can truly go missing... trust me.” “How? That mystifies me.”

“Stay mystified.” Lynda laughed. “What stops a hunter from following the hound that’s trailing the hare?”

“I see...”

“The DG-SSS will castrate you the next time you vanish.”

“Good riddance to my testicles then, I’ll say to him... These ones that came to avenge Jules’ death, are members of the Black Swamp-men too?”

“You don’t need to be told. Do you?”

“...And Eva?” Jude knew. He just asked. “...And Eva.”

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“...And Eva,” Bam added. “The Black Swamp-men are disgruntled over the country’s resources sharing modalities. They’re an off-shoot of some defunct political parties whose desires were not satisfied by the past and current dispensations of government. They claim to be marginalized.”

“How did you know this?”

“We hacked the group, didn’t we, Lynda? That’s why Roy’s marked for death.”

“Oh yes. We now think that their central members should know something of the Dust devil,” Lynda said”

“Why so?”

“Members of one secret organization know the members of another... along that line... Theory.” “Well. Probably. Not entirely impossible, but assumptions breed mistakes.”

Suddenly, in the white flood light of the Toyota Hilux’s headlamp, a few meters ahead. A barricade laid across the road. Bam slammed the brake and the vehicle screeched as it skidded to a jarring stop. A sinister figure stood on the other side of the barricade, in the middle of the road, clad in black. He aimed his rifle at Bam, and came over the barricade to his

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side of the vehicle. Lynda, moving only her wrist, aimed and pulled the trigger of her gun. The bullet caught the man right in the forehead. He had no time to be surprised. He simply toppled to the ground. Lynda scanned the surrounding darkness with a powerful flashlight. She got down, ran and pulled the barricade aside. Bam got down too. He picked up the dead man's rifle and ran his hand all over him. He found a wad of money, a handset and a parcel of hemp. In his back pocket, he found something like some folded tracts. Bam picked up everything and put them on the floor of the vehicle under the driver's seat. He passed the rifle to Lynda and got back behind the wheel. Then, a salvo of bullets tattooed the windscreen of the Toyota Hilux like hailstones from an angry sky. "Hell!"

"Open these shackles!" Jude screamed. "Hurry!"

Lynda fiddled with the bunch of keys in her pocket. She opened the handcuffs on Jude's wrists. "The bullets came from the front."

"Sure. Others could be anywhere," said Jude. He snatched the AK 47 that Lynda propped against the corner of the vehicle. "Casket makers and vultures, they say the same prayer."

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“The deaths of others yield their daily bread,” Bam concurred. He grabbed the wheel in his brawny hands, slammed the pedal to the floor and the Toyota Hilux lurched with a combination of speed and power. It took on another salvo of bullets but the windscreen remained intact. It was a Toyota Hilux with certain special features. The vehicle, a rumbling beast in Bam’s hand, surged past four sinister figures by the roadside before Jude or Lynda had time to send parting shots their way. Lynda shouted, “Bastard Bandits!”

“They infest this region from our neighbouring countries,” Jude fumed. Bam agreed, “Blame our porous borders.”

“...and much more,” Lynda added. “I wonder if White and Roy have any idea what happened.” “Look behind you.”

Lynda turned around to see white’s face plastered against the glass behind her. She saw the question in his eyes. Through the square hole, she asked, “Did you hear the gunshots?”

“What’s going on? We are foreign observers, me and White.” “We ran into some gentlemen of the street.”

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Bam swerved the vehicle off the highway. He shot it up a long slope and descended into a dirt path. The Toyota Hilux decimated the ground in a new found ambition. Some thirty minutes on the dirt road brought them to a settlement where one house stood about a quarter kilometres from the other. It was the hour before dawn. Bam parked the vehicle under a cluster of almond trees with low hanging branches. Thus concealed, he got out of the vehicle and went behind to open the back door for White and Roy. They got out too. White pulled Eva out by her upper arm. Roy got hold of the bouncer whose movement was somewhat hindered by the chain around his waist onto which his handcuffs were hooked. Eva wore only handcuffs. Lynda and Bam led the party to the front door of the seemingly untenanted bungalow. The door swung open and a thin man slithered out in the twilight. "Welcome everybody, nice trip?" his voice, strong tenor.

"Nice trip. Something to eat, man. We're starving." Lynda said. To White and Roy, she said, "Bring them this way."

They led Eva and the bouncer after Lynda to the last room down a dark passage and shut them in. "Skin will

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show you to your rooms everybody. Freshen up, come out here by 10:00 a.m.”

“Those two?” Jude jerked a thumb in the direction of the captives.

“They’ll be fine. Skin’ll see to that. He’s the best shot this part of the world.”

Skin patted the bulge on his waist with a scrawny hand. “No man can test me,” he said and turned down his thin lips at both ends, nodding.

“Of course.” Jude observed that Skin looked just a little more than mere skin stretched over bones. Long and thin neck with a prominent Adam’s apple. The man carried his fragile frame as if he would break any moment. What they lacked in physical strength, these types make up for in handling guns. Their lives depend on it, he thought. Skin showed him his own room and he was grateful. At least, he would sleep without having to keep one eye open for the first time since he fled the prison yard. About an hour later, Skin came calling. He asked them all to dine and afterwards, to meet with Lynda.

They sat on everything available. Lynda looked to see that they were complete in number. “ We’re here. We

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shouldn't be. It would be against reason to expose ourselves for any reason. Truth is, death is looming over all of us whose name is associated with the SSS secret network. The people we seek, members of the Dust devil, know us. We don't know them. Our belief is that we have somehow thrown them off our scent. So, 'you must not be seen, whatever you do.'"

"What about the two we brought?" Jude's mind dwelled on them.

"We hold them incommunicado." Lynda didn't say what will become of them. "Meanwhile, we have only this daytime to rest. We ought to hit the ground running. The latest batch of Dust devil's flyers condemned the Chief Justice of the federation. It said hiding right in the core of Zuma rock will not save him from the long arm of the Dust devil. The flyer slated his death for the 29th of May, 2015."

Jude's guts knotted within him. "How did the Chief Justice step on Dust devil's toe?" "In line of duty, I suppose, but assumptions breed mistakes, you said, didn't you?" "We'll have to find out."

"How?" "From him." "How?"

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The answer was not ready in Jude's fuzzy thoughts. "Can we ask these two Black Swamp-men what they know?"

"Do you expect them to open up just like that?" Bam asked. "It's possible they don't know a thing. If they do, they'd rather die, like Jules the living dead, than to tell us."

"Let's try, Bam." They almost killed Roy; he'll handle them. There's no atheist in a fox hole."

"No matter what you do, don't hurt them," warned Lynda. Roy scoffed. "It may be necessary."

"It won't be." To the man called Skin, she said, "Did you serve them meals?" "Yes. They didn't touch their food."

Roy fetched a bottle of calypso coconut wine and glass from the refrigerator. He got some pills and a small sachet from his personal collection of drugs. He sneaked into the captives' room. Eva coiled up on the single bed in it with her hands shackled behind her. She snored lightly with her eyes shut in slumber. The bouncer sat sulking on the wooden stool beside the window. The handcuffs were still hooked to the chain around his waist. The chain ran through the burglary proof on the window preventing turning around to look outside the window. Roy glared at him awhile. "Sleeping's a good way to practise how to die," he said,

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indicating Eva with a nod. "Thug, I have something for both of you. She'll go first, slowly and surely to wait for you in hell. This will make her cross silently over to the other side without much hassle. Imagine that."

He jerked Eva roughly awake and dragged her across the floor to the window opposite the bouncer. Roy tied her to the burglary proof despite her struggle. He poured some calypso coconut wine into the glass with some pills in it. Then, he cut an unmarked sachet of some whitish substance open and stirred the substance into the content of the glass. The silvery mixture in the glass fizzed and sizzled, bubbles rising upwards as in boiling water. He forced every drop of it down Eva's throat with much difficulty. "You don't deserve it, but rest in peace."

To the bouncer, he said, "You'll be with her shortly. You won't need a spiritual adviser. No need. You'll end up in hell all the same even if you have one. Be getting ready."

He picked up the glass. "Yours won't be a peaceful death," he told the sulking bouncer and stepped out of the room. The bouncer did not so much as bat an eyelid all through the episode that played out before him. He didn't show any sign of fear.

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Jude, sat sipping water. He thought he was lagging in his fitness programme. He powered his Nokia Lumia 630 and let it play its entire booting stunt. Next, the phone vibrated, startling him with message alerts. "Idle. Long overdue," he muttered. The message mentioned the albino and Goliath, Lynda and Roy and Bam under respective subheadings. Nothing on White. Another message was exclusively on the DG-SSS. He settled to read for details but Bam came knocking on the door. "I'd rather have you handle that thug, Jude. The woman's out of the way. What do you think?"

"Okay. I'm game."

"Great. Go see what you can come up with."

Jude watched Bam withdraw his barrel-like self out of the door. He leaned backwards onto the wall and shut his eyes awhile. The feminine scent that wafted up his nostrils wrapped up his soul in the softest of shawls. He opened his eyes to see Lynda standing there. Her clean-cut combat trousers set her off so fetchingly, Jude's heart skipped a beat. She topped it with one of her favourite sparkling white vests. He regarded her through half open eyes. She matched his gaze with raised chin and eyes hidden behind long upper

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and lower lashes. Lynda seemed even more mysterious. "Hell of a woman," he muttered under his breath.

"The police officers are not real," Lynda said. "None of them ever joined The Nigeria Police force, NPF. The other one was lynched shortly after we left the hotel."

"I know."

"How did you know?"

"From the way they operated. Unprofessional. I didn't know that he was lynched."

"Yes, he was," Lynda agreed. "Good for him. The fake uniform is for the impression they needed to create to get at you. He made a useful confession that they're at war with members of the Dust devil."

"Meaning?"

"We theorised that members of one secret organization could know the members of another." "We have to confirm that anyway."

"Sure. You're taking on the thug," Bam rumbled, "right?" "Yes, I am."

"Okay. Feed him enough carrots first," Lynda said, on her way out.

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Jude watched her turn gracefully around and walked away. He felt a heartquake as he heaved himself up from the stool and headed towards the captives' room. He met Roy along the passage, carrying Eva's limp body. "What's the matter?"

"Who knows? ... I'll find out."

Jude continued. He found the bouncer propped up against the window. "Hey. You look as if you could burst like a bubble. We haven't treated you as you deserve, have we?"

"What? With Eva poisoned, and he said I'll go next?"

Anger welled up within Jude. He raced after Roy and met him lowering the limp body unto a bed in another room. "What have you done to her?" Jude demanded.

"What's she to you? Go play your part. Your thug's waiting, so are we."

Jude gave him such a stare as to thaw a block of ice and Roy backed out of his punching range in a hurry. "Go play your part, man, and let me be."

Looking repeatedly from the limp body on the bed to Roy, he shrugged and backed off, hating the Idea of

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extrajudicial killing. Back with the bouncer, he lowered his booming voice, and said, "I'm sorry about Eva. I guess the fellow was too hasty. How did he poison her?"

"He forced some fucking bubbling stuff down her throat?"

He x-rayed him awhile. "Life means little to some people. Well. She's dead, she's dead. Let's see if we can save you." He thought the thug won't be as tough as he looked. "If he said you'll go next, you will. But we can strike a deal. Can't we? I'll take you under my wing if you play ball."

"What's the deal?"

"I need info... on the Black Swamp-men, and Dust devil." Jude opted for direct confrontation "It's a deal, remember."

"I'll rather die than do that, man. Fuck off!"

"I can. But no, you cool down. You're under an oath, I know. But keeping an oath and losing your life... think about it. Give me what I want; you'll leave with me to Chad tonight. I'll set you free with some money to take you far, far away." Jude leaned forward and whispered. "I'm also on the run."

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“What part of fuck off is it you don’t understand?” The bouncer glared at him.

“The part that means you’re willing to die when you can live. I’m surprised, bad guy. Your choice is yours though, I respect it.” Jude made to move towards the door. “Even if we didn’t pull off this deal, keep it to yourself. It’s between us. What’s your name?”

Silence.

Jude left him. He asked Skin to bring the bouncer’s meal. Skin brought a plate of fried potatoes and omelette. Jude took these from him and stuffed some of the potato into his own mouth. “Even if you’re going to die, eat, for now. Don’t kill yourself before time.” He drank from the cold water that skin placed beside the bouncer. “I learnt you refused to eat something... for fear of poisoning? I won’t let that happen... except you really choose it.”

Jude brought out a bunch of keys and opened the handcuffs on the bouncer’s hands. “I don’t trust you not to make trouble. I just won’t let you starve. Eat.” He pushed the table within the bouncer’s reach and went out of the room. In the sitting room, he met White, Roy and Lynda bending over something in Bam’s hand. White looked up. “Anything?”

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“Maybe there’ll be. Maybe not. We shall see. What’s going on?”

“The items Bam picked from the bandit last night... he found some red flyers among them.” “New or old?”

“Flyers are flyers, are they not? Those were members of the Dust devil, can’t you see?” “I see.”

Lynda rose up. “We have a starting point, it seems to me.” “What is that?” Jude asked.

“Let’s see what you get from this fellow. Then, we hunt down the ones that blocked the road last night.”

Jude wondered at her liver. “It’ll be like hunting for scorpions.” “Must you remind us? We all know. Tonight.”

“With some luck, we’ll find them.”

They all looked one another in the eyes and got different reactions. Jude shrugged, picked up one of the flyers and shuffled to his room. He sat on the edge of his bed, thinking. He wondered how the ubiquitous red flyers were distributed. No one saw anyone did it. He brought out his Nokia Lumia 630 and opened the message app. Jude absorbed the details of Idle’s messages as they shed more light on each of the individuals in his team. He found out

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that Lynda later found her twin sister and was in touch with her. It was from their communications that Idle found out that she was a Russian citizen by birth. Lynda had returned to Russia in search of her late father's estate and other investments. For a reason of her own, she preferred to reside in Nigeria after more schooling in Russia. He wondered why there was nothing yet on White. Shortly, he rose up and ambled to the bouncer's room. He saw empty plates before the bouncer. "You ate something? That's great. Sometimes, we find friends even behind enemy lines. I've been in worse trouble than this with the Cameroonian gendarmerie. I was to be tied to the stake and fired way back then. My luck was in when one of them took a liking to me. He not only fed me well, he also showed me the way out of my predicament. It was a rare kind of luck. I don't mind giving it too."

"You said you're on the run?"

"Two of us, yes. You can join us to Chad if you like."  
"What exactly do you want?"

"I want to find the members of the Dust devil." "What do you have against the Black swamp-men?"

"Nothing. We think they may lead us to find members of the Dust devil."

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“Do I have your word that if I show you, you’ll keep your end of the bargain?” “Sure.”

“Okay. We’re looking for them too. If you let me off, I’ll let you know the moment we find one. We will.”

Jude perceived that the bouncer was not without wiles.

“Make up your mind. It’s for our mutual good.” Jude put back the handcuffs on the bouncer’s hands. “I’ll be back.”

Later that night, the whole lot of them, armed to the tooth, split themselves into two vehicles. The Toyota Hilux and a Volkswagen Golf Mk3. Bam took the wheel of the first with Roy beside him. Jude, White and Lynda took the latter. Jude kept ahead of Bam by something close to one kilometre. Along the interstate highway, where the barricade laid the previous night, the VW Golf Mk3 began to jerk and stall. He started it again, and again it stalled. No matter how he tried, the car would start and stall. Jude pulled up by the shoulder of the road and got out. He opened the bonnet and started fiddling with wires and just about anything his fingers could find. He was visibly agitated. However, like an eagle, his peripheral and central visions were on red alert. He caught a glimpse of something in motion, to his right. Jude fingered

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something with his left hand while his right hand held a large oil-stained rag. The figure drew nearer as he bent over, investigating the car engine with a baffled and frustrated visage. It took nerve but he kept his act up. The lanky man, in ragged clothes, thought he startled Jude when he said in a grating voice,

“freeze man, and look into the barrel of my gun. That’s the road to hell. I’m your tour guide, I tell you.”

Jude raised his brow in mock surprise. He raised his hands in a show of surrender, holding up the oil-stained rag in it. “Who are you?”

“You don’t want to know. It’s no use. Where’s the money you’re carrying? It may mean you’ll live or die.”

Jude ran his tongue over his lips as if to moisten them before he could speak. “Money... Money's no problem please. Do you have a specific amount in mind?”

The gunman’s ears pricked up. “You’ve got a load of it? Show me.”

At gunpoint, Jude took slow backward steps to the other side of the car. “Please, don’t be quick in using your gun. I’ll give you whatever you want.”

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The gunman followed slowly. Just past the seat beside the driver's, Lynda nudged him in the ribs with the cold rim of her Glock G45 semi-automatic pistol. He turned to see what touched him. In that shocked moment of his heartquake, White presented his own to him. Out of reflex action, the gunman pulled the trigger of his AK 47. The bullet stung past above Jude's head. He ducked out within the brief milliseconds of the gunman's distraction. He rammed his head into the gunman's middle, causing him to bend over and lose balance. In his confusion, Lynda grabbed him by the neck as White pushed the barrel of his gun higher in case he pulled the trigger. Jude immobilized him in a vice-like grip and they had him.

He wrenched his gun out of his hand and slammed a pair of handcuffs onto his slender hands. They pushed him into the rear seat of the car. Jude made to run around and get behind the wheel. However, the ratatatata-ratatata of gunfire in short bursts stopped him dead. He dived back for cover as the bullets riddled the car tyres on the driver's side. The car sank onto its belly on that side. Lynda and White flung the doors on the opposite side open. They crawled out like rodents smoked out of their burrows, both with M16 rifles. Jude pulled out the gunman as the bullets continued a

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hellish staccato on the other side of the vehicle. Lynda and White tackled the source of the gunshots. Jude covered the other side, thus their back.

They continued to suppress, and calculate their getaway in the meantime. The handcuffed gunman laid on the ground where Jude threw him. He rolled over, got to his feet and started in the direction of the gunfire. Jude broke cover and dashed after him. In that instance, they heard gunfire behind them. They became urgently aware that they were naked indeed. It was Lynda. She opened fire at the source of the new threat without hesitation. Someone rose into view, throwing up his gun. So did another and yet another.

Then, dark indistinct figures began to rise up in different directions, challenging the intruders with rabid gunfire. Lynda mowed them down as White did the ones on his side. Jude busied himself with selecting the ones that posed immediate danger. Suddenly, the handcuffed gunman broke into a run again. He ran like a handless man towards the source of gunfire closest to them. Jude was about to run after him again when a salvo of bullets burst the man's head open. He did the jig dance and fell to the ground with half a head.

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Thereafter, the gunfire around them ceased gradually.  
“They’d rather kill him than let us have him.”

“That’s a good one,” said Lynda.

“We’re not leaving alive without one of them,” said Jude. His brain, ticking like a clock.

## CHAPTER 5



Jude watched Lynda leap off the burning car. Swift as a swallow, she raced and jumped into the open boot of the revving Toyota Hilux. The vehicle zoomed along a half arc onto the highway, and away screeching. Roy crouched beside a bleeding man on the floor of the booth. He was binding up the man's thigh with a stripe of Lynda's scarf. "His femur's intact."

"What's femur?" Lynda asked, Panting and trying to maintain her balance in the motion of the vehicle.

"The bone in a human's thigh."

"True. I remember. He's lucky. He's useless and dead, we need him alive."

Jude's dirt-brown eyes fixated on Lynda squatting beside Roy. Together, they tried to stabilize the man with the gunshot wound. He realized why they styled her Mamba. She was audacious, aggressive, unrelenting in attack. If the group survived their assailants' attacks, she was a strong factor. Jude didn't say it, but he met her with fresh respect.

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Unfortunately, White lay dead as doornail in the boot of the vehicle. A dark crimson fluid oozing from his gunshot wound. A shot from an unexpected angle hit him in the temple just before Bam came barging into the gunfire brawl. Mad, and spraying bullets like mad, Bam drove with one hand. He decimated the attacking gunmen from their back. The others fled. Then, he drove towards Jude and Lynda as they ran from the burning VW Golf MK3. Jude jumped in after Lynda. Roy ran up and away from the cacophony of gunfire, and followed suit. The Toyota Hilux made a sharp U-turn and flew down the interstate highway.

Jude asked, "What becomes of White's body?"

"It goes to the morgue," she said. Her singsong voice, mellow. She wiped a tear or two from her eyes, swallowed hard, and cried, "Oh!"

Neither Roy nor Jude attempted to fill the silence that followed. Jude understood the affinity that subsisted between work colleagues, which he thought made her grief. The grief, contagious, ran through them as the Toyota Hilux raved along.

When Bam finally parked the vehicle under the shade made by the branches of almond trees, Lynda asked Jude to

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freshen up. She did the same and made a few phone calls. Then, she asked Jude to come along with her. Jude took the wheel of the Toyota Hilux and drove in whatever direction Lynda pointed. Finally, he pulled up the shoulder of a deserted street. They waited. A quarter of an hour later, an ambulance crawled into sight and met them there. They passed on White's body. Lynda sobbed more as the ambulance eased off.

"It's alright to feel that way... but brace up, Lynda." "He was... Oh no!"

"Cry if you must anyway. It's okay to cry." "Let's go."

Back at the safe house, Bam sat outside the building with a moody air about him. Skin leaned on the doorframe, not talking. Others were in their various rooms. Jude went past them without saying a word. His mind was on the bouncer. He itched for a word from him. A word that will give him a glimpse into the Omnishambles of the state of affairs around him. He wished he would wake up and find himself leading a regular life. However, he felt himself sliding down a slippery slope into a pool of indefinite evil. He led Lynda by hand to the door of her room and left her there. Jude returned to the bouncer's room. Roy's breathing matched his

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combustible countenance. It seemed he could burst into flames anytime. Roy got up and shouldered him aside on his way out of the door. He'd rather be with the bouncer alone, it seemed. Jude wondered what could have transpired between the two in his absence. He pulled the stool from which Roy rose up to himself and sat down.

"You've had a bad quarter of an hour, Right?" "He's a sick demon."

"I know. Forget him. What do they call you?" "I'm Kali."

"What's your decision?"

"I'll go with you. How soon are we going?"

"We're safer travelling by night, say as from 1: 00 a.m. Tell me, what's the quarrel between your people and the Dust devil all about?"

"They're trying to push us out of the market." "Drugs?"

"You called it so." "So you know them?"

"It's not easy, but we target them at the exchange points. We trace them through our own buyers who are in our thing."

"That's a good angle. Where can I find your buyers?"

"I'm not going with you."

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“No, you’re not. Give me real names and how to find them, you will not have to come.”

“Okay. There’s Godfather, there’s Snow, and there’s Natty Rasta. Jude made a mental note of the names. “Where do they stay?” “Natty Rasta’s in FCT. We left Godfather and Snow at Lagos.”

Jude said his thanks and meant it. “Just a moment,” he said and stood up. Next, he went out seeking Roy. He found him in the garage where a makeshift bed held the Dust devil man with the gunshot injury. The man laid with his eyes shut. He opened them just a slit as Jude stepped into the room. Jude heard Roy saying, “I’ll see to it that you die slowly...”

“Nobody dies slowly. We have something to go by. There’s the Godfather, there’s Snow and there’s the Rasta man. Lots of them get their dope from these people.” Jude observed the man’s brows furrowed slightly, and smoothed out almost instantly. His stony eyes opened a shade wider as he studied Jude’s face. Jude met his eyes with a stare that bore through him. He batted his eyelids and looked again. Jude bent over him. “What’s it you know

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about Godfather, Snow and Natty Rasta? Tell us, and we'll set you free."

"I wish I knew."

"I'm giving you the first refusal. Too many of you are tired of your thing. They're opening up and getting pardoned. Tell me what you know. You'll gain protection. You'll gain freedom..."

The injured man looked long at Roy and back at Jude. Jude squinted his eyes trying to understand him. He nodded. "Give us a moment, Roy."

Roy's ears pricked. He glared at the man where he laid and ambled out of the room. "What do you have?"

"What do you want?"

"I want to know about the Dust devil."

"You're trying to bite more than you can chew." "Go ahead and tell me."

"I warn you. You deserve to die the moment you know a thing. That's the law." "Tell me."

The man regarded him briefly. He raised his head and looked at the door. Jude's eyes followed his own. However, He saw what the man could not see. Roy hung around in the

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passage out of the man's sight. Jude ignored him. "Go ahead."

"We don't all know our Spiritual Lord. He is everywhere every time, and could be hearing me right now. He could be you."

"How come you follow a leader you don't know?"

"He knows us all, and he caters for us through his messengers."

"He doesn't take care of you enough. Why did your men block the road to rob the other night." "Stolen water is sweet."

"Wow. So, where can we find the messengers?"

"You're not going to find them. We can't find them either. They find us whenever they want to." "What if you need to give them an urgent report?"

"They always know. We report nothing."

Jude knew by what he heard so far that he was dealing with a highly organized foe. "I'll be with you soon. And, remember, I keep my word."

He left the man, went out and pulled Roy after himself to the sitting room. "You heard him. What's your take?"

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“We go after the Rasta man, uh?”

They met Lynda in the sitting room. Jude briefed her about his findings from their captives. He expressed displeasure over how Roy dispatched Eva.

Roy protested the allegation, “Eva’s alive, hale and hearty, man. We played Jekyll and Hyde, didn’t we?”

“You took it too far, Roy.” Lynda scolded. “That stuff could as well kill her.”

Jude’s dirty-brown eyes stared hard at him. He shrugged. “I’m going after Natty Rasta. Me and Bam.”

“I’m going with you. Roy and Skin will keep an eye on the house and the captives.” The note of finality in Lynda’s voice told Jude it was an order.

Roy tried to stop her though. “Let them go. You can never tell how things turn out there. Stay with us.”

She challenged him with her smoky eyes. “On your mark, Jude...”

3:30 pm saw the black Toyota Hilux cruising into the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Lynda wore a pair of black jean trousers and a pink flowery T-shirt. Her naturally pouty lips glowed in bright red and Jude thought she was

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smashing. "You must have been a very bad girl growing up, Lynda."

"Thanks for the compliment, but I grew up in a convent."

"Yeah," Bam agreed, "There, you disassemble and assemble all sorts of guns for sport all day long."

Lynda chuckled. "Even at that, I was better than either of you growing up."

Bam shot the van towards Jabi Lake Mall. He pulled over some two hundred meters to the entrance of Zion-Yard restaurant and bar. Jude opened the door and got down. He helped Lynda out of the vehicle and she would not let go of his hand. They clung together as if they were an item, looking like a pair of trysting adulterers. Jude stirred them into the gate of the restaurant and bar. A waiter in robe and crocheted cap on top of his dreadlocks hopped towards them. A tricoloured belt sporting red, gold and green adorned his rotund waist. "Good afternoon sir, madam. Welcome to Zion-Yard restaurant and bar. Feel at home."

"Good afternoon, Rasta. Thank you."

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The Rasta man led them to the outdoor seating area of the place. He pulled a white plastic chair out for Lynda and Jude went around the small glass-topped table in-between and sat down, smiling broadly. The place boomed with Cocoa Tea's Rickers Island, their music system. The Rasta man said, "What would you have me serve you sir?"

"We'll go easy. Mirinda, Dr Pepper and grilled beef, brother man. The day's still young."

"Sure. One moment." The waiter withdrew his chunky self. His dreadlock poured down to his waistline as he went.

Jude said, "Some of these guys go through the motion of being Rastas. They know next to nothing about Rastafarianism. Most just, imitate the real Rasta men. These ones are highly argumentative in conversation. They argue to hide their ignorance and thereby expose it."

"What do you know about it?"

"I know enough to get by."

"See? Who was worse growing up?"

Jude smiled wistfully. All the while, his dirt-brown eyes took in every detail about everything in sight. The outdoor seating area consisted of an array of up to a hundred glass-

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top tables surrounded by two or three loud coloured plastic chairs. People sat with much distance among themselves. Beyond the open seating area stood a hall. Inside, some people sat in rows, facing the same direction. It seemed like a viewing centre to Jude. The waiter reappeared with a tray containing their order. He flashed a perfect set of white teeth in a toothy smile as he placed the soft drink bottles gingerly on the glass-topped table. Jude reached out with a sinewy hand to feel his Mirinda. "Chill, man, chill." He nodded with satisfaction and said, "Respect still."

The Rasta man beamed some more. "Peace and love man... Wadada!"

Jude winked at Lynda who sat awarding him a teasing smile. He beckoned the Rastaman closer, leaned to meet him midway and whispered, "I a go light a spliff, what ya say?"

The Rasta man stiffened. He looked him over with a question in his eyes. Then he answered, "No blood clot, but you ain't no dread, are ya?"

"Me no wear dem dreadlock but I-man a dread inna me heart, mon. Seen?" "Seen, bredren. Ready wen ya wanta light up mon."

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“I won’t be left out of this. Bumbaclot!” Lynda made a show of being thrilled. “Yes. I got that from a Rastafarian movie I didn’t understand.”

The Rasta man chuckled and hopped away. “This is an unexpected angle.”

“How?”

“He wants to show me where to smoke ganja. You’ll stay here and eat grilled beef. ...look behind you.”

Lynda followed his eyes to the viewing centre. Bam was ambling into the hall with the air of a man who had all the time. The Rasta man hopped to him too, supposedly to welcome him. He ushered Bam into the hall and they watched him sit down through the wide window. Then, another Rasta man with a heavier dreadlock came out of the door radiating good health in a sparkling white T-shirt. He wore a pair of tracksuit trousers with I-tal colours lengthwise by the sides. Swords of sun rays slashed through the air in a million directions. The rays emanated from the heart shaped pendant that hung from a necklace on his short thick neck. His handmade boots shone boldly with I-tal colours too. The waiter hopped after him and seemed to be answering queries. They came midway towards Jude and Lynda,

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turned right and headed to the back of the hall. Another structure stood there. It was a bungalow painted in Italian colours as the hall; red, gold and green. They went behind the building and out of sight. Jude wished he could follow them immediately. "That's him."

"He's made of money by the look of him. Drug money. That's our man, but we have to confirm." "Yeah. I don't want to hit the wrong man."

The waiter emerged from behind the hall. He seemed to be in a hurry. Jude ignored him with all his will power. He observed that the waiter's eyes evaded his own as he hopped past. In the viewing centre, Bam raised a brownish bottle to his mouth. He took a long drink. His head cocked to an angle that made him look at Jude and Lynda. Lynda pressed send on her phone. "He's itching to know what's up."

"Tell him to find his way to this area and sit far away from us."

Lynda sent him another message. Then, Bam rose up like king-kong. He spoke with the waiter and paid him. They watched him saunter towards them and took a seat with his back to them. Jude told Lynda to give him the low down on where he was going with the waiter and rose up. He went

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over to the viewing centre and found the waiter. "Are you busy? I'm set."

"Okay. We'll go behind the gym." He wiped his hands. "Come along."

Jude followed him the way he had gone with the other Rasta. As they rounded the corner out of the sight of others, the beautiful view of the backside of the hall. A swimming pool seemed filled with water the colour of the sky. A wide tent stood beside the swimming pool. Colourful plastic chairs stood around some ten glass-topped tables under it. Some twenty metres from the tent, there was a sheltered area. Jude saw dumbbells, barbells and benches. There was a pull-up bar and three treadmills among other equipment. Jude observed that he has not seen any muscle flexing fellow since they stepped their foot on the premises. "A good gym you've got here." "Really, all the boys love it."

"Is everybody free to use it?"

"No. It belongs to the club. Only the members use it."  
"What club is it?"

"Our club. We Rasta's." "That's grand."

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The waiter led him past the gym into the backyard of the bungalow. It was an open space without any form of flooring. On it stood a shed of thatch. Benches constructed out of bamboo ran the perimeter of the space except the entrance. The waiter waved at one of the bamboo benches. "Do sit down," he said to Jude. "This is where we burn the wisdom weed."

Jude sat down. The waiter raised the top of the wooden box under one of the benches. He whipped out a rifle and aimed it at Jude in one smooth motion. "Bumbaclot! Fiyah Bun ya! Nuh take I man fe bubu?"

Jude caught his breath. He felt caught off guard, and cornered. His own gun burned against his hips. The waiter's gun was an AR15 rifle. It looked like an evil wand in his hand. His lips peeled off his perfect set of white teeth in a ferocious snarl. A duplicitous demon. Jude raised both hands slowly. "Easy, man. Why do you think you need that gun?"

"Fe let ya down, beast . Me nuh truss ya, bag o wire." The waiter shook his head from side to side in disagreement. His dreadlock waved in defiance like a lion's mane. The look of him sent jitters up Jude's spine.

"Put the gun down. You don't want to use it, dread."

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Jude heard footsteps approaching. He looked sideways and knew he was in a fix. Four men with different lengths of dreadlock came from the other side of the bungalow. Their guns apart, they looked like the users of the gym he had seen. Behind them came the one with the most dreadlock. Natty Rasta walked tall behind them. They came to the thatched shed and parted in twos to let him pass. "The news of your coming got here ahead of you, Mr Jude Ochada. I'm afraid you crossed your bounds."

"Really? What's the consequence, Natty Rasta?" "You'll be shown the way."

"Well. We'd better chat."

"Yes, but it doesn't guarantee you'll live here alive, I'm sorry. What exactly do you want here?" "Tell your men to lower their guns."

He cast a sweeping glance at the five Rasta men around. They pointed their guns at Jude with their fingers on the trigger. "You heard the bald-head bredren, didn't you?"

The waiter moved closer to Jude and ran his chubby hand all over him. He pulled out his Glock G45 and tucked it under his robe. He stepped back leaving Natty Rasta and Jude in their centre. Jude wondered if these Rasta men

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observe or keep the Rastafarian principles. He had a feeling that they were not truly Rasta at heart. "Natty Rasta, I have a proposal that only you must hear. If you'll let your men in on it later, it's up to you."

"No qualms about my men. Shoot." "No. It's that sensitive."

Natty Rasta searched his eyes. "One false move, you'll have it right away." "No kidding." Jude's mind was on Lynda and Bam. "You have my weapon."

Natty Rasta nodded. His men withdrew themselves from earshot but not from eyesight. They lurked around with their guns half raised. Jude watched them with his peripheral vision, not looking directly at them. "Thank you. Let's talk."

"I said shoot."

"First, how did you know I was coming?"

"Nothing is hidden under the sun. It's my little secret. You didn't come alone, did you? We have your companions in custody. The man-mountain, and the 'woman with the mysterious eyes.' Lynda's eyes tell no tale as I got told. It's pure waste she's going to die with you."

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Jude felt the blood drain from his poker face. Natty Rasta would not make that up, he thought. He felt the sharp prick of insidious betrayal. His suspicion zeroed in on either of Roy and Skin. He felt a pang of deep regret as he thought Roy was the more likely suspect.

"I have a different intention from whatever you think."  
"What could that be?"

"You're not our quest. I only want to consult you."  
"Consult me? Hmmm. Over what?"

"Yes, consult you." Jude thought he could catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Politeness and temptation combined are master keys. "You're not on my blacklist, Natty Rasta. I need information for money. And you're the only one to give me that."

"So, what do you want to know and how much's in it for me?"

"You can earn a million for betrayal, can't you?" Jude thought if he rose to the bait, he might demand more money.

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Yes. Hook, line and sinker. Believe my lies." "What information is worth your one million K?"

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“Would you like a down payment? You'll see that I mean it.” “That'll be cool.”

“Lynda will arrange a funds transfer into any account of your choice. You tell me what I want to know. You get your balance.”

“You amuse me. What will any info be worth to you when you're as good as dead?” “Leave such questions till judgement day. Are you in?”

“Why not? Blood money, like stolen water, is sweet. Isn't it?” “Sure. Let's go wherever you're holding my companions.”

Natty Rasta went out to his men. He conferred with them in dread Talk and called Jude out. They led him and their boss to the other side of the building from where you could see the outdoor seating area. Natty Rasta slotted in a key into the security door and turned it. He led the way into the bungalow. Jude followed, and three of the gun toting Rasta men brought up the rear. He was surprised to see Lynda and Bam. They chained and handcuffed them to iron posts in the dim garage. Bam didn't bat an eyelid as they went in. Lynda's face was a hatchet. She stirred at the sight of Jude but remained silent. Jude said, “Lynda, ask no

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question. Arrange for a five hundred k funds transfer into Natty's account. I think he will play ball."

"They've got my mobile phone."

"You'll have it." Natty gave her a lopsided smile. "Let's wait in the sitting room."

He asked the waiter to bring Lynda's phone from his office within the building. Natty Rasta led the party to the seating room and asked his men to bring Lynda. They removed the handcuff and chain from her hand and waist, and brought her at gunpoint to the sitting room. The waiter handed her phone to her. She tried to dial a number but Natty Rasta stopped her. "With the gun to your head, you could as well tell me how much money is in that account, won't you?"

"I could, if the account's linked to my phone number. It's not. Force won't do, Natty 'Rasta..." Lynda gave him a look that buttressed her words. Then, she went ahead and dialled the number. A female voice answered. Lynda spoke with the voice and gave Natty's account details to her. In about ten minutes, Natty Rasta's phone vibrated with a message alert. He said five hundred thousand Naira had been credited. "what info do you want?"

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“Ask your men to excuse us.”

They took Lynda back and put the shackles back on her. The gun-toting Rasta men went out of the room. Jude continued, “I found myself chasing a black shadow on a pitch dark night. I need the silhouettes to take definite form...” he let it hang awhile. “Who’re the people behind your customers?”

“MY customers?”

“Yes. Members of The Dust devil. They compete with the Black Swamp-men to sell their stuff to you, I know, but show me their faces.”

“Oh, that. And you’re paying a million to know their faces? What use is the info to you when you’re going to die anyway? Well. The Dust devil doesn’t operate the way you think. The people behind the ones we see hide behind impenetrable iron masks. Only special ones among their stooges know someone who reports to the inner circle of the organization. And these ones are unknown like the ‘someone’ they report to.”

“You sure know one of their stooges. Show his face.” “I will, for an extra half a million k.”

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“Nothing more.” Jude agreed readily. “Lynda will credit your account as soon as you satisfy us.”

Natty Rasta rose up from the armchair and went into an adjoining room. He brought a brown envelope and selected a photograph from it. This he tossed onto the centre table before Jude. Jude picked it up and his heart skipped a beat. His poker face may conceal his thoughts from others, not from himself. The tall lanky man seemed to have been snapped from a distance. It was Skin! The one who welcomed them to the bungalow when they arrived from Lagos. “Are you sure he’s one of them?”

“One of the stooges.”

“He informed you of our coming, didn’t he?”

“Yes, and that would be all.” Natty Rasta rose up again. He bawled, “Bad Bwoy!”

The waiter in robe came hopping to his master. Natty Rasta gave his orders in Dread-talk. Bad Bwoy went out and the other Rasta men came back with him. They carried their guns like magic wands in the hands of some ancient wizards. Natty Rasta spoke more with them and turned to Jude. Let’s have my balance. Again, they brought Lynda and she ordered a funds transfer of one million naira into Natty

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Rasta's account. His phone vibrated again and he confirmed the sum. "Now, you'll cool your heels with your friends pending your transportation to the morgue. That's your final destination. I've been paid to do you in our way."

The Rasta men led Jude at gunpoint to the room where they held others. They put a pair of handcuffs on his hands and chained him to a pole beside Bam. The Rasta Men trooped out. Jude observed that they designed the room for such usage. "Skin is a Dust devil stooge. Lynda, how come you trusted him?"

"It doesn't show on the face. I'll be damned if he is!"

"He is. And I'm inclined to think you know more than you're willing to admit."

"We'll sort that out later, Jude. We've been waiting, only waiting for you. Let's get out of here. Are you coming?"

Jude eyed him. He ran his eyes all over, assessing his bondage, knowing what he meant. He observed that it was getting dark outside. "I'm ready when you're ready."

"Okay. Let's go." Bam heaved himself up from the ground. The chain around his waist and neck restrained much movement. First, he wrung the handcuffs on his hand

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apart. Then, he strained the chain around his waist until it gave at its weakest link. The one on his neck was smaller. It took less effort to break. Bam dropped the chains by the pole to which they tied him. He went over to Lynda and broke all her shackles too. Jude had broken his handcuffs. Bam helped him with the chain. They stood free and set to go but they had no gun among these gun-toting untrue Rasta men. While they contemplated their exit, they heard the key turning in the outer door. They heard the door open and Natty Rasta's voice resonated through to them. "You're such a bastard, Jude."

Bam and Lynda tried to flatten themselves to the wall behind the door. The footsteps were drawing closer. Jude waved them away from the door. They squirmed further into the dark corner of the room. By the time the door flew open, Natty Rasta burst in carrying a sawn off shotgun. "I'm blasting you, man..." He stopped dead, shocked by the emptiness of the room. Jude sprang up in a flash. He whacked Natty Rasta in the temple and wrenched the AR-15 out of his hand. Lynda threw a kick that caught him squarely in the solar Plexus. "Blood money, like stolen water, is sweet," she said into his ears as he staggered backwards into

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the wall and slumped. "Was the 1.5 million credited to your account a sham?"

## CHAPTER 6



The man with the brown tea mug sat behind a polished teak desk. He fiddled with a remote control in the semblance of a mobile phone. Like playing a game, he practiced manipulating the robot, which for the lack of a name is herein referred to as the 'other man.' He could switch him back and forth between automatic and manual modes. He could make him sit, stand or talk. He could make him do many other things as well as do nothing.

"A cat will sometimes toy with its prey, and rip it apart after." He raised the brown tea mug to his lips, sipped some cold tea, his eyes on the figure before him. "Jude won't work as expected. Spread the net. Find him, Kill him, kill his associates. That's our stance."

The taciturn being, tall and lanky, nodded. He pushed his spectacles higher up his nose bridge with a sinewy slender finger. He slithered out of the room leaving behind a group of three sexagenarians and the 'other man.' On his way down the flight of stairs that led to his office, he

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punched and dialled a number on his mobile phone. The gruff voice on the other side said, "Hello."

"We have the word...unleash the hounds." "The bastards' got Natty with them."

"They're going to tap him for info. What do we do?"

"Rescue him if possible. Otherwise, lay him down flat, ASAP." "Involuntary mercy killing, I think?"

"Something along that line, but don't think. Do." "Okay."

"Run along." With an equally sinewy hand, he drew out the drawer of the desk in his office and chose a Glock G45 out of the three handguns in it. He tucked it into the IWB holster on his belt on his way back upstairs. He found the men and the 'other man' on their way out to the balcony. Mug in hand, his boss raised his eyebrows and shot him a sideways glance. "Yes?"

"I've let the hounds loose, sir."

"Awesome...good riddance to Jude and his cronies. Come along."

The tall lanky man and his short thickset boss lagged behind others. They stood side by side, a contrast of each

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other, their hands upon the railings of the passage to the balcony. He gazed skywards at the crescent sailing high up in the night sky. The tall lanky man watched the dark surface of the water in the swimming pool at the centre of the property below.

“Who said the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dream?” asked the man with the brown tea mug.

“Somebody Roosevelt.”

“There’s no middle ground between right and wrong. Which of the somebody Roosevelts? Specify.

“Eleanor.”

“Great. She was referring to us. She knew that our unsentimental president-to-be is the country’s deliverer. She knew that the phenomenal good is a tangible reality. What do you think?”

The tall lanky man’s pinkish thin lips curled off his tobacco stained teeth in a smile that vanished almost as quickly as it came. “Whatever you say, Boss.”

“Excellent. Take your mind off Jude right now for just one minute. Think. Do you think you have faith in a

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president from any part of the country? Don't answer yet. Our new president isn't from any part of the country. He has no lineage anywhere. He has no village. No relatives. Meaning no distractions, and ultimately no love, no hate except as he chooses to simulate. He's the arch bureaucrat of all times... how about that?"

"He's perfect for Nigeria, boss."

"Thank you, my ace." Leaning towards the tall lanky man, forcing him to stoop and listen, he whispered. "Neutralise the Chief Justice. When it's time... "

"... it's time. Will do, sir."

He looked him in the eyes to confirm comprehension. Then, he plucked at the man's sleeve and left to join the others on the balcony. The lanky man dialled a number on his sleek silver coloured sony Ericson mobile phone. The line connected and the thin voice again said, "Hello."

"We have the word. Strike Wise Jay."

"Okay." The line went dead. He slithered to the balcony and hovered within earshot of the three sexagenarians and the other man. It was the bald man conversing with 'the

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other man.' "So, what do you think of the Nigerian bureaucracy?"

"I don't think, I know. In the short stretch of the country's history, she has endured influences from the military, and the civilian leadership at one point or the other. They both have their virtues and vices, but I prefer the civilian aspect. The civilian leaders understood Max Weber better. They knew that bureaucracy is the best solution to governance. They also know that it must not be taken to the extreme, because the incident of such extremity is on the subjects, masses or whatever word you deem appropriate. The ordinary citizens."

The three sexagenarians listened with rapt attention as the 'other man' aired his opinion on Nigerian bureaucracy. They chuckled and took turns to pump his hands. Their laughter was short lived though. They have become accustomed to such interactions with 'him.' The man with the brown tea mug asked the 'other man' to lean onto the backrest of his seat. He complied. With the phone-like remote control, he pressed a combination of some buttons, shutting him down. "His Excellency's taking a nap. Let him be." He sipped some cold tea. "Last night at Zion-Yard, our

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pawn vanished, we're all aware. Jude and his cronies took him. The hounds will find them before long... We are gods. And the mills of the gods, they say, grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small, right?"

With keen ears, the bald man and the heavily bearded counterpart listened. They said nothing. Smacking his lips, he continued, "The more important issue is the forthcoming presidential elections. I will have the dates postponed to 28/29 of March when we cannot do otherwise but win. Do I have to remind us of the enormous cost of our project, or the consequence of it going belly up?"

"No."

"Not at all."

"Excellent." He leaned across the polished teak table in their centre. "The incumbent must return to wherever he came from."

"Bayelsa," It was the bearded man.

"The greatest number of votes must accrue to our man by all means necessary." "That's an easy part," said the bald man.

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“Excellent. Our man will win, and we shall enact the phenomenal good.” The brown tea mug being empty, he pushed it to the centre of the table. “Keep your eyes peeled with your ears to the ground.

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Between Bam and himself, they could bear Natty Rasta’s limp body out of the Zion-Yard restaurant and bar premises. The question is, with the place crawling with people and the gun-toting Rasta men, how?” He picked the unconscious Rasta man’s shotgun. “Lie low, you two, I’ll be right back.”

“Where’re you going?” “I’m getting guns.”

“Be careful,” Lynda said.

“I will. A little.” He stepped gingerly from the room through the passage to the sitting room. Jude opened the security door just a crack. He peeped into the growing darkness. About to step out of the door, the waiter materialized from the direction of the outdoor seating area. Jude caught his breath and froze. Very slowly, he pushed the door shut. From the dark recess of the bungalow, he watched the waiter hop towards the swimming pool side of the premises. He was without the rifle he whipped under the thatched shed. As he went, Jude sneaked after him, not

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intending to alarm him. He watched him hop past the swimming pool towards the thatched shed. He assessed the distance from where he stood and the waiter. It was longer than he could cover in a flash. Besides, there was nothing to shed him if he had to take cover. One can never tell. He could carry a handgun on his person. Jude wondered where the waiter had left his rifle as he opened the long box under the bamboo bench. He brought out two similar rifles and slung one across his shoulders. The other, he carried in his left hand, casting a sweeping glance. Jude dashed back and flattened himself against the wall of the bungalow. He waited, pulse rising, for the waiter. Jude thought they were beefing up security, and that accounted for the waiter's return for more guns. Then, he heard the waiter's footsteps. The footsteps approached steadily. He let the waiter walk past just two steps. He struck. Jude clamped the waiter's mouth from behind and clubbed him on the head with the butt of the shotgun. The waiter blacked out before he could spin around to see what went bump in the night. "Sorry, quack Rasta. I need these guns more than you do."

He lifted the waiter effortlessly and laid him in the dark by the wall of the bungalow. Jude picked up the guns and raced to the thatched shed. Three guns is to three bad apples,

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he told himself. He got one more gun out of the long box, shut it and turned around. The sound of footsteps startled him. He crouched and scurried behind an oil drum that did little to shield him. Two Rasta men came into the thatched shed. They stood their guns against the fence. One opened the lock on the small gate. Someone came in with a backpack. He handed it over to the first two and took his leave. One of the Rasta men opened the drum behind which Jude crouched. He brought out another backpack and carried his gun. Jude was grateful for the darkness. He watched the other one lock the gate and caught up with his partner.

When Jude reached the bungalow, Bam and Lynda surprised him immediately he stepped in through the security door. They saw him coming through the window. Natty Rasta's unconscious body lay on the floor. "Let's get out of here before they miss him. There's a gate at the back. Jude pushed a rifle each into their hands. Bam lifted the limp Rasta man onto his shoulder. He held his rifle at the ready in his right hand. They filed out of the bungalow with Jude showing the way. He picked an iron bar from the gym with which he pried open the lock on the gate. They traced their way to the far left of the Zion-Yard premises to the roadside. Bam laid his burden on the ground and went off to bring the

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Toyota Hilux. Jude and Lynda put the Rasta man in the boot. Jude climbed in and sat in the boot. Lynda joined Bam in front. As the Toyota cruised past the Zion-Yard's gate, they saw two bizarre looking Rasta men clad in big jackets and baggy trousers. one on each side of the gate, they stood casually... on guard. The car park had more cars in it. A good number of power bikes lined the edge of the car park flooded with light from halogen lamps. Multi-coloured lights played like fireworks in the outdoor seating area and the place seemed more crowded.

"The quack dreads are looking out for friends of their captives," Jude said through the square hole in the glass behind Bam's head, "but their master's a captive now. There's a moral in that, you know?"

Lynda scoffed. "What moral?" "There's nothing like 'final victory.'"

"That's the summary of my sermon, Bam. When did you start being religious?"

Bam chuckled. "Just good upbringing... wait a minute, we've lost our innocence, it seems."

Every one of them tensed up at the sight ahead of them. About ten motorcycles seemed to sprout suddenly out of the

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ground as they crested the hill into sight. Their headlamps flooded the highway ahead of them. They were heading in the opposite direction. Lynda grabbed her rifle. So did Jude. "No panicky shooting, Lynda. Let's find out the name of the game. Right?" It was an appeal. Jude knew how she could be a spitfire kind of a woman with a gun. Vroom, vroom and vroom, they rode past the Toyota Hilux. "They're on their way to the Zion-Yard." Lynda said as she observed dreadlocks on those without helmets.

Bam drove with his right hand. The left one cradled his rifle out of sight. He maintained his 60 km/h speed. The headlamps of the remaining seven motorcycles began to veer off his side of the road as they came nearer and nearer. The vroom, vroom , vroooooom they made in unison sounded military as they cruised past like an ominous gang of bandits.

Jude relaxed. He observed that he ceased to breathe. "Natty Rasta said they knew of our coming beforehand."

"Did he tell you how?" Asked Lynda.

"Information. Skin told them."

"No way!" Lynda countered with vehemence. "I trust Skin." "Trust Skin, trust my foot! He showed me his

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photograph." "I'll skin him alive if it's true. I don't believe it anyway." "We shall see."

"In that case, we'll have to approach them on foot from the back. If it's him, he wouldn't expect us back."

"You're right. Let's save ourselves a manhunt." Bam rumbled. "He will flee, or fight if he has guilt upon his conscience."

"Wait a minute, how come we haven't been killed? We've lived with the very foe we're hiding from since the night we arrived."

Bam shook his enormous head. "That beats my calculator. It's creepy."

"True. There's something fishy somewhere." Jude's poker face turned pensive. "How, Lynda, did Skin fit in among us?"

"White said he was clean. And we believed. He has proved himself trustworthy in many other situations."

"Well. Doesn't the devil lurk behind the cross of Christ?" Jude asked. "That's where he does the worst damage." Jude fell silent. The idea of dining with the devil himself gave him the jitters. There's no security anywhere, he thought.

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In a little while, Lynda showed Bam where to bear left. He turned the vehicle sharply into the dirt road and manoeuvred it following her direction. Some twenty minutes later, Lynda showed him the way into an array of teak trees where he parked the vehicle. Lynda and Jude left Bam in charge of the vehicle and Natty Rasta. He gained consciousness on the way and Jude put the shackles on his hands and feet. However, he didn't ask as much about where or what was happening.

They tiptoed to the back of the bungalow. Lynda gently tried the back door. It won't budge. She motioned Jude to follow to the front by the left flank. The gory sight of Skin's grotesquely twisted body greeted them as they peeked around the corner. Lynda's hand jerked upwards to cup her mouth. They both froze. Jude switched to action mode as adrenalin pumped into his bloodstream with each heartbeat. He pulled Lynda backwards, scanning the front of the bungalow for another presence. There was none. He stationed Lynda with her Ar-15 rifle at the door. She was sobbing. Jude wondered how emotional Lynda turned out to be despite her aposematic exterior. Yes. Aposematic; her beauty was conspicuous and terrifying. The type that makes some men tongue-tied in a woman's presence.

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“Hush, Lynda. There’ll be enough time for that later.”  
Jude felt a little angry.

He patted her back and left. Tiptoeing, crouching, he went to the other side of the building. Jude peeped through the shattered window of the first room. The bouncer hung from the burglar-proof with his right hand chained high up. He leaned forward as if he wanted to lie down but couldn’t. The stool upon which he sat tilted onto two legs and stuck like that under his weight. The dark patch on his chest showed he took the shot in his heart, at close range. Jude burned with rage within him. By the next window, he saw the man with the gunshot injury with a pillow over his head. His body, twisted in an awkward angle laid on the bed. They housed him in the garage. Jude wondered how and why he got into that room. He shuddered at the thought of what could have happened. He moved forward, gun in hand and caught the sound of a conversation. It was rather like two lovers saying mean things to each other in a cool way.

“Agree... You came to cheat on someone. Who?”  
“...Agree? You’re trying to install guilt, right?” “Well. Denial is an easy way out, swine.”

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“So’s an alibi. How did it happen that you went on tour but your fingerprint showed all over the place?” “The doorknob, murder weapon and drawers’ handles all have your signature on them. That’s why your alibi failed.”

Roy struck her hard. She groaned in pain and screamed as he hit her again. Jude would have interrupted then, but he liked what he heard them saying. Peeping, he watched Roy step back from Eva. “So, you were not in love. Fast pretender. Tell me. Who is your bedroom bully? Tell me whom you came cheating on.”

“Must I agree? To what end? You tell me. Why did you kill Jimmy? You wouldn’t have succeeded if White was around.”

“Oh. Fuck White. I put a hole in his cranium, as I’ll do yours. You know too much for your good health.”

Roy struck her again with the back of his hand and went out of the room. Jude shook his head. Crouching, he turned around on the balls of his favourite rubber soled moccasin shoes. His heart jumped into his mouth as he bumped into someone.

“Ouch!” Lynda landed on her posterior. “You took too long.”

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“How does that permit you to scare the shit out of a grown orphan?” “Gawd. Did you hear all that?”

“That’s the opposite of a gospel. What’s the word?” “Bad news. He killed White.”

“It’s good we know now. Let’s catch him before he slips through our hands. He’ll definitely leave but I don’t need a gun fight.”

“How are you going to catch him?”

“Like a boa constrictor. But I won’t squeeze him in a hurry.”

They sneaked back and positioned themselves on each side of the security door. Jude put his ear to the door. He decided that Roy was not in the sitting room. Very gently, he turned the door handle and pushed the door open. His whole senses tuned into the same frequency. Stealth was important, and so was speed. He pushed the door further open and slipped into the sitting room. On the centre table, Jude saw two packed bags. Roy was leaving; he thought and crossed over to the passage that led to the kitchen. The light from the sitting room shone into the early part of the passage. Jude, hearing the rustling in the adjoining room, determined where Roy was. He contemplated waiting in the

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dark recess of the passage but his patience snapped like a rubber band. He opted for a combination of speed and surprise.

Quiet, cautious, he crossed over to the entrance of the adjoining room and listened. Silence! He put his ear to the wall. Silence! What could he be doing, he wondered. The answer came in the form of a single ping of the bullet that shattered the fan regulator above his head. Jude ducked and dashed into the passage. Another bullet struck the wall to his right behind him as he reached the mouth of the passage. From the dark side of the passage. He saw Roy walk into the sitting room with no attempt to shield himself from gunshots. Jude pointed his Ar-15 at the wall above Roy's head. He sprayed a short burst of bullets into the windowsill behind him, intending to scare him into backing off. Roy would be useless dead. He wanted him alive. Like a Zombie, Roy continued his approach to the passage. Jude could see him from the dark: he could not see Jude from the light. Yet, he stepped into the entrance of the passage. He stood peering into the dark passage with his hands dangling from his sides like an ape. Jude aimed his gun and fired. The Glock G45 in Roy's hand flew out to the ground. Shocked, Roy glared at his open hand for a brief moment. He lurched

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to the gun. Like lightning, Jude sprang out of the dark passage. He slammed a right hook into Roy's temple. Roy reeled backwards and tripped over the centre table. He sprang back to his feet and charged at Jude with clenched fists. Wanting him alive, Jude didn't shoot. He rammed the butt into his groin. Roy grunted, bent double and toppled to the ground. Lynda's foot connected to his rib cage with venom. "Traitor."

Jude picked up his gun from the ground. "See what's up with Eva."

Lynda ran down to the last room. She found Eva chained to the burglar-proof. Her blood shot eyes and swollen upper lip told the tale... Lynda observed the lacerations on her bare upper body and shook her head. She undid the chain and led her out to her room.

In the sitting room, Roy seemed relieved from the pains in his groin and rib cage. He made to get up to his feet, but Jude kicked him down holding the muzzle of the AR-15 over his head. "Traitor," he spat. "You're that devil, aren't you? Well you're burst. The game's over. You surely aren't working for yourself. Who's behind you?"

"Lucifer himself. He'd love..."

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“Hey!” Lynda came into the sitting room with Eva cleaned up and clothed. “Can you hear that?”

“Sure as hell.” Jude swore. “The quack Rasta men... they’ve missed their master.” He tucked Roy’s gun into his waistband and quickly tied his hands up behind him. Lynda too slammed a pair of handcuffs onto Eva’s hands. “This way,” she led her through the passage to the back door. Jude jerked Roy onto his feet, expecting resistance. There was ominously none. He shoved him after Lynda and Eva as the ‘vroooooooooooooM! VrooM! VrooM!’ increased in crescendo like deep growling from some death metal music. Lynda opened the back door and let them all out before closing it behind her. She led them on a run into the forest of young trees intermingled with vines behind the bungalow. They went a little way inwards and crouched to observe as the bike men rode round the bungalow. Jude counted ten in all. The riders took positions with AR-15 at the ready. One stepped forward and tried the back door. It opened without hassles and three of them entered, gun pointed. Shortly, they came out, and the ten men gathered and conferred. Then, each mounted his motorcycle and off they went. Lynda and Jude rose up, each leading their charge. They emerged into the backyard of the bungalow like chicks after the hawk was

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gone. Then, like sudden thunderclaps on a sunny midday, the crack of a gun rented the air. It came from somewhere, yet out of nowhere. Jude, Lynda and their captives broke into the most important race of their lives, not looking back. They crashed back into the forest and took cover. Two bike men in leather jackets and jerseys came out from the left flank of the bungalow. They sent bullets whizzing overhead of Jude and his party. "They aren't gone."

"Let's go!"

Lynda led the way. They ran deeper into the forest as the sound of motorcycles rose up in the distance once again. The two bike men latched onto them like leeches in dire need of blood. They threatened with gunshots and chased. Jude broke off from the group and hid behind a tree trunk. He sprayed a quantity of bullets backwards, listened, and hearing nothing, ran to meet up with others. He met Lynda holding Roy down as Eva kicked the hell out of his groin. In pain, Roy groaned and it took Jude to stop further attacks. He pulled him up to his legs and shoved him along. Bullets whizzed past their ears as they ran. Again, Jude turned around and depressed the trigger. The bike man in front spun around, throwing his hands involuntarily upwards as

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they rounded the wavy path into sight. Jude sprayed the next one too. However, that wasn't all. They heard the sound of running and crashing through the forest. Other bike riders came tracking them. Lynda leading, Jude rearmost, they guided their captives away.

Soon, they burst out right where Bam stood gun in hand, finger on the trigger, by the Toyota Hilux. He looked like a gorilla with a rifle, at the action station. He only lowered his gun a bit at the sight of Lynda and Jude. Galvanized, he squirmed behind the wheel, and started the engine. Lynda and Jude pushed Eva and Roy into the vehicle. They both climbed into the boot where Natty Rasta sat shackled on the legs. Bam had hooked his cuffed hands to the chain around his waist.

The bike men crashed through the forest into sight. They hit the ground running, shooting like it was world war III. Side by side, Lynda and Jude lay manifesting a crucial law of life; they reciprocated the gunshots with increasing body count on the edge of the bush. Bam set the Toyota Hilux charging away through the same route that brought them.

About to hit the highway, more bike men, numbering twenty sped past. It was a nasty coincidence. Seeing the

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Toyota Hilux, they executed a U-turn in unison, and like a pack of famished wolves, they followed. Jude watched them drawing closer. Some in helmets, others in dreadlocks like lion mane. "This isn't a social call, Lynda."

"It's a hero's party where they dance to the drumbeat of bullets."

Jude saw a bike man pointing a man-portable rocket launcher at them. "Let fly!"

They aimed and fired in alternating succession. The bike man with the rocket launcher threw it aside and fell off his bike. Three others veered into the roadside ditch. The rest began a wild spree of shooting. They aimed at both the body and tyre of the Toyota Hilux. It was like pouring water on the back of a duck. In ones, twos and threes, Jude and Lynda knocked them off. Then, a bike man caught up with the others from the rear, with his rocket launcher raised. Jude fired at the same time with him. As he jumped off his bike in eternal surrender, the back tyre of the Toyota Hilux ruptured raggedly. The vehicle blazed a wavy path and it took all Bam could do to prevent crashing into the roadside ditch.

"Lie low!" Jude jumped out facing the approaching bike men. He sprayed in return as the 'pow,' 'crack' and bang of

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their guns threatened doom that moonlit night. Bullets pinged off the body of the vehicle behind him. He needed no spiritual adviser to tell him, Jude dashed to the other side of the grounded vehicle. The bike men, shooting, caught up and rode past. Jude counted. They were eight. He watched them turn around in unison and ran back to the other side of the vehicle for cover. Bam burst out of the vehicle. He was quick for his bulk as he joined Jude and Lynda behind. As the bike men came within range. Together they mowed them down one after the other.

“We can’t hang around here.” “Grab your bike.”

“And leave these ones behind? No way. Roy and Natty Rasta will lead us to the Dust devil, can’t you see?”

“And sometimes, you look where you didn’t intend, Eva’s it.” “Meaning?”

“She knows something of value. She’ll ride with me.”  
“Bring them out.”

Bam opened the door and let out Eva and a resentful Roy. He took them one after the other to the back of the vehicle. The moment Natty Rasta set his eyes on Roy, he spoke for the very first time. “It’s a small world, after all. Traitor.”

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They all turned to look at him.

“You know him?” Jude quipped.

“Like the back of my hand. He’s a double-dealing devil...”

The vroooooom, VrooooooooooooooooooM of more bikes reached them from their back. The bike men that assailed them at the bungalow, regrouped and were on their way back to town. Jude said, “It’s not over.”

“No it’s not,” Rumbled bam. “Quick, get behind those boulders, you two”

Lynda led Eva to the back of the boulder by the roadside. Bam and Jude carried Natty Rasta out of the boot to the back of the same boulder. When they came back for Roy, he was simply nowhere in sight! And the angels of death were upon them. Jude jettisoned his idea of leading them away as if he was escaping. He wanted to give the rest a loophole through which to escape. Rather, he picked up his AR-15 and joined Bam in the gunplay by the moonlight. Lynda crawled into it too, and the trio pitted against a legion of bike riding demons.

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The boulder did not serve its purpose courtesy of Roy. In the thick of the battle, he had found his way around it, and with handcuffed hands, grabbed Eva by the neck. The struggle between them attracted the gunman who found them. He shot Roy in the forehead and Eva took hers in the upper right shoulder. He pointed his gun at Natty Rasta, but he never pulled the trigger. Jude pumped him full of bullets. He raced back. On the ground, Lynda lay shot in the upper right arm, writhing. Bam rushed to her aid, and in so doing, ran into a bullet. He toppled heavily to the ground and laid instantly still like a tree trunk. A bike man, supposedly dead, crawled forward. He wore a ghostly smile, revealing a set of bloodied uneven teeth. He had Jude on the cross-hair.

## CHAPTER 7



The federal capital territory was a beehive of activities. Sinister bike riding men took to the streets. Other road users honked the horns of their vehicles all around, raising a mixture of loud disgusting sounds. They spread in all directions like a disrupted procession of ants, meandering round the numerous cars abandoned by fear-filled drivers on the major streets. There were several more collisions, and resultant conflagrations. The bike men rallied round all nooks and crannies of the city, ransacking hotels, churches and mosques. In the end, they came up with nothing.

However, somewhere in the suburb of Suleja, in Niger state, two power bikes arrived shortly after midnight. It was a hectic night ride with one injured person astride behind each rider. Lynda saddled the bike behind Natty after he administered a rough first aid to her injury. Eva moaned, riding behind Jude. Her left shoulder, bound in stripes, turned off a dead man's shirt, troubled her. Jude held and led her after Natty Rasta and Lynda as they dismounted their motorcycles. They all went up a flight of stairs to the

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second floor of a three-storeyed building in the fenced premises. A bright white light sprang up as Natty Rasta reached out to the wall and pressed the switch.

“It’s a blunder! A blunder, so frightening, like a terrible thunder!” Jude lamented, regretting having been right about Roy, and like a gullible youth allowed himself to be convinced otherwise. He would have been used, abused, and disused at last. A pawn in the hands of ill-motivated men clad in iron masks. Repossessed by the demon of suspicion, Jude resolved inwardly to go solo, as he thought the first paramount concern of life was self-preservation. Shaking his head from side to side, in cold anger, he muttered, “This is discombobulating.”

“Don’t be that way, Jude,” said Lynda shivering, her singsong voice pleading. “It is more harrowing to me. I’ve stayed longer with the Judas than you. I’ve been more exposed to him than anyone else. He knew virtually all that I know. He must have been relaying things to the people he worked with all the while.”

“You two, yours are no worse than mine,” interrupted Natty Rasta. “Roy and the people behind him took over my

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business. Worse still, was having me manage it for them, to maintain certain profitable links the business has.”

“How is that possible?” Asked Lynda. “Blackmail.” Eva quipped. “How else?”

“Blackmail,” Natty Rasta confirmed in a sorrowful tone. “Some of my own men turned against me, working with them for whatever reason they had. There are the ones who joined our rank for the weed they get easily and smoked, not in appreciation of the principles and culture of Rastafarianism. They wear dreadlocks too, but aren’t ‘dread’ at heart.”

“Weed... Indian Hemp?” Asked Lynda “That’s it.”

“Someone said it’s the weed that grew on the grave of king Solomon. Is that true?”

Natty Rasta burst with a deep belly laugh despite himself. His shoulders rocking, he threw back his head. “That’s one hell of a jape!”

Jude liked the way he laughed. He chuckled reluctantly, but appreciating the light element. It did well to decontaminate the tension in his soul. He watched Natty Rasta attending to Eva and Lynda’s gunshot injuries. He

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thought the Rasta man went about it with confidence. Without being told, he stepped backwards. "You surely know it, man."

"Yes. When you think you've known a true Rasta, there's always one more thing you don't know about him. I'm a certified croaker. " He wore an open smile looking downward at Lynda. "I needed to make more money than my surgery centre was fetching. I opted out of practice, and entered a new line of business. It turned out to be a licence to print money. Things went well, until Roy came calling. He wasn't alone as I got to know afterwards. He was backed by some powerful shadows that chose to stay in the background. They took over my business. No compensation of any sort. Nothing. Now, nothing I have is mine. I'm a shadow of myself, a figurehead. You see."

"Aw aw..." Lynda said.

"You see... I don't want money anymore, I want something else." "What do you want?"

"A sword. Jesus said, '...And if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one.' Do you read your bible?"

"Vengeance?" Jude asked, surprised at the mention of Jesus. He wondered if Jesus ever said such, and if he did,

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whether he meant to teach vengeance. "How do you want to go about it when you don't know those behind Roy?"

"I'll find them. let me put on my thinking cap."

Jude again grew silent. He thought hard about the Rasta man's words. He considered all that Eva had revealed. The gravity of the evil that the Dust devil represented seemed to dawn on him anew. He shut his eyes in retrospection, contemplating. And after a quarter hour of hard thinking, he resolved that one cannot ride a tiger for too long. The only way out now is through. This is when Idle comes in, he told himself.

The next evening saw a mesomorph male coming out of a cab. In a bluish flowery cotton shirt over a pair of wine coloured corduroy trousers, he carried a backpack on his shoulders like some high school kid. He looked like one, but he was not. Jude let him pay off the cab before he stepped out of the shadow. "Hello man."

"What's doing?"

"Let's find out. Welcome."

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“Shall we?” he said, taking Jude’s extended hand in a warm handshake. “You got me going wild when you first vanished.”

“The devil came meddling with something perfect. Let’s hole you up somewhere first, ” said Jude, passing his ATM card to him. “Pull out a hundred thousand Naira. Lodge yourself into the Valley view hotel behind you. I’ll be with you by 9:00 p.m.”

With that, Jude left him. He went back the way he came to the gated yard that Natty Rasta sheltered them. He said it belonged to his late brother whose kids decided to stay put in England. Jude pushed the gate open. The Rasta man sat on the bonnet of a car covered in coarse tarpaulin.

“They struck the Chief Justice that same night,” he said. “Wow!” Jude exclaimed. “Very ba...”

“He escaped. His bodyguard took the bullets after a gruesome ‘one is to four’ gunfight. One dead body guard, Three dead bike men. The fourth one fled the scene when some SARS operatives showed up.”

“It’s the Dust devil orchestrating these attacks. They don’t give up. They’ll try again since he’s marked for elimination.”

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“Sure. It’s their corporate decision which they won’t rescind. My thinking cap’s yielding something.”

“What?”

“I wish to meet the Chief Justice. If he’d come out clean, and tell me who he’s been dining with when the whole wide world’s asleep, I’ll be one leap close to the puppeteers of the Dust devil. I want to kick their black asses”

“Yours is black too. I understand, I agree. The Issue is how to meet him without being seen.” “...And how to make him trust us, and open up.”

“If he doesn’t, he’d be shortening his life span. I’ll reach out to him somehow.”

Jude left him outside. He went in and drafted a letter to the Chief Justice of the Federation. In it, he revealed his person, stated his reason for writing, and wrote down what he wanted in plain enough words. He stressed the need for him to open up and live... or keep secrets, and die. The choice was his, but he’d prefer him opening up. He included the same phone number he had given to Idle, and stated his dire need for a response. Jude did not pay much attention to Eva and Lynda. They were doting over each other as women do upon starting up friendship. He lay on the single couch in

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the sitting room. He turned things over in his penetrating mind, not as long as he'd like to, as he slipped into the land of nods. By the time he woke up with a start, Natty Rasta was serving spinach, stewed in Roma tomato and white rice. It was 8:00 p.m. While they ate, Lynda said her twin sister would be coming to Nigeria and that she wished things were different. She may have to find her way to Lagos if it comes to that. Jude checked his wristwatch. It showed 8: 35. "It tasted like a Rasta man's food. No meat."

He left them laughing hard as he went out of the flat. Lynda called after him, "Where are you going?"

"I See you in one hour, I've got to see the world."

In the dark, not long after, Jude strolled close to the gate of Valley view hotel. He dialled Idle's Number, and waited. A brief moment later, Idle ambled out of the hotel gate, seeming to have all day, but Jude knew better. Jude made a low familiar whistle to which Idle responded by further reducing his pace. He bore to the left side of the entrance of the hotel. Jude walked after him, caught up and led him down the street into an adjoining street. About three poles into the side street, Idle almost bumped into him from

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behind as he stopped abruptly. "Here'll do. I can't show up in bars and hotels. I'm on the wanted list."

"True."

They traded information and news, and updated each other about the development since they last communicated. Jude passed on an envelope marked 'Private' to Idle. "Make sure this gets to the Chief Justice himself. It's for his good health... and mine."

"I'll do so. It won't be easy to reach him because of the attempt on his life." "Find a way. Time's important."

"Okay. Maybe I know someone who knows someone..." "You always do. Let me know as soon as you're back." They said good-bye.

Idle had been gone for two days. Jude had no option but to wait. He realized first hand that patience was a boring experience. Back in their hiding place, he lay again, doing some thinking. His mind reeled back to when and how it all began. He thought about the life he led before, comparing it with the life he led now. The death threat looming over him, and how to neutralize it became his dominant thought. The sudden ringing of his phone interrupted his thoughts. On the rippling screen, he saw the name, 'Idle,' and sat up in a

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hurry. Jude punched the call receive button and learnt that Idle just arrived into his hotel room. They arranged to meet again, at night, at the same time and place.

Jude wished he could fast forward the time of the day as he lay down again, fighting boredom. In due course, it was time. He called Idle on the phone and met him at the gate of Valley view hotel. They headed down the shadowy street as they did before. "You kept me standing on my toes, man."

"It wasn't easy. I had to give all it takes to take all it gives." "How did you gain access to him?"

"I've just told you. There's always a string to be pulled if you look hard enough. I pulled one, and caught his attention. He tested my authenticity: rigorous questioning, background check and all that after he'd read the letter." Idle stepped down from the sidewalk and lowered himself onto the pavement. "We could sit down, couldn't we? The old man was very curious about your imprisonment. He said an investigation was conducted to find you, and that it was an effort in futility."

Jude sat down beside Idle. "How did he know about me?" "That, I can't tell, but he does. If not everything, something." "Why hasn't he called me?"

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“He will.”

Jude stared long at his bosom friend. He thought he was the opposite of his appearance. “Thanks amigo.”

“What are friends for?”

“Well... but I have to let you know I’m grateful.”

Later that night, Jude’s phone rang. He guessed it was the Chief Justice. He was right. The baritone voice introduced himself and asked if it was speaking with Jude Ochada. Jude confirmed his identity and they exchanged pleasantries.

“I appreciate your position the more, Jude,” said the Chief Justice. “When will it be convenient to come around? You won’t be sighted by another soul than the pilot I’ll send to pick you up.”

“Will tomorrow morning be okay?”

“Tell me when and where to pick you up.”

“9:00 a.m. I will communicate my location to you an hour earlier.”

“That’s alright.”

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The following morning, Jude briefed Lynda about what he planned to do. He bade her to keep it to herself as he prepared to go out. Next, he dialled the Chief Justice's line and said he was ready. The next twenty minutes saw him at the agreed meeting point. He waited out of view beside Saint Peter's Presbyterian Church. There was no single soul in sight. The thrumming of the helicopter reached him before it appeared on the western horizon. It was a mere blackish moving speck in the sky. Gradually, it grew bigger and took on a definite shape. It descended to something below two hundred feet. Jude crossed over to the field of the school run by the church. He waved his white cap as prearranged, and soon the chopper perched before him. The door opened and he climbed into the cockpit. Jude placed the brownish female pilot at seventeen or eighteen. Her crew cut gave her a boyish look. A male co-pilot sat next to her. He looked somewhere around thirty. Even in plain cloth, Jude could perceive his military aura. They greeted in unison, "Good morning Mr Jude Ochada.

"Good morning, who are you? " The man said, "I'm Nick. She's..."

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“Rose.” The girl cut in. Her listless face was a mask of curiosity. She studied Jude like a fresh specimen of something strange as the chopper ascended under her command.

“Great. My pleasure.”

“We’ve got thirty minutes to lodge you where the Chief Justice will meet with you.” “Where’s it?”

“Keep your eyes peeled,” said the teenager over her shoulder. “It’s somewhere private in the capital. He holds you in some esteem.”

“That’s refreshing.” Jude felt the chopper pick up speed.

The co-pilot fell silent immediately but the brownish girl sustained the chat a little longer. As said, some thirty minutes later, the chopper began its descent. The world out below grew more distinct. It reminded Jude of ‘being shown the kingdom of the world from the height of a pinnacle.’ He could see the city sprawled north, west, east and south to different degrees. The pilot aimed the chopper towards a fenced property the size of a standard football field. Within the fence, solid storeyed buildings juxtaposed one another on one side; the other side contained two bungalows and a stretch of well-manicured lawn beside a swimming pool. The

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chopper perched before one of the bungalows and they all got out. With great economy, the duo introduced Jude to one of the bungalows and another pair of supposedly housekeepers with the same military aura as Nick.

“The Chief Justice will see you at noon,” the brownish girl said, and they left him with the other pair. “We’ll be right back to return you to the wild.”

“I must be a wild species then, okay.” Jude shrugged. “Thanks.” “So it seems, never mind ‘thanks’...”

At noon, a gentle rap interrupted his reverie. Narrowing his dirt brown eyes, Jude observed one of the pair who opened the door and entered. “The Chief Justice will see you now. Come with me, please.”

In the foremost one of the cluster of storied buildings, he ushered Jude before the Chief Justice. Judee thought one couldn’t judge a book by its cover. The Chief Justice was a diminutive man who sat behind an enormous desk peering at him from behind a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. He leaned forward after an exchange of courtesies. “Your reputation walks before you, Jude,” he said. My source confirmed all about you. Our search for you yielded no result and we took

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you for dead. One of those disappearing tricks. Your letter was a pleasant surprise."

"Thank you Chief."

"Well. As it is, my life has been under constant threat. The government security agencies cannot be trusted. It's like an all-man-to-himself situation now, and the Dust devil is behind it all."

"What do you know about the organization?"

"A little. Maybe nothing, but its influence shows all around us." "Is the Dust devil responsible for the attempt to kill you?" "That's public Knowledge."

"Do you have any contact with its members?"

"They are everywhere but you can't finger a soul. That's our challenge." "Is there any undue pressure for anything from you by anybody or group?"

"That is not unusual in my office. We receive all sorts of pressures from different quarters. Anyway, you hold on. The fact is that I'm marked for assassination, and there's death hovering over you too. What do you think we can do?"

"Whatever you let us do by being more open." "You think I'm not being open with you?" "That's what I think."

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The grim faced man heaved a sigh. Fleeting as it was, it was not lost to Jude. He saw the look of despair flashed through his eyes. The smallish man searched Jude's soul through his eyes. Jude met his gaze with dirt brown eyes peering out from under bushy brows. The Chief Justice leaned back onto the backrest of his armchair. "You are what they say you are," he said.

It was a complement. Jude didn't let it go to his head though. He ignored it, even as he noticed that the smallish man seemed to shrivel the more. "Withholding vital information at this critical time is like gambling with your life, your honour. Out with it."

"It's not as you think, but let me say that the enemy we both seek is not far from us, I'm coming to that. First, tell me. Now that you can't walk in the open by day, how would you investigate certain individuals at the presidency?"

"Go ahead and tell me. Who needs to be investigated?"

"My list is long. I wanted someone trustworthy to handle it. I almost slipped. Luckily, I heard from you. You'll handle it if you give me your word that you can."

"Let me have it."

## DUST DEVIL

“No. Tell me, how will you do it?”

“I’m not alone. The presidency is easy to penetrate.”

“Easy, you said?”

They locked eyes for a brief moment. The Chief Justice shrugged. “Any port in a storm... It’s a big gamble. If you win, I’ll make it up to you.”

“I’ll try. The only way out for me is through.” “Where are you holing up?”

“I’m with a few friends in the same situation as I am.”  
“It’ll augur well if you have a watertight safe house...”

Jude left his presence some thirty minutes later. He has secured a safe place in the Federal Capital Territory, under the very nose of the Dust devil. The Chief Justice offered him one of the storeyed buildings. He thought of the rest of them back at Natty Rasta’s, but somewhere inside, the thought of going solo still gnawed at him. The helicopter stood by; waiting for him by the time he got to his lodge at 4:00 p.m. It would be at his disposal while the situation persists, the Chief Justice had said. That has its pros and cons, he knew. Rose and Nick dropped him where they had picked him in the morning.

## DUST DEVIL

Natty Rasta and Lynda sat up watching TV. Eva laid on the couch asleep. Jude reclined on the sofa with much on his mind. He realised from their evening's discussion that he'd really need these people in his scheme of things to come. Natty Rasta wants vengeance. For Lynda like himself, there was only one way out, and that's through. Eva needed protection from her own kind, especially now that she had switched sides and revealed much about them. Somehow, she desired vengeance too for the ills meted on her by Roy and certain unsavoury ones in their thing. They were highly placed men in the society, she had told Jude; medical doctors, lawyers, academia and whatnot. However, their nocturnal activities were highly questionable. He realised that despite his feelings, reasons suggested that these were his immediate team members. No matter how and where they all came on board the same boat, they seemed to have bonded. Experiences first fostered the bonding. The sharing of beliefs followed. Then, the emerging feelings of comradery took over. Jude, knowing that he had a new conviction, and that convictions have consequences, opted to lay part of his plans face up on the table. He heaved himself into a sitting position and drew their attention. "Spare one moment, you two, will you."

## DUST DEVIL

“What now?” asked Natty Rasta. He paused the New Jack City movie playing on the TV screen. “We are all moving tomorrow.”

“To where?”

“We’re going back to Abuja. There’s a better safe house. Besides, We can’t do anything from a distance.”

“Tell me more.” Lynda got up like a snake to a challenge.

“You heard me, Lynda. I’m not reporting to you as the DG-SSS said. That structure is not in place.”

“To hell with structure. How safe is your better safe house, egg head?”

“I’m addicted to good things, you’ll see. The place is very secure. We’ll move in the very hour before dawn, while it is still dark.”

Jude saw to it that they were all ready by the said time. Natty Rasta took charge of Eva while Lynda and Jude carried their light personal effects. Jude led them to the meeting point and they waited. Just as the rays of the sun were about to dispel the darkness from the eastern horizon, they heard the thrumming of the helicopter as it flew into sight. All but Jude was shocked. He had kept that part away from them on

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purpose until the last minute. However, none escaped the wave of excitement that swept over them. The chopper perched, and they climbed into the cockpit in something like a hurry. Then, the chopper lofted almost at slow motion, and away it flew. Eva who had been silent most of the time was all smiles. She said, "This seems like a promise of so much pleasure."

Natty Rasta chuckled. He said, "Pleasures seem sweet, but prove a glass of bitters, when ignorance enters... finish it, Eva."

"...folly is at hand? What's it we have to do with Oliver Goldsmith?"

"It just popped into my mind," said the Rasta man. "It's food for thought. Think about it. Think about the consequences of excessive pleasures"

## CHAPTER 8



Like a dog, Jude smelt fear on the smallish man. The Chief Justice had owned up at last, that he was sorely afraid. He viewed the government security personnel with much distrust, and could not go to work. Jude sensed that he was the man's faint ray of hope to live, for he reached out for him as a drowning man clutched a twig. Jude gazed up at the full stars in the clear sky. He inhaled the mixed scent of assorted night blooming flowers wafting up to his nostrils. There was Jasmine. Sweet, musky, enchanting; but it was no time to fantasize.

The Dust devil will strike again. How, where and when? He could not tell. Something vague was crystalizing at the back of his mind informed by the knowledge he now possessed. A plan was forming. He had much to do, and, one at a time, he would have to crack the nuts. Every second counted, he thought, leaning on the railing of the balcony.

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## DUST DEVIL

The sun glared hard directly overhead, its rays bouncing off the shiny black saloon as it slid through the gate of the Supreme Court premises. It crawled to a standstill before the car park, waiting. A shadowy figure emerged from the midst of a vast array stationary cars. He collected a briefcase from a pair of whitish hands through the right side front window. The shadow figure turned around. He stepped back among the parked cars immediately. The black saloon car rolled away.

He stooped, and placed the briefcase on the gravelled ground. One after the other, he brought out the components and assembled them into a rifle. It was an NTW-20 fitted with a telescopic optic. He raised the telescope to his eye, pointing it in the direction of the Chief Justice's office. The smallish man stood at the middle window, and seemed to glance at the car park for a brief moment. Then, he turned his back to the window where only his waist upward showed. The shadowy figure, shielded by the cars around, climbed into a coaster bus. When he had the Chief Justice in his crosshairs, he steadied his hands. His thick forefinger curled around the trigger, and began to squeeze. At that moment, his target shifted out of sight.

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The shadowy figure waited, unruffled, patient as a python. Then, the target returned and seemed to settle into a chair. The shadowy figure looked through the telescope at his target some hundred meters away. Again, he had him in his crosshairs and steadied his hands. Without hurry, he squeezed the trigger. Splinters of glass flew in every direction a fraction of a second before the muffled sound of gunshot startled the target. The Chief Justice spun off the window in his office, out of his sight. The shooter disassembled his weapon with deft hands and packed the components into the briefcase.

In that instance when he straightened up with the briefcase in his right hand, a dart struck him in the nape. Surprised, he spun around as his right hand jerked to the back of his neck. He pulled out a syringe tipped with a hypodermic needle. He took a baffled look at it, and grabbed the silver-plated .45 from his waistband. Cursing, swearing, he dashed out of the bus in the throes of confusion, looking everywhere. His gun snapped rapidly from one line of fire to the other wherever he suspected motion or presence anywhere around him. He scurried to the backside of the parked cars. There was nobody. He fished his phone from his pocket with a trembling hand, and dialled a number.

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Then, he spoke rapidly into the phone before returning it into his pocket. He darted among the parked cars searching for his assailant. His movement grew increasingly clumsy and at last, he leaned against a red sports car for support. He seemed to hold the car in an irrational embrace. Then, he slid down the side of the car and slumped, a deflated balloon.

On the left flank of the central building, another man slung his dart gun over his shoulders. His hairless head shone like a polished boot in the sun. A pair of brown tinted spectacles shielded his eyes as he stood with his broad back to the wall, peeping. When he saw the shadowy figure go down, he leapt out and dashed towards the car park. The man laid face up gripping his briefcase upon his chest. The new entrant picked up the briefcase, and frisked the limp body on the ground for. He stuffed everything he found into his own pocket. Then, his own companion materialised. Between them, they carried and dumped the limp body into the boot of a metallic grey Toyota Venza. The vehicle eased out of the car park towards the front of the central building of the Supreme Court.

The court clerk came out of the building. He carried a mannequin, made likeness of, and dressed like the Chief

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Justice himself. He flagged down the approaching vehicle. Recognition dawned on the man with the hairless head, and he slammed the brakes in reflex action. His companion started. They cast sideways glances at each other, and lowered their guns, perplexed. Jude ran to the rear and stuffed the dummy into the boot too. He got in behind Idle, and the new version of Natty Rasta with a head shaven as clean as a bottle-top. Natty Rasta quipped, "Jude, you had Idle me protect a dummy in the name of the head of the judiciary, the Chief Justice of Nigeria?"

"One Chief Justice is as good as the other. What d' you think, Idle?"

Idle, reconciling with how mad Jude could be, looked at him with bleary eyes. He shook his head, and said nothing. He drove at a cruise until he cleared the Three Arms Zone, Abuja. Then, he floored the pedal and Toyota Venza surged like a caged beast that just gained its freedom. However, they were not alone. A black ford bus picked up speed behind them. The Toyota Venza slowed down, and bore right. So did the black ford bus. "We have company."

A tower technician in light grey dungaree bore a light backpack on his back. He stepped onto the first of the

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climbing rungs of the telecom mast. One rung at a time, he made his ascent. It was a two hundred and fifty feet affair, but his climbing plan may not take him that high. Looking downwards, the neighbourhood sprawled beneath him like a gigantic carpet. It seemed to crawl with a million glow-worms emitting diverse colours of light. Some moved with a beam preceding them, others seemed static. The Three Arms Zone, Abuja was stirring. The technician climbed a little above three hundred feet before dawn. Then, he stopped. It was going to be a long wait, but wait, he would.

From the backpack on his back, he took out a Wingspan Titan 12 x 50 telescope. With this, he viewed the neighbourhood. Soon, he identified his query by a 2 x 2 arrangement of Geepee tanks on raised platforms. It was hard to tell their sizes and capacities from a distance but they were there. The technician remained motionless at the break of the day. He grew oblivious of the beehive activities that went on in the district beneath him. With the telescope, he viewed the compound with an exceptionally high perimeter fence. Two rectangular storey buildings ran parallel to each other. He could see the shed in-between. The rear view of assorted exotic cars showed under the outline of the roof of the shed. Someone rounded the corner into view. He seemed

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to be in a hurry. The technician observed that the person carried a suitcase, and an aluminium ladder. He placed the ladder against one of the Geepee tanks and climbed upwards. He climbed beyond where the tap of the tank should be to the very top and opened it. The tower technician watched him empty the content of the suitcase into the tank and went down the ladder. He went back the way he came out of sight and returned with the suitcase a second time. He scurried up the ladder and emptied the content into the Geepee tank again. This time, he descended and removed the aluminium ladder, which he carried away with himself.

Shortly, a door opened on the second floor of the storey building on the left hand side. One after the other, three men emerged and filed after one another along the corridor. They went to the corridor and sat around a table. The tower technician could not determine the separate individuals from their distance from him. He was however sure that the owner of the property was among, and therefore others must be his allies. A fourth man came out of the door. The same one had climbed up to the Geepee tank. He went to the sitting men with something flat, might be a file, in his hands. He stood before them and seemed to be explaining

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something to the men from the object in his hands. The tower technician watched their near fifteen minutes interaction.

The three men rose up in unison as if in obedience to an order. They marched down the corridor into the door from which they came out. Soon, they descended the flight of stairs by the side of the storey building and a long white saloon came out of the shed. They all got in, and the car drove out of his view in a hurry.

The fourth man, the one with the file, who had climbed the Geepee tank, came out too, carrying two of the suitcases towards the shed. He opened the boot of a car and put them in. Then, he got into the car and drove away too.

Some thirty minutes later, the vehicle drove in and parked under the shed. He went back into the storey building. While the tower technician contemplated the trips with briefcases, the other vehicle arrived with the three men. Behind them, two other cars drove in. As the vehicles pulled up beside one another, each man came out and picked a cloak of some kind from the boot of the last one. They all put on the cloaks and trooped up the stairs to the second floor of the storey building. They remained inside until it struck 12:00 p.m. on the tower technician's wristwatch. Then, they

## DUST DEVIL

emerged one after another from the house and got into the two extra cars. They drove off. The tower technician put his telescope back into the backpack. He began his descent, stepping down one rung at a time. On the list the Chief Justice gave to him, this was the third place he had physically looked into. It was the first place he had seen anything in the semblance of clandestinity. He mapped out his next line of action as he finally stood on the ground. Jude stepped out of the fence around the mast adjusting the backpack on his back. He stepped across a drainage gutter onto the main road and turned to his right. Then, they stepped out from the back of a kiosk, each pointing a gun at him. "Nobody climbs that thing for fun, Jude," said the dead voice. "Put your hands in the air."

"...stand still," added the husky one. "We seem to know how to find you, don't we?" "How much still?" Jude's face went dead pan.

"As much still as a statue!" Cross grinned.

"You know what's up!" Jude stood still. From beneath bushy brows, his dirt-brown eyes took them in. the midget and the giant.

## DUST DEVIL

“You know what’s up!” the albino mimicked him in his dead voice. “You blew up your chance of being a bigger boy Jude.”

“How’s that?”

“You won’t need to know anymore, I’m sorry. Now, you belong to the bottom of the lake.”

Cross took Jude’s backpack off him. He ran his hand all over him, patting him here and there. He found and pulled out Jude’s gun. Walking behind, poking Jude on the back with the muzzle of his handgun, they ushered him down the street to where they had left the black ford bus. They pushed Jude roughly into the bus and Cross got in next to him.

Some twenty minutes after, the black ford bus parked under an array of pine trees. Cross never let his guard down for once. He motioned Jude to get out of the bus and they led him towards the old building. A thick layer of pine needles covered the soil of the ground as they went. Jude thought that the property was not in regular use. “How does this joint look like the bottom of a lake to you, Oracle?”

“No, it doesn’t. It’s just a reception point, you’ll see.”

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The midget put a key in the corrugated iron door and turned it. Then, the door opened into a rectangular courtyard. Jude wondered what the building was and what went on within. From the courtyard, they entered into a corridor with doors on both sides. Jude counted as they went. At the fourth door to the right they stopped and the midget opened the door. Jude had never been that surprised all of his life. Lynda laid bound both hands and feet in a double couch. She opened her eyes as they entered. He rushed in to take a closer look, just to make sure she was all right. "My God. Lynda, are you okay?"

A strong hand gripped him by the collar of his dungaree and jerked him backward. The force of the pull was enormous. Jude did not resist. He staggered backwards, tripped over something behind him, and crashed to the ground. It was Cross. "This isn't Lynda, can't you see? You guys will die in each other's bosom in a short while, except you provide Lynda."

Unbelieving, Jude rolled over. He took a closer look at the woman. She was Lynda to him, but his memory helped him. He remembered that Lynda was expecting her sister, which she said was an identical twin. She wouldn't have

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come into the country if they looked this much alike, Jude lamented. The midget came around and slammed a pair of handcuffs onto his hands. "Our eyes spotted her. They claimed to have found Lynda at the airport. We went after her, caught her. It turned out it was something like a Lynda. Not bad. We are one step closer to her. Her twin sister will die, if she doesn't surface and present herself a living sacrifice unto the Dust devil."

"What if you do find Lynda, will you let this one off?"

"We will. You're going to make things easier. Bring her to us, we'll let go of her beautiful, innocent sister. That'll end your misery on time, won't it?"

"Yeah. You're right. To get Lynda, you'll have to pass through me. I wonder how."

"That's why we brought you here, you see?"

"I can't see. How are you going to get Lynda through me? She's one hell of a butterfly, trusting nobody, always fluttering. You never can tell where or when she would perch."

"Butterflies love nectar, don't they? They hunt for it."

## DUST DEVIL

They passed a chain around Jude's waist, and hooked the cuffs on his hands on it. They bound his feet in shackles too and left him in the dim room with the woman.

Back in their new safe house, Natty Rasta took a closer look at their 'guest.' The man seemed overdosed by the amount of tranquilizer that went into him. Gripped in the residual effects of the shot, he laid breathing almost imperceptibly. Natty Rasta felt his pulse. "He'll be fine. Just a little more time." He muttered to himself. "I'll let him be for the moment."

He crossed the floor to the corner where Lynda and Eva laid chatting. He observed that Eva seemed brighter and much less in pain. He turned away, preferring to leave them in each other's company. Lynda would not let him go. "Heard from Jude yet?"

"No."

"He's taken too long you know? Idle?" "No."

"I have a feeling something's up. What it is, I don't know, but I'm sure he's either after something or the other way round."

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“Whichever way, he’d be just fine.” Natty said in an attempt to allay her fears. First, she had raised the issue of being unable to reach her sister since she came into the country. It took all he could muster to calm reassure her. He left her and went to the kitchen to collect his thoughts. Jude’s number did not connect when he dialled it. He tried Idle’s number. It connected and rang. The voice cut the second ring midway. “Talk of the devil...”

“Where’s Jude?” “They have him.”

“Cho! Bumbaclot! Where do they have him?”

Lynda sprang to his side at his exclamation. She was jumpy. She clung onto Natty Rasta’s arm like a pleading teenager. Natty ran his hand through her hair to comfort her while he listened to Idle on the Phone. When the line went dead, he explained all he heard to Lynda. In a twinkle of an eye, he was set to go in a short-sleeved lumberjack shirt over his pair of black 501 shrink to fit jeans. He couldn’t convince Lynda that this was not her show. She dressed up too. He reasoned with her to stay back for the sake of her injury, and to tend to Eva, but she was defiant. When she went into the room to select her weapon, Natty ducked out of the house through the stairway at the back of the storey building.

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Jude loved guns. And he had a lot of respect for those things. In the hands of another man, they made him tame. His eyes have grown accustomed to the dimness of the room. The handcuffs on his hands were chain linked. He loved that too. Lynda's sister laid motionless on the bare mattress by the wall. Jude wondered if she would be any good with a gun. "Hi. I'm Jude. Your sister is my partner. We work together."

"I was going to ask you. I heard your conversation with those two."

"Not to worry, we're going to be okay. We'll get out of here. Can you use a gun?"

"Listen to yourself, man. You just said we're going to be okay. How are we going to be okay with guns banging everywhere?" It was a plea.

Her voice was rather mellow, not as resonant as Lynda's, Jude thought. "That's our first means of ever getting out of here if you need to hear it blunt. We call it 'persuader,' and we're going to need it. You'd better be ready for anything."

He rose to his feet and stood with his legs shoulder width apart. Jude wrenched the cuffs on his hands apart with a sudden burst of strength. Each became a rugged

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bangle on each wrist. He dealt accordingly with the chain around his waist and stood free from bondage. Lynda's sister looked on in awe with her lips formed into a silent O!

Next, is to break out from the dungeon. An escape bid looked like a morbid business to Jude. More so, because he'd have to extricate Lynda's sister. He wasn't leaving her behind, he decided, and went to work on her shackles too. In a moment, he had opened both the latches and the jaws of the cuffs on her slender wrists. They were both free. He went across the master bedroom and opened the wardrobe. It was big enough. "What do we call you?"

"Call me Susan."

"Okay. Susan, get in there and stay as low as possible. You don't like gun fights, do you?"

Susan shuddered visibly. Looking at Jude as if he was a demi-god, she stepped into the wardrobe, whimpering. She had the plea in her heart in her equally smoky eyes. "It's going to be okay. You crouch in there."

He shut the doors of the wardrobe and stepped back to the door of the room. He turned the door handle and pulled it gently. The door yielded. It felt unsafe. He pushed it and stood thinking hard. He would have to wait for any of the

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two to come, and it would be unlucky if they both came. Then, he heard some footsteps ghosting along the passage. Barely audible, but surely, the footsteps approached. He stepped behind the door with all his senses tuned in to pick the sneaky footsteps. Someone turned the door handle and stuck in a gun hand and his head. Jude's right hand shot out, gripping the albino at the wrist. He pulled him in as a bullet tore through the dim room. "You are good at stalking, runt."

"You're a dead dog." The dead voice grunted.

The midget held the gun by the butt; Jude held him by the wrist. In their grip, the gun turned away from either of them. Jude slammed him into the wall with brute force and pulled the gun but the midget didn't let go. He rather sought to pull the trigger, which Jude hadn't allowed to return since his first shot. The midget held onto it with a vice-like grip, surprising Jude with his strength.

Jude thought the Goliath would soon come running. With the other hand, he grabbed the midget by his belt and yanked him off his feet. The midget's steel-toe boot connected squarely with Jude's shin like a sledgehammer. Excruciating pain exploded in his right leg and he limped to the centre of the room, dragging the albino with him. Jude

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held him at arm's length. He rammed the right one into the midget's temple. He kept at it until the midget lost his grip on the gun, punch-drunk. Jude dropped him onto the tiled floor, pulling his gun off his hand. He darted to the door and peeped. He saw nobody. An ominous silence greeted him as stepped into the passage. Stealthy as a pickpocket, Jude traversed the dark passage into the courtyard. He was ready for anything. The courtyard was empty. He ran to the door and tried it. Like the rock of Gibraltar, it didn't budge an inch. Jude scoffed. He went into the room next to the main entrance and found all the windows adequately protected. Looking out through the window, he saw that the black ford bus was gone.

He dashed back into the passage, testing all the doors as he went along. He looked into the fourth. The midget albino laid as before. Jude continued down the passage still testing other doors left and right. The last one on his right opened backwards with a creak. Quickly, he stepped in to check the window. They sported some burglar proof too. He could go through any part of the roof from the courtyard, but Susan wasn't Lynda. She would not be able to climb. He made up his mind and ran back to the fourth room. The midget was stirring. Jude whipped his head with the butt of the .45. He

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opened the door and pulled Susan out. She still whimpered. Jude couldn't care less. He held her arm and pulled her after himself to the courtyard. Jude ran back to the room and brought out a wooden desk. He helped Susan onto it and climbed after her. "Hurry, get up to the roof, come on."

Susan braced up with some newfound strength and agility. With a little push from Jude, she got up to the roof and reached out with her right hand for him. Jude climbed up too. Together, they crossed to the back of the roofing and Jude jumped down first. He motioned her to jump into his arms, but Susan jumped to the ground just like him. "I'm impressed," he said, smiling sincerely, surprised.

"So am I. She surely can fly." Pointing a semi-automatic shotgun at Susan's head, stepping out from the back of an old pine tree, Cross grabbed her.

He levelled the muzzle of his gun at Cross' heart.

"Checkmate! Put the gun down, Jude." Tall, lanky, he slithered out of the corner of the building,

.45 in hand, finger on the trigger. Chewing his words, he grated, "I wonder why you're refusing to die anyway."

## DUST DEVIL

Jude's heart skipped a beat. He took two slow steps backward. "So many things I want to do in this world."

The ominous grin on Jude's face made the newcomer keep his distance with his pointed gun between them. "Drop your gun."

Jude hesitated, and dropped it. "Done that, you see?" He observed that Susan shivered visibly at the sight of the guns like a hoplophobia. "Let go of her, Cross. She's no part of this game."

His gun shifted from Susan's head to Jude's. With the other hand, he waved towards the front of the building. "You, move. This way. Slow."

Jude in front, Cross pulled Susan after him by the arm. The tall lanky man brought up the rear. They went to the metallic door and into the courtyard again. The midget met them at the centre with his lips turned down at both ends. His bluish dancing eyes broke a habit of a lifetime. They were steady for once, boring into Jude as they went closer to him. He pulled a hammer from under his jacket and came at Jude like a mad ram. Jude's right leg lashed out in a stopping kick to the chest. The midget reeled, and sprawled backwards. Something exploded in Jude's head like

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dynamite. He blacked out before reaching the ground. When Jude came to, he was, again, in chains. This time, in handcuffs linked by a bar in-between, and a bigger chain. He was tied, sitting with his back to a pole in the courtyard. His bleary eyes made out Susan at the next pole two yards off. The midget, the giant and the tall lanky man stood around her. "You said you don't know where your sister is, how do you intend to meet her?"

"I don't want to meet her. She has her life to live. She's living it however she chooses, isn't she?" "Meaning..." Cross said.

"I've got nothing to do with her!"

"Well. But how are we supposed to believe that?"

"We don't have to believe such a yarn?" The albino scoffed. "Her sister will be sad to find her corpse chopped up by the lakeside."

"Make up your mind in fucking minute." The tall lanky man said through thin lips that hardly moved.

The sudden boom of a cannon, and the crash of the front part of the courtyard startled friends and foes. Everybody jumped, and froze. Then, in the urgency of the cataclysmic

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threat, the midget and cross acted reflexively. They rounded up Suzan and Jude, and drove them like rustled cows into the passage. Jude ran beyond his pursuit, past the fourth door. Testing all possible outlets, none yielded but one from which the tall lanky man came out in response to the commotion in the yard. Susan followed him bumper to bumper into the room. A stash of mint dollars arranged from ceiling to floor greeted them. On their heels came the midget, cross and the tall lanky man. Every one of them, foe and friends, bonded in quest of safety. However, in the glow and aura of the dollar filled room, Jude, not thinking, blurted, "Man, love is the end of duty. I heard that from someone. I mean it."

## CHAPTER 9



Lynda bound the unconscious man's hand behind him. She left Eva over him with 'specific instructions.' In a short while, she located Natty Rasta using a Spyier cell phone tracker. She set out to home in on him. Lynda dashed into a roadside thicket as soon as she sighted him. She watched him from some eighty feet off. Standing behind a tree trunk, he raised his mobile phone to his ear. He listened, spoke at length into the phone, and slid it into his jacket. Then, he seemed to settle down, peering at the corrugated iron door of the inset old looking house. The very sight of him hinted at the situation, and the wait might have seemed too protracted for Lynda. She emerged from her hiding place onto the tarred road, and sashayed down the slight slope towards him. Natty Rasta sensed a presence. He turned sharply around, his gun about to let fly. "Damn! What good is there in startling a great man?"

Lynda's voice, and the look in her smoky eyes, did not match her casual walk one bit. "Great men are not always wise..." she snapped.

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“...neither do the aged understand judgement, Job 32: 9, right?” Natty cut in with a sheepish grin. “Apologies. I did it for your own health, Lynda. Don’t read the riot act to me.”

She scoffed, glaring at him like a teenage tomboy. “How mad are you?” “Mad as a hatter, likkle sistren. I’ve always been. Don’t get mad at me...” She heaved a sigh. “Sin no more.”

Natty Rasta nodded his thanks. “I’d swear I’ve seen you a couple minutes ago. Was it a doppelganger of you, led alongside Jude into that old building, at gunpoint? A serpent of a man and another like Goliath ushered them both. It puzzled me how you got ahead of me.”

Lynda wilted visibly as if her soul fluttered helplessly to its maker, in humble supplication. “Oh my God! They’ve got Suzy. What am I going to do?”

“You can’t be luckier to find where she’s being held, can you?” Natty Rasta suited her down. Next, he made a phone call in dread talk. The outcome; a Rasta driven rickety Honda Accord sputtered down the road in something less than twenty minutes later. Natty stepped out from behind the tree trunk, hailing. The old car pulled over to the side of the road. The Rasta man came out carrying a long leather

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bag, limping. Natty Rasta reached out for the bag, speaking dread talk, probably in greetings. From the long leather bag, he brought out a homemade\_bazuka fashion gun.

Natty Rasta aimed the gun at the front wall of the old building. He pulled the trigger. The wall came crashing to the ground about a hundred feet away, taking the corrugated iron door with it. From their position, they could see the giant, the midget and the tall lanky man. Startled, the giant and the midget ran around in circles. The tall lanky man only slithered to face the new threat. Then, he said something to his companions and they seemed to calm down. From a distance, Lynda and Natty Rasta watched them undo the shackles on their captives' legs in a hurry, and rushed them into the wide passage that led from the long courtyard into the building itself. Lynda sprang forth. So did Natty Rasta, on time, catching hold of her. "You don't want collateral damage, do you?" he said. "They're cornered."

"It's a good thing if they are," Lynda spat.

"They'd be equally cantankerous, ya know," said the limping Rasta man. Natty called him Badrick. "Stay back sistren n watch we back."

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They started towards the building, Natty Rasta at the lead. Badrick limped after him. Lynda heeded his admonition. She let them go ahead and watched over them as a vicious mother watched her chicks, ready to confront the slightest threat. Badrick to the left, Natty Rasta to the right, guns at the ready, they stepped towards the courtyard.

“Damn you. That’s Jon Snow in Game of Thrones.” He slithered backwards as Oracle and Cross rushed into the room. “I’ve got to stop them. Isn’t duty the end of love too?”

The giant and the midget froze, stunned, and stared in awe at the piles of dollars. In that moment, they both seemed hypnotized by the icy stare in the tall, lanky man’s black eyes. In between the time that thoughts came and went in Jude’s mind, the serpentine man pulled another gun from his hip. To Oracle and Cross, he hissed, “keep an eye on these two. A man never knows what he’d do in advance. Let me see...”

He stepped out into the passage before any of the two could say a word. Jude thought he was crazy going out alone to take on the newcomer with such firepower as could blow down a thick wall of the building. Without his gun, he felt stark naked as on the day he was born. He was done for.

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"We're better off going through this together, Cross. Give me my gun."

"True, but safer it is to trust you like a fox." The giant grinned. The perplexity seemed to have thawed off him.

"You're not reasoning."

"Yes I am. I reason better without a gun in your hand. You'll rather be my shield, you know."

In the passage, a gun coughed once, and again. Then, a door crashed open at a distance. Cross grabbed Jude by the arm and nudged his ribcage with the muzzle of his gun. Jude felt the rim of the gun by his side. And beyond, he felt something colder than the rim of the gun. The cold rage took dominion of his soul. From the passage, he heard doors creaking open and slamming.

Whosoever protected this much money would be ruthless, he thought. Behind him, he heard the dead voice, "Be my shield too, Mock-angel."

Jude turned his head to see the fear in Susan's eyes. She was a vegetable at the sight of guns, wilted twice as much. Resigned, she obeyed the midget, influenced by the power in his gun. He strained to bear it. The room-by-room search

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was coming nearer. He could tell by the closeness of the last bang of the door, followed by the multiple footsteps.

"I hate being cornered, " said Cross. The giant peered slightly through the door. "Three of them, we're going out, man. Stick your hands in the air as in surrendering and step out."

"If I don't?" Jude asked, losing respect for the gun against his ribcage. "I'll put a hole in you, fool. Move it!"

"Your gun is a lesser evil."

Cross's right hand shot out in something like a hundred kilogram jab. It struck Jude's temple and rocked. He staggered against the wall for support. The pain brewing with cold rage, exploded within his cranium. The giant reached out to pull him up, and in one explosive movement, Jude's knee connected with his groin. The giant stood for a millisecond as if wondering what it was that hit him. Then, he began to topple over, clutching his crotch. His brawny gun hand came slowly up and he took an aimless shot. Jude wasn't there. He grabbed the giant from behind and pulled the gun out of his hand. The midget, shocked by the sudden turn of the table, stood frozen behind Susan. Jude's dirt-brown eyes bored through Oracle as he stood with a gun to

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the small of Susan's back. "You'll think it's a one to one game, but no. Drop that gun."

"No. Guns don't just drop. Not just like that, man," Oracle said. "Coming to think of it, I could afford to die. You drop your gun." His dead voice rang clear. "I'll waste this one if you don't play ball."

Sensing that the midget had recovered from his shock, he resolved to handle him with kid's glove. "How about presenting ourselves as living sacrifices to the Dust devil? We could as well surrender to the people outside if we aren't fighting side by side to get out of here. We can continue our fight later."

"That'll be grand. You know what's up! Here's the countdown to dropping your gun. Five, four, three..."

Jude had seen the look in his eyes before. The dancing blue eyes were still again. He said in a hurry, "Wait a minute!"

"A minute's too long. Four, three..." "Okay!"

"I'll drop it."

"Drop it!"

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Jude tossed his gun at the midget, in obedience. The albino lurched forward, stretching his short hand to catch it mid-air.

The opening and closing of doors along the passage, the footsteps and whispers drowned into a military silence. Whomsoever they were, Jude thought, they were right by the door, probably contemplating what went on within the room. He kicked the gun out of the midget's hand and whacked him on the face. The midget didn't catch the tossed. Gun. He lost his own gun, and lost his balance, under the impact of Jude's ramming punches. He came at Jude like a demented devil, aiming the toes of his shoes at his shins. Jude winded him with a solid punch to his chest and pinned him to the wall in a vice-like grip. "You like chasing your losses, runt."

"I never ever lose," gasped Oracle.

"Oops! This time, you will, sacrificing yourself to the Dust devil..." "Can a dead man die again?"

While Jude contemplated whatever the midget meant by his mantra of the dead not dying, Lynda's sonorous voice interrupted his thoughts. "It seems we have a house party here, Jude. How's it going?"

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“Hey! What the hell are you doing in this part of the world?” “Curiosity. Am I welcome?” Her voice lacked mirth.

“Welcome as flowers in May. We’ve got something like a Lynda in here.”

“Oh my God, what a gentle surprise!” She pushed the door open and went in with Natty Rasta and Badrick behind.

“Yeah. Equally pleasant is to discover Dust devil’s own bank. It’s risky to stay here though.”

Cross was stirring where he lay. Jude shoved Oracle aside, and picked up the two guns. “Goliath was resistant to authority. I kicked his grapes, of course, in self-defence.”

Lynda caught her twin sister in a crushing bear hug while the others looked on. While she doted over her, Jude broke away from the enchantment. Remembering the snake-like man, he asked, “Did you meet or see anybody on your way in?”

“Not a soul.” Jerking his thumb at Badrick, Natty Rasta said, “Here’s one man better than Judas Iscariot. Badrick. He brought the gun that rocked the building.”

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“And put the fear of God in friends and foes?” He reached out a hand to Badrick. “Your kind is as rare as hen’s teeth.”

“I and I a dread, brethren, we spread love. Anytime.”

“Let’s get out of here. We’ll search the house for a snake of a man and dump these ones at the bottom of the lake before we go home to roost.”

“If not for Suzy, I’d stay back to give them a treat. They’re both descendants of Iscariot.” “When I asked you about them, you said they were ‘insiders,’ and no more.”

“No blame game. We were all duped.” “Take her home and come back for us.”

Jude and the others led Lynda and Susan to Badricks rickety Honda accord and bade them goodbye. They returned to comb the nooks and crannies of the building but the tall lanky man was nowhere in it. That signalled a red flag! He could have ordinarily escaped as well as gone for reinforcement. Time will tell, they decided and led Cross and Oracle at gunpoint on foot away from the building. They went down the road about two hundred yards and bore into the same bush that Lynda had first concealed herself while

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tracing Natty Rasta. Some fifty feet into the bush, they tied the giant and the midget to trees.

“How easily the table turns.” Jude grinned at Cross “I’m not going to incriminate you. You are already a criminal. I’ll imprison you if I want vengeance. I want more than vengeance. I want the man behind the mask. I want a share of the Dust devil’s stash of dollars too.”

“As for the man behind the mask, none of us know him. If the money belongs to the Dust devil, you wouldn’t come this close to it.

“Shed more light.”

“Drake’s a thief. He stole from his late boss’s loot and hid it there. EFCC seized the rest. We found his ‘bank’ the moment you did. We’ve been looking for it. You can see that he fled and left us to face whoever came barging in with a thunderous gun. He’s rather cowardly.”

“So, What’ll you do if you ever lay your hands on him?”

“How can I? Will you let me go? I didn’t treat you roughly when I came for you. You’ve always been clean. You and your friends may have the money, free Oracle and me.”

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“No. We don’t need the money. Who’s the man behind Dust devil? Show us, we’ll let you go.” “Ask Oracle.”

“Tell us, Oracle.”

“Tell you what? You’ll see soon enough that nobody can kill a dead man. I’m not scared of you. Go get your share of that money and leave us in peace. I want some myself. ...Drake’s a whopping big thief. I assure you, he wouldn’t dare tell a soul he was here today, and he’d be wishing we were dead.”

“He may be right to wish so. I’m offering you a chance to escape. Who’s behind the dust devil?” “You know what, Jude? You’re hard of hearing. Go ahead and kill us.”

“Okay,” said Jude, looking askance at the midget. “...”

“You’re not going to go far even if you shoot us now, Jude. The table turns again.”

Jude’s ears caught something like the distant buzzing of a swarm of bees. He frowned, raised his brows in question, eyeing the midget revealing his perfect set of white teeth in a triumphant grin. Cross too couldn’t hold back a lopsided grin. Soon enough, the sound grew in crescendo into the distinct vroom, vroom, vroooooom of motorcycles. Jude

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understood. So did Badrick and Natty Rasta. Jude tore the midget's shirt, stuffed a part into his mouth and gagged him with the rest. He did the same to the giant. He blindfolded them with strips of cloth. "That's not how the table turns."

He motioned Badrick and Natty Rasta out of the earshot of Cross and Oracle. Jude conferred with them in whispers. He told them to call Lynda and ask her not to return until otherwise informed. He said he'd love to be a fly on the wall at the old building. Then, he traced his way through the bush away. From the thicket, he watched the bike men. They rode around the building. Some went into the building guns in hand. Others stood around the house like hounds watching out from which hole a threatened giant rat would burst forth from its burrow. Quiet as a mouse, Jude wormed his way through the thicket until he could see the front of the building. Some bike men attended to two other men that went in and out in a frenzy. A long white saloon parked half turned into the courtyard. The tall lanky man, Drake, was one. The other, short, fat and bald as a coot, matched the Chief Justice's prime suspect. "Well, well, well. A major puzzle is solved," Jude muttered under his breath. He watched the two men get into the white saloon and drove off in the opposite direction to where he left Natty Rasta and

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Badrick. Then, the bike men began to ride onto the road. They went back the way they had come leaving five of the kind behind. To safeguard the money, thought Jude.

Jude began to trace his way backwards. Safe into the bush, he pulled out his mobile phone and dialled the Chief Justice's private line. He reported, "The 'number five' on your list is it. Besides, I've got the two that picked me up in custody. They've confessed being members of the Dust devil when they thought they had me. If they were, so would be their principals, the DG-SSS and the CoS to the FG."

"Thanks for confirming my suspicion. What would you want right now?" "I'm coming over. With these ones, we should make headway."

"I believe in you. I'm waiting."

Jude would love to have Idle come to pick them, but that would mean leaving the Chief Justice to himself. He called Lynda's line and asked her to come right away. Then, he headed back to meet Natty Rasta and Badrick. While they waited for Lynda, he undid the gag on Oracle's mouth. "What's the nature of your work at the presidency, and for whom do you do it?"

"You don't want to know!" Oracle spat.

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“Yes I do. Besides the DG-SSS and the Chief of Staff, who else is behind the Dust devil’s iron mask?”

“You really don’t want to know, do you?”

Jude’s hand shot out in a backhand slap that caught his across his face, “You don’t mind dying, I forgot.” He struck him again. “You asked for it!”

The midget licked his burst lips and spat blood at Jude. He burst into suppressed laughter full of scorn. “What do you think you’re doing? You ought to be begging for mercy, but you’re not. Well, kill me now you’ve got the chance, I tell you. It’ll soon be too late, the table will turn again. Then, I won’t spare...”

The sputtering of the old Honda Accord interrupted them. Badrick started, and limped out of the bush onto the road, signalling Lynda to stop. The vehicle slowed down as it went past, and made a U-turn. Shortly, Jude and Natty Rasta emerged with Oracle and Cross at gunpoint. They put them into the middle of the rear seat of the vehicles and got in beside them on each side. Lynda kicked the vehicle. It came alive, and so did the sounds of two power bikes from the old building. The vehicle had barely covered a distance of twenty feet when bullets riddled its hind tyres, leaving the

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passengers with no option than the situation warranted. Lynda pulled the vehicle across to the shoulder of the road. She parked it with the driver's side away from the approaching bikes, and squirmed out with a gun. She stung from behind the cover provided by the vehicle even though her targets were still out of range for her gun. The bike men slowed down and Badrick shifted onto the driver's seat and out of the vehicle. Stretching a hand from his cover, he opened the booth of the car, fetched the gun with which they blew the front wall of the old building, and trained it onto the approaching bike riders. It's a bet. They saw him from afar, and executed a sudden U-turn, in unison. The boom of Badrick's gun rocked the neighbourhood like a volcano. However, for the bike men, it turned out to be a hair's breadth escape.

Jude and Natty Rasta got out of the vehicle. It was of no use with bad back tyres and a sputtering engine. They pulled their charges at gunpoint out too. Oracle spoke first. "You don't seem to see; demons don't give up. You should have taken your cut of the stash of cash and cut out. Now, you're done for."

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“There’s something the demons dread, runt. Zip your cesspit of a mouth,” Jude growled. “What I see is, you care about dying. Watch yourself feigning confidence at gunpoint. You dread the damage a gun can do, don’t you?”

Jude turned to the others. “Runt here’s right. Let’s get out of here.” “How?” Oracle asked. “By now, the roads are blocked both ways.”

Despite Jude’s anger, he reckoned with the fact of the midget’s chiding. “You pay the ultimate price, I think.” Jude knew he meant it for the first time. He kicked Oracle from behind. “One more word, you go.”

He saw the effect of his dirt-brown eyes on the midget who stumbled down a small slope, sprang up onto his feet. He cringed as Jude approached him pointing his gun at him. “No atheist in a fox hole,” Jude muttered, grabbing the midget again by his collar. “Here, everybody. Follow.”

He dragged him into the bush. Lynda, Natty and Rasta led the Goliath after him. Badrick, limping, carried his homemade gun on his shoulder as nomadic herdsmen their sticks. The group went deeper into the bush as the distant sound of motorcycles grew louder. Jude thought Cross could not be underrated despite his compliance at gunpoint. Oracle

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on the other hand had proved more of a troublemaker. He asked Natty Rasta to gag them again. They could shout to attract undue attention. Natty did as Jude bade him do, starting with Cross. He was about to gag Oracle when the midget blurted, "What is it you fellows really want? Let us loose... Don't we seem like Jonahs to you? Perhaps, the Dust devil would be content to have us back, and backoff. As long as you have us, they'll come for us, and you, fools."

"That rings true," said Jude, "But shut up. I'm roping you in alongside whosoever you work for." "Who do you think we work for?"

"DG-SSS and the Chief of Staff." "I choose death!"

Lynda bumped into Cross who froze in his tracks at what he heard. Natty Rasta and Badrick seized him from both sides as he shook his head from side to side in defiance. They pushed him to move on, but he would not budge, like a ploughing bull resisting its handlers. Jude thought the giant suddenly lost his fear of their guns. Meaning what? His phone vibrated in his breast pocket before he could answer the question. He pulled it out, and the letters, 'Chief Justice' rippled on the screen.

## CHAPTER 10



**E**va touched whosoever seemed not to be paying attention. She spoke almost breathlessly on how she fared in their absence. At last, she said, “Idle was marvellous, the way he extracted vital information from the man you left under my watch.”

Jude, smiling, said, “I’m not disappointed. Neither am I surprised. I will meet Idle at the Chief Justice’s residence soon”

Jude reclined on the couch, shut his eyes and let his mind drift back to the incidents of the recent past: his climbing up the telecom mast, to the old building, and the forest. He wondered how Cross, like himself, suddenly lost his respect for guns, and turned as obstinate as a mule at the mention of their patrons\principals, the DG-SSS and the Chief of Staff to the federal government. Yet, when the gun-toting bike men, in their numbers, had infested the forest in search of them, he was less cooperative in their bid to escape.

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Like a couple of 'Jonahs', he had jettisoned Cross and Oracle to make their escape more probable. He bound them to tree trunks, blindfolded them, but undid their gags to let them scream their hearts out to attract the bike men's attention, or die bound there, while he and his companions made good their getaway. Jude contemplated the gap between loyalty and submission: one could be loyal without being submissive; one could be both loyal and submissive. Could one be submissive without being loyal? Yes. He thought it possible, and that would be the acme of sycophancy, and treachery. He felt Cross and Oracle were so.

He and his associates had heard Oracle when he began to scream. They heard the bike men calling as they closed in on foot in the forest. Jude replayed how he and his companions sneaked in one direction, circled stealthily to the other, and fled. A couple hours passed, they burst out at the end of a street, where Rose and Nick in the helicopter, whisked them to safety. All that while, Jude's mind dwelled on Drake, the serpentine man.

He heaved himself off the couch, circumvented Lynda, Suzy and Natty Rasta as they sat upon every available thing,

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chatting. Eva was in the kitchen making their meal. "I'll be with you," he said, excusing himself.

The Chief Justice pushed the gold-rimmed spectacles further up his nose bridge. He leaned forward. "We're on course, Jude, but what can we do without solid facts? These men are slippery as fish in water."

"Of course, Chief. ...Cross and Oracle are pawns in their hands, I think. Somehow, they've shifted loyalty. 'He who serves two masters must lie to one,' they say. Our man confirmed my suspicion." Jude met the small man's steady gaze. "And, now we know that Drake's the man who calls the shots for the many groups that make up the Dust devil. He commands from a distance, not revealing much of himself. Only the leaders of each group know him. Their followers don't."

"Drake couldn't run the Dust devil alone, could he? I think not. He's a pawn in the hands of someone buried deeper in the ground- number 5... and his cohorts." The Chief Justice nodded repeatedly in realization.

Idle chipped in, "You're right Chief, and he works with the bespectacled bald one they simply call X, and others."

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Jude heaved a sigh. "I've caught a glimpse of X, I'm sure."

The Chief Justice Continued, "We've got to dismantle their machinery now that we've seen through their Iron mask. And that should be before the forthcoming elections." He paused with an aura of shrewdness. "The Dust devil has vested interest in the elections as some of their flyers stated. Ask yourselves why?"

"Infiltration of the government. They are a jump ahead of us, and that's why we are in this situation."

"Thank you! Now, contemplate power in the hands of the sort of men that make up the organization in Nigeria. People who do virtually anything for money: narcotics, sex trade, counterfeiting dollars... The stash of money you chanced upon are real and unreal dollars. They've been in circulation for long. EFCC's on the trail of certain individuals connected with the distribution of fake dollars, home and abroad. It recovered much, a whopping big sum of counterfeit dollars from the late Senator Alice Inok's underground property, and believed there was still more somewhere. It's still watching out for traces of the rest."

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“The members of the Dust devil are trying to insulate themselves. Their motive, to have space to operate with impunity: controlling, looting , kidnapping, assassinating any old how. Terror would grip the ordinary citizens.”

The Chief Justice still nodded with vehemence. “The phenomenal good!”

The chair creaked as Jude heaved his square solid bulk out of it in that instance. “That’s it! The phenomenal good! ... It brings to mind, “life being solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short, without government.” There’d be no government in Nigeria. See how it’s affected our lives now. I, on the run, when I’ve not committed any offence against the state!”

“It’ll be worse if nothing is done.” It was Idle.

“Now, it’s a different ball game. The Dust devil’s mask has dropped.”

“We’ll thread with caution,” admonished the Chief Justice, rising up too, “and act fast.”

The following night saw Jude and Natty Rasta cutting concertina wires. It was the backside of the premises in which he first saw Drake. The mighty gate stood closed like heaven’s gate to transgressors. It was 1:00 a.m. when their

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stealthy labour ended. They scaled the high fence into the compound. Side by side, they sneaked along the shadowy inner side of the fence, and came up to the back of the first storey building. The immediate surrounding was flooded with halogen security lights.

They approached the house with great caution, and went to the front of it. The array of exotic cars under the shed was gone. On the other end of the shed, the water in the swimming pool shimmered with the reflections of the moonlight. Jude left his companion outside with the instruction to follow in exactly ten minutes' time. He drew his gun and went up the stairs like a cat stalking and sniffing out a mouse. He opened the front door. The sitting room was vacant. One after the other, he looked into other rooms, only to find the whole house untenanted, and evacuated- there was no furniture. A quick search of the rooms in it yielded nothing worth his while. There was nothing that could lead them to the men he had seen from the top of the telecom mast. He went out through the passage to the balcony. There, he found a brown ceramic tea mug, half-filled, sitting on a saucer. Two plastic vials on the glass-topped table caught his eyes. One was empty, and the other had a white powdery substance in it. They were both unlabelled, the size

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of his thumb, standing beside the tea mug in the saucer. Jude picked them up, unscrewed the cock and poured some of its content into the saucer. The tea mug in one hand, the vials in another. He raised the tea mug to his nose and sniffed the cold tea in it. Coca leaf tea, he thought, and the content of the vial, cocaine. "Number 5," he mumbled, putting the vials into his jacket's pocket. He went out of the house and met Natty Rasta on his way up the stairs just as he had a flash of memory. Jude broke into a run. Natty Rasta followed. Together, they went to the back of the building, where he searched and found an aluminium ladder propped against the wall. He carried it to the GeePee tanks in front and climbed up. He took a look and gasped in shock! The tank was filled two-third way up with mint dollars. "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart," he said to a befuddled Natty Rasta. "Number 5 and his men evacuated the building, and vanished," he told Natty Rasta, "but the owner of this 'bank' will return for it. Drake will come back."

"When?"

"When the chips are down."

He went down the ladder, returned and placed it exactly where and how he found it. He left with Natty Rasta to try

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the doors of the other storey building. They were locked. Natty Rasta interrupted his thoughts. "When will the chips go down? I think they're down already."

"No. Not enough."

"Then between now and then, Drake might show up." "You're echoing my thoughts, man. What do we do?" "What do we do?"

"We guard his bank until he comes."

And so, they stayed till dawn. When they got hungry and thirsty, Natty Rasta chided that he loathed the feelings, and would go to fetch some snacks. Jude did not let him. To scale the fence in broad daylight means to risk exposure.

When at last, the sun began to set and shadows began to elongate. Jude and Natty Rasta came out of the first storey building where they hid from the scorching rays of the sun all day long. They ambled to the closed gate, and right then, a vehicle came to a screeching halt before the gate. They raced to the back of the other storey building to hide. They heard the jingling of keys and the clicking of a key in the gate. The gate creaked open inwards just a crack. Jude peeping, saw it opening more, and more. He saw him stepping through the gate as one treading on thin ice. An

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aposematic silence laid upon the premises. And there was nobody in sight but Drake. Gun drawn, he went closer to the rectangular storey building to their right, the one from which Number 5 and his men cleared out. Drake looked cautiously as though suspicious. Then, he seemed to make up his mind. He went and opened the gate enough and drove the vehicle into the premises. It was the same black Renault 21 with tinted glasses. He parked with its boot right towards the row of elevated GeePee tanks. Jude Pulled his handgun from his waistband. He motioned Natty to follow him. Jude led the way through the flank of the building to the backyard. "Let's give him a free range to operate... just a moment."

"Sure."

"He's going for the ladder now."

"How do you know?" Natty Rasta asked.

"He uses the ladder to hoard dollars up in the tank. His personal loot, I bet. I'd go round the world if I lay my hand on such a stash of cash, real dollars, as the guy has up there."

"How did he come by that much money?"

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“He steals from thieves... You go back round the house, Natty. Stay there and don’t let him go out of the gate. Come running if I signal you.”

Jude stood peeping, gun in hand, and saw Drake coming with the ladder. He shifted further behind the wall. Drake placed the ladder against the tank and began to climb, a steel knife in his teeth, a briefcase in his right hand. He couldn’t go all the way to the top, drop into the tank, and bring out money. Rather, he stopped at the base of the tank. Drake stuck the knife repeatedly into the base of the tank.

Jude stepped out of his cover. “Drake, we meet again.”

If he surprised Drake, the snake of a man didn’t show it. He turned his head slowly sideways, fixed an unblinking stare on Jude, as from the lidless eyes of a viper. His thin pinkish lips curled up at both ends in a snarl, revealing an uneven set of tobacco-stained teeth. Holding the ladder with one hand, he let the briefcase drop to the ground from the other. His sinewy left hand was reaching for his gun, but Jude barked, “Freeze!”

He froze. “One false move, Jude, you’re done for.”

“I should say that. I have my gun by the solid butt, you’re on its receiving end.”

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“That’s logical. Will I find you teachable? If yes, then take my tip. Logic doesn't govern human affairs.”

“Meaning?”

“You’re at my mercy. Drop your gun, boy. That’s an order, and maybe- just maybe- we can talk. What do you want?”

“My persuader isn't blood-thirsty, just trust, and obey... ”

“That’s one thing with your likes. Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you. An act of affection from an unsentimental soul.”

“I’ll be just fine. Now, slow as a snail, come down one rung at a time from your Dollar Bank.”

“So you know what’s up there. How? Oh, I remember. I spotted you atop the telecom mast playing a fly on the wall, didn’t I? I did.”

“Get the hell down!” Jude’s patience snapped. He remembered a proverb he once got told. “You do not toy with your father’s ‘family jewels’ like you do with your mother’s udder.”

Drake burst out in a convulsive cackle. Jude tightened his grip on his gun. Despite himself, his shoulders rocked as he laughed too. They laughed so hard, they cried. Drake

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shook his head from side to side with his peripheral vision taking in Jude. "You lost your innocence earlier than your peers, Jude."

"Leave that until judgement day, ...after death, isn't it?" Still laughing. "For now, Let's talk about you. Come down."

Drake began to descend. When he was some three feet to the ground, he stopped. "I seem to have lost my mind, Jude, playing second fiddle to an obstinate boy with a toy water gun. Now, you get the hell out of my way." With his left hand, Drake drew his own gun with grave equanimity. "I'm sorry, I don't give a bloody second chance."

Jude pulled his trigger first. The bullet caught Drake on his gun hand. Another, on his chest. Both shots found their targets, and did no damage. Drake dropped to the ground from the ladder. He pulled his trigger too. But Jude ducked quicker than lightning. He dove behind the concrete pillars that elevated the GeePee tanks. Drake's bullets sent chips of cement plastering showering all over him, and to the ground. Everything about Jules the living dead flooded his memory in that instance. Drake too wore a bulletproof vest, he thought. He'd shoot any exposed part of his body, the way he shot Jules, the living dead. Drake darted towards the

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swimming pool beside the shed sending gunshots backwards. To his right side, Jude saw Natty Rasta emerging cautiously from behind the building. He wore a wide grin. "Wasn't those guns popping the signal?"

"No. You go around the building to the other side. Don't let him get out of the gate." "Yessir!" He spun around on the balls of his feet.

The backside door of the Renault 21 flew open. Like a ghost from the blues, the raving beauty materialised. She held a Glock G45 like a wand, and shot in some carefree manner from her angle. The bullet hit Natty Rasta on the forehead at short range! He fired a shot that struck the woman in the neck. Jude dove back behind another pillar. He recognized the woman who visited alongside the Chief of staff to the president during his feigned incarceration! Her gun pointed at Jude, dropped out of her hand to the ground, and she followed suit. She lay writhing on the ground, gargling blood. Natty Rasta lay on the ground by the flank of the building, dead as doornail oozing blood from the wound on his chest. The woman surely knew where a man's heart hides. Mad as a hornet, Jude ran to the Rasta man's side. He

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felt the dagger in his own heart, but Drake gave him no time to grief. The sinistral shooter screamed, "Goddess! No!"

He drew a second gun from his waistband and came shooting, and crying in a horrendous voice, "Goddess, oh, Goddess!"

"What's Goddess to you, goon?" Jude shot at his head and missed by a hair's breadth. He bolted.

The shot seemed to awaken Drake to the fact that he was not completely insured against a gunshot. He slowed down, slithering after Jude, shooting with both hands. Jude knew he could not run faster than a bullet. But he did all his best on a ziz-zag path. When Drake stopped, Jude continued his race around the building to the gate. He pushed the gate to and bolted it from behind, and looked through the front of the building.

Far away, he saw Drake tearing his hair, still screaming like a demented demon, "Goddess! ... Oh Shit! Goddesssss!"

Drake lifted her into the back seat of the Renault 21. Next, he picked up his briefcase and threw it into the car. He glanced towards the gate and saw Jude standing behind the closed gate. Drake began an unhurried slither towards Jude who dashed to the flank of the first storey building on his

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side. He peeped again to determine where to send a shot, Drake in a viper's vanishing trick, was nowhere in sight. Jude sprinted across to the back of the building. He peeped like a turtle out of its shell. The car, the pillars, and far beyond them to the wall of the fence on that side, No Drake. Cautiously, he went further out, alert as a bodyguard on duty. The sound from the other side of the Renault 21 made him jump. It was Goddess! She half crawled into the open door of the car. Jude went over and assessed her. She was weak as water. He lifted her and propped her on the back seat of the vehicle, all the while looking out for the shadow of the snake of a man. Goddess still gargled blood. Jude thought of her chances of survival, though he couldn't care less. "Goddess he called you, but you're dying like a dog."

She opened her eyes, took a passionless look at him, and tried to say something. "...ond, ...ond grgrllll, grgle ...ond."

Curious, Jude listened. He tried to make sense of the utterances in combination with the wagging of her right forefinger. He noticed it directed him, but where, or to what. He could not comprehend. Goddess gasped, arched her back, and eased it slowly as she exhaled her last.

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Jude raised himself up from the side of the car. He scanned the area around him. No Drake. He raced through the flank of the second storey building, and through the back of it. There he was! Drake slithering to the gate, carrying a briefcase in his right hand, and a gun in his left hand. The gun, raised, and aimed spewed one shot after the other at Jude. The briefcase in Drake's right hand dropped to the ground. Its false bottom came off with the impact with which it landed. Some vials spilled all around. Cocaine, thought Jude. He took cover behind the over-raised septic tank, aiming Drake's head, and not hitting. Drake backed past the gate, to the flank of the other storey building, and to the back. His guns spitting at Jude in succession all the while. He was a cornered viper.

"I'm a snake charmer. Me! I only kill a snake that won't be charmed." Jude turned around. "Go on. Keep out of my shooting range. I'm coming for the bombing. I know you shoot like Sylvester Stallone. That's not going to save you now. You wouldn't like to surrender, would you?"

"I'll die shooting, Bingo. You'll do well to give up on me, perhaps you'll get a good chunk of the dough up there, canine!"

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By the time they each went round the opposite sides of the building, Drake was not in plain sight, but there. One after the other, they looked behind all the things they could use as cover, sneaking. It seemed to Jude like spotting a viper, looking away for a stick with which to kill it, looking back and seeing it no more. It gave him such a creepy feeling that he could walk into a bullet any moment. The ping of a bullet directly over his head confirmed his fear. Puzzled, Jude stepped back. He fired a shot, and another, in the direction from where the gunshot came.

“Agh!”

“God pound you!”

Drake uncurled. He burst forth from his cover. His guns spewing death coated in lead jackets. like the viper that he was, he slithered away, shooting backwards and leaving a trail of crimson liquid as he went. Jude remained where he took cover, peeping at intervals. When Drake went far enough to render his shooting spree an ineffectual campaign, Jude rose up. He followed him towards the swimming pool. Limping, Drake ran. He threw his guns down and literally stepped into the water in the pool like someone intending to die by drowning. That alarmed Jude.

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He sprinted across the ground and plunged after Drake. His whole body tinged with the cold water in the pool. He swam everywhere, searching. No Drake. Frantic, Jude explored the length and breadth of the multi-level swimming pool. Baffled, he climbed out of the pool, contemplating Drake's disappearance in the pool at an almost superstitious level. Jude was by himself a practical man. He plunged back into the pool, swimming and groping around the bottom edges. He rose up occasionally to the surface for air and sank back to continue his quest. At the end of the length, to his right, he found a rectangular opening like a manhole. Jude felt the edges of the opening with his hands. He reached into it with a hand. His hand went all the way in without touching anything. It's a tunnel, he thought, and swam up to breath.

When he returned, Jude swam into the tunnel. He estimated that he had swum some sixty feet without hitting its end. If Drake passed here, he thought, he could too. He continued. By the time he reached the end, he found that the tunnel turned upward. He thought to rise to the top and found the water shallow there. Jude rose and stood on his feet. It was only waist deep. Then, right before him, a metallic ladder pointed him in the direction he must go. He

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climbed it to the top and found himself in a specious hall. The hall, furnished like an auditorium, had three doors, the wall indicating either outlets or rooms of some sort. One after the other, he opened them. The third one opened into a bigger rectangular space in which the snake of a man sat binding up his gunshot wound. Drake, startled, sprang up from the ground. He charged towards Jude, brandishing a slender dagger that sprang into his hand from his jacket sleeve. It was a stiletto. Drake hissed, "You don't give up!"

"No, I don't." Jude stood still, alert, waiting. As Drake came close enough, he leapt into the air, and unleashed a powerful kick that sent him reeling backwards.

# CHAPTER 11



The colourful inauguration of the new president-elect of Nigeria brandished top-notch security coverage. The dreaded members of the presidential guards' brigade punctuated the venue at strategic points.

It was on the 29th May 2015. The VIP pavilion of Eagle Square filled up. So did the two pairs of popular pavilions flanking it. Representatives of foreign governments, Nigerian dignitaries; ex-presidents and others graced the occasion. The small grim-faced Chief Justice stole a covert glance at two of his specially appointed body-guards -Idle and Nick- among the regular ones. He had approved of their credentials, and testimonials, and so, fixed their membership of the elite brigade like wielding a wand. His gaze swept through and settled on the solid square bodied one in mufti some twenty feet away, for reassurance. Jude observed that the Chief Justice recognized him behind his realistic silicone face mask. However, he seemed estranged by his false visage. Jude nodded almost imperceptibly. He watched him take a deep breath, and proceeded to administer the oath to

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the new vice-president. Then, to the president-elect of Nigeria, in his signature baritone voice...

Thereafter, the new president delivered his inaugural speech, articulating his words like a TV broadcaster. He commended, and promised, to profusion. He gave the viewing world a brilliant glimpse of his vision for the nation, concluding by thanking all those who contributed to the success of his election in a host of ways. His Excellency's speech, as brief as a dream, elicited a standing ovation from virtually everybody around.. Then, the erstwhile president took his honorary leave, soaring away on the tidal wave of deep cheers in his private helicopter...Were every Tom, Dick and Harry all on the same page? Jude kept his eyes peeled.

Armed to the teeth with vital information from his deadly encounter with Drake in the 'pond,' he looked out for the trio of Number 5, X, and the heavily bearded ex-senator that Drake called Lacuna. They had been as untraceable as a pin in a haystack since the discovery of the Dust devil's liar and dollar bank. Jude felt certain that they were present, but 'invisible' to him as he to them. To him, every bearded person among the dignitaries was a suspect.

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It was almost time for the inaugural luncheon at the State House Banquet hall. The president would leave in the waiting helicopter. He rose up, and his retinue with him. Directly behind him, a short thickset personage in sparkling white apparel rose too. The view of him, hitherto obscured by the president elect's taller frame, struck Jude like a thunderbolt. Number 5!

Where was X? Where was Lacuna? Jude kept searching...

The looks of the members of the presidential guard's brigade matched their dreadful reputation. Some of them ushered the president and a select few into his entourage towards the helicopter. Others linked their hands in a human chain to prevent people from going too close to the new president. Among those following the president elect, he spotted X! He was three persons behind Number 5, and behind him, a head bobbed well above all others. It was Cross! Too, the albino midget hopped behind his constant companion.

Number 5, X, Cross and Oracle, would fly the president-elect! It didn't feel right. No. The red flag, from what he now knew, was too 'red.' Except the new president was a member

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of the Dust devil. How could he tell? All he knew was, something sinister was in the offing! Jude's dirt-brown eyes darted everywhere in the crowd and rested on a striped black and white T-shirt. Close to the members of the presidential guard's brigade, as near as they allowed people to the president-elect and his entourage, he saw him. Unassuming, Badrick stood. His dreadlocks hung backwards, bound in an Ital band, down to his waist. He was looking at the guards and the president like every other person. Jude wangled his way through the crowd and tugged at his shirt from behind. "We can't pull it through here." Jude muttered.

"What-a-gwan?"

"Cool it, man. Come along." "To where?"

"Hurry."

Off they went past the last pair of popular pavilions that flanked the VIP one. They ran along the inner side of the galvanized iron chain-link wire that formed the perimeter fence of the Eagle Square, to the second gate and dashed to the parking garage behind. "You'll drive," said Jude.

"To where?"

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“Where the action is.” “Do-do action?”

“Do-do action...”

Lynda materialised behind them. A chameleon, lowering its camouflage guard, she jumped in beside Jude on the back seat of the grey 2001 Nissan Pathfinder automatic jeep. Pulling off her realistic silicone face mask, she said, “Did you see the germs?”

“Sure. Number 5 and X. No Lacuna.” Jude followed suit. “We’ll get into the hall before they settle down.”

“We’ll find him.”

From the knapsack on the floor of the vehicle, Lynda pulled out a fresh set of the masks with different visages, one male, one female. Badrick eased the car off like a beast rising from hibernation. Gradually, it picked up speed to some 60 km/h until it left the area. Then, he floored the gas pedal.

The Statehouse Banquet Hall crawled with guards from the elite brigade. Jude arrived first. An eagle-eyed guard scrutinized his ticket, passport and face at the gate, and let him pass. He ambled in, putting up an open show of acclimatizing to the environment. Outwardly, he appeared to

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have plenty of time in which to do nothing. A languorous soul, in the mood for the occasion.

Inside the hall, he set off into one of the convenience facilities. Jude's dirt-brown eyes searched the room. The button-size CCTV camera matched the frame of the polished mirror on the wall. He pulled his jacket and hung it over the mirror, thus covering the camera. He replaced his mask with one of a different visage and emerged from the rest room a different man in the same uniform with the guards from the elite brigade on duty. The chopping of the presidential helicopter carried loud and clear to his ears as it approached and finally landed in the premises of the State House Banquet Hall. All over the place, activities stepped up in a dutiful frenzy among guards and officiating personnel. They seemed to be in a race for something. At the main entrance of the hall, he merged with the other uniformed guards. Lynda came out of a cab outside the gate. She paid off the cab driver, sashayed forth and secured her pass with a ticket and identity card. Her face behind a realistic mask was hidden, but her endowments, conspicuous as the glory of a blazing sun, compelled the guards' eyes to ogle involuntarily. She sashayed in.

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Past the gate, at the main entrance of the banquet hall, a guard complimented her, "You got a natural pass, madam, this way."

"Yes I did, thanks," she said offhand, beamed, and followed where she led. Lynda whispered to his back, "Lacuna's in the chopper. He's coming out."

"He's yours in ten minutes." "The chips are down."

Jude pointed her to a seat and muttered, "Nick's almost here. He'll take X."

Among the inner circle dignitaries, the new president sat with dignity. The trio of Number 5, X and Lacuna sat very close to him as what one would describe as his right hand men. Jude observed the guards coming into the hall in ones, twos and threes. He wandered dutifully towards them, conforming with them, and went with them to the president's table. Soon, a thick hedge of guards formed around His Excellency, screening the other guests' view of what went on within. The elite brigade members had a hard time warding off news hounds from the president, but they did.

Two guards pulled their guns. They pointed at the baffled president from both sides. Jude stilled his nerves. He

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put a hold on himself with sheer will power. They half lifted; half dragged him off his seat, and whisked him through an opening into the door behind them. One cupped his hand over the old man's mouth. Number 5 rose up, agile as a monkey, and followed them. to restrain himself from premature action.

Jude cast a furtive glance at Lynda. She sat leaning forward with her brow raised in question. He knew that she burned with consuming curiosity sitting there, waiting for his signal call to action. Jude signalled her to hold on. In a matter of five minutes, the president himself walked back through the opening in the human hedge to the table with Number 5 following close behind him.

His Excellency's visage unruffled, expressed confidence. He appeared too composed for one who looked into the barrels of two guns a short while ago.

As the president took his seat, the hedge of guards around him erupted in a thunderous cheer. They seemed to have struck gold! They dispersed, leaving the president himself smiling with dignity. He cast a sweeping glance around, scanning his companions at his table, and said something Jude did not hear.

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Jude, casual, relaxed, ambled away. Not with the other guards, but to the door into which they took the president. The two guards who pulled their guns at the president bored through him with eyes that could drill holes in one's breastplate. Jude flinched inside. Outwardly, he jerked his right thumb at his crotch, praying he should be right that there was a rest room behind that door. He didn't wait for their approval but went right on like one of their kind.

Along the corridor, there were four doors. He opened the first door to verify what the room might be. It was a restroom. He looked over his shoulder to find one of the guards still looking at him. Jude stepped in and shut the door. He stood alert like a mine in the field for some five minutes before he opened the door and headed back. He found the guards laughing their hearts out like everybody in the banquet hall. Jude dashed back, opened the second, and the third. They seemed like some kind of office. In the fourth, marked 'female,' chained, sitting on the cistern, the president's granite hard eyes looked daggers at Jude. There was raw anger in the old man's eyes. Jude closed the door. He stepped back, and out of the corridor, into a hall that reverberated with a cacophony of laughter. The guards

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stiffened physically when they saw him. One of them went into the corridor, maybe to look, and see.

Jude went past Lynda not looking at her. His brain ticked like the seconds hand of a clock as he went, watching out for Nick. Jude's dirt-brown eyes swept through the guards in the hall. Some guards looked hurriedly through the guests as if in search of someone. He muttered under his breath "They've found the mask."

On his way out through the entrance of the hall, he met Nick and Rose entering. Nick was a legit member of the elite brigade. Lynda was not, Jude himself was not. Their bubble would soon burst. He walked past Nick. "X is yours in five minutes."

"He's mine all right. Where's he?"

Jude veered off before he could answer Nick. A guard was tackling suspected guests to establish their identities some ten feet ahead. He glanced backwards, and saw Nick entering the hall. Jude turned around. He interviewed a robust middle aged man for identification, buying time. At last, he went back into the hall, avoiding the active guards. Someone touched his elbow. It was a guard with a knowing look. "Hi... I don't seem to know you from Adam."

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“Adam's long gone, he doesn't know all his descendants as well, does he?” Jude said offhand. He didn't stop.

“Excuse me.”

“What can I do for you?” He didn't stop.

The guard latched onto him. “Hey?” He went physical, reached out a hand that grabbed Jude's elbow. “Who did you say you are?”

Jude stood still. “Did you lose somebody?” “No, there's an intruder, we believe.”

“We'll find him.” He reassured the guard. “The place to look is among the president's companions I'm sure. I'll take a look.”

He stepped away from the guard, towards the president's table. Lynda caught his signal, rose up and sashayed around to the side where Lacuna sat conversing with a Russian in all respects, by the look of him. Nick, at a stroll, approached the table from the other side. Suddenly, the trio, synchronized by a common understanding, whipped out their guns. Each pointed at their respective target's head: Jude to Number 5, Nick to X, and Lynda to Lacuna.

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Smart and true to their training, the other guards' guns jumped into their hands. They let fly. A bullet struck Jude in the chest where his heart should be. In a flash, he sent a shot, another, and another in rapid succession. The shooter and two other guards behind him threw their hands in a wild involuntary protest, and collapsed atop one another. Another bullet caught Jude on his forehead. Holding Number 5 down in his seat in an iron grip with one hand, he turned with deadly equanimity. A bullet struck him on the head again. He brought the shooter down with a shot to his heart. "Lord my foot, they risk blasting you to hell if you don't stop them."

"True," Number 5 grunted. He held up his hand in a flash. "Stop shooting!"

The guards went through the motion of freezing, a gun barked, another bullet hit Jude on his right shoulder again. To the recalcitrant guard, he turned and depressed the trigger of the submachine gun in his right hand long enough in reprisal. The staccato of his gunshots left the guard's body tattooed like one cheap punk in an obscene jig dance. He dropped to the ground to rise no more.

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With a chubby hand, Number 5 pushed his brown tea mug further into the centre of the table. Jude pulled him onto his feet with a brawny hand. He put his gun to his head and held him in front of himself, where bullets were most likely to come from. Only then did he cast a sideways glance at his companions.

Like killer machines, Nick and Lynda, tackling other threats, brought down over a dozen guards. Jude thought the total body count could be more. To Number 5, he said, "We take a lot of killing, you see, fucking Lord. Put your goons in check!"

Number 5 bawled, "Cease fire, men! Cease fire!" The guards froze.

The 'president elect' scanned the on goings. He rose up, and set out mechanically away, into the midst of the shocked remnants of the guards where they stood, gun in hands, like statues of some unknown soldiers. They formed a circle around him in an uncertain move, their weapons pointing at Jude and his companions.

Jude asked Number 5, "Who's who among the two?"

"Him," he said, nodding at the 'other man.' "That's the president." "And the one in the restroom?"

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“An impostor.”

“Pull the other one, it’s got a bell on. We’ll take a look, won’t we?” He pulled out a pair of handcuffs, clamped one onto Number 5’s right hand and the other onto X’s left hand, such that they were joined together. More guards poured into the hall through the main entrance. Gun in hand, they slowed and began to thread as though they walked on a mine infested field. Like the devil among the ‘sons of God,’ Cross came with them.

Jude’s voice was pure cold steel. “Tell them to drop their weapons. I won’t say it a second time.” “Drop your weapons, everybody!”

The guards began to put their guns down in slow motion. Jude thought he had them by the throat. He pulled a second hand gun from his waistband and gave it to Nick. “Use this. Put a hole in their heads if you have to,” he said, indicating the trio of Number 5, X and Lacuna.

He left Number 5 and X under Nick’s care while

Lynda had Lacuna. In a moment, he was out with the gagged president in exactly the same attire as the president in the hall.

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“Tell me who you are. Who are you?”

“You must be Jude,” the old man said. “Aren’t you? I’m the new president of course. Why?” “No. There’s the president. Take a Look, he’s your exact copy, perhaps your twin brother.”

The president, shocked to the marrow, stood speechless. He stared at the ‘other man’ in the same apparel as himself. Jude was by himself almost uncertain as he watched the president’s every reaction. He thought the man saw a reflection of himself without a mirror. “This is the weirdest political accident in the history of Nigeria.”

“Weirdest political accident...” The president mouthed it for taste, and nodded vigorously. “The phenomenal good!”

Recovering from his shock, his small roundish eyes looked daggers at Number 5. The Dust devil shepherd, also recovering from the dread of imminent death, retrieved a device from his pocket. He thumbed a few buttons on it as he would a mobile phone. Jude overlooked mistaking it for a phone. To the president elect, he said, “First thing, you get out of here, your excellency.”

“Not without the other ‘me’, you know?” “Sure. We’ll ‘invite’ him, but you go first.”

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“And the whole bunch of them? We bring to book of course.”

Down the hall where a few people too terrified to run laid face down on the floor, Jude could see the girl. Beside her lay the man with a lion’s mane. “Hey Rose! Badrick!”

Friends and foes alike turned. Rose and a masked Rasta man rose up, each brandishing a Glock G45. Limping forward, Badrick screamed, “war ina Babylon all-a-de time!”

“Rose’ll take you home your Excellency, we’ll be with you soon.” Jude went around picking up the guards’ guns. Rose, nodding, ran to Nick and together they went out with the president-elect to the helicopter outside the hall. Soon, the helicopter started, rose up and ‘chopped’ away.

Although Number 5 seemed calm, the atmosphere in the hall charged up with a new tension. He thumbed the remote control in a way not likely to cause harm, thus setting the ‘other man’ in self-defence mode. Most of the guards produced either another gun. The rest of them drew knives. Jude understood their new position. The freedom of the new president posed a threat to them-the wrath of the law. The law, to which they are opposed. “We’ll be just fine if we play ball. Otherwise, to hell with all of us. We die sacrificed to

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your hell of a Dust devil. The first to go'll be these three though."

He poked Number 5 on the chest with the barrel of his submachine gun. "I can see it's a new ball game. Your stooges have good guns again, and some are entering a gunfight with knives. Aren't they chasing their losses and willing to sacrifice you first."

It was just a flicker. Terror flashed a millisecond in his eyes. Jude saw it. "I said there's no..."

The eruption of gunshots from the guards cut him off. Jude, Lynda and Badrick returned fire. They plucked out the closest guards first. The knife carrying ones that defied their guns went down too. Jude observed that Cross stood still with a white hankie in hand. He asked himself if it applied in that context. An internationally recognized instrument for enacting a truce in the hands of a recognized hypocrite. In the thick of the lethal crossfire, shooting from friends and foes, Jude considered Cross' gesture another grand ruse. But he made up his mind to give him the benefit of doubt, and handle him with a kid's glove. What has the hypocrite to communicate, or does he wish to surrender? So far, Lynda, Badrick and himself fared well with their submachine guns.

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Their bullet proof face masks under the realistic ones. Their bullet proof vests too did them a load of good. Cross was backing off one backward step at a time towards the main entrance to the hall. Jude raised his voice above the madness in the hall, "Put your cronies wise, Cross! Tell them to cease fire!"

It was like a betrayal of some sort. Some of the other guards turned to look at Cross behind them. The white flag seemed red to them. It seemed to alarm them. Two of them vented their fear, frustration and anger on him through the barrels of their guns. The bullets struck him in the head from left and right. The giant crashed to the ground.

In judgement, Jude in turn knocked each of the guards off with short bursts of his sub machine gun for violating someone with a white flag. Then the chopping of a helicopter caught his attention. The president, he thought, had been sent back up. A moment after the helicopter landed, Oracle appeared at the door wearing a fiendish snarl. Some sixteen guards materialized with him, shooting the old kamikaze soldiers' way. Jude dragged Number 5 and X into the door behind in an itching hurry. Shooting with his right hand, he went for Lacuna. He got hold of him too. The man screamed as a bullet struck him from behind but Jude virtually threw

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him into the doorway. He understood they'd rather kill one of their own than let one take him. Jude, Lynda and Badrick settled into action. The guards, finding them 'unkillable' began to beat a retreat towards the door. What in life could scare off a pack of wolves if not the devil himself? Jude, relying on his Deekon bullet proof face mask under the realistic one, vest and fire power stepped forward. He was shooting his way towards the 'other man.' Bent on snatching him like a hawk, he shot the three guards behind him. In a combination of speed and power, Jude burst forth. The 'other man' pointed his index finger, an accusing finger, at Jude. He steadied it and sent a projectile at him. It struck Jude on the forehead, but thanks to the Deekon bullet proof face mask under the realistic one. Another bullet stung him in his left bicep, stopping him in his tracks. He needed no diviner to tell him that it pierced his body armour.

In a reflex action, Jude's submachine gun's barrel traced a brief arc through the air. Its trigger depressed, it discharged a volley of bullets into the other man in a way that showed there was no negotiation with the devil. Another bullet stung Jude on his left shoulder. "Noooooo!"

Jude, this time sprayed bullets all over the 'other man.' He toppled backwards and lay making irrational movements

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of arms and legs. No. Not in pain but 'the other man's system software unable to coordinate his hardware. Where he lay with arms and legs repeating the same motion over and over, his forefinger kept spewing its projectiles in a single direction, lodging them in the chest of a guard that lay dead as doornail on the ground. Jude dashed back to where Lynda mounted by the door. He saw her deliver a nasty kick to Lacuna's groin as he made it come out of the door. Nick was sending single shots into the remnant of the guards that had backed off close to the main entrance. Oracle, wore a nasty frown where he stood panting like a Boston Terrier.

The buzz of a massive swarm of bees wafted into their ears.

Friends and foes cocked their heads and ears to make certain. The remaining guards regrouped at the entrance of the hall. Lynda bound Jude's injuries with strips of cloth with an eye on the door.

Above the buzzing of the bikes, they heard the chopping of an approaching helicopter. Oracle and his companions in utter horror raced out of the hall. The gunshots from the sky prevented them from reaching their helicopter, and so they scattered in every direction, shooting back.

The pandemonium died. The Director-General of the State Secret Service and the Chief of staff to the president

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came in through the main entrance. They stood taking in the disarray before them. The DG-SSS said, "This time, I charge you for illegal possession of firearm, Lynda, and for mass murder, Jude. Rasta man, friend? Friend, I see... Welcome to Babylon, Rasta"

"Ain't no livity ina Babylon shitstem!"

## CHAPTER 12



**B**rused all over, terribly shaken, Jude and his friends emerged from the final gunfight before the belated arrival of a team of fifteen armed soldiers. Thereafter, the new president set them up for Medicare, not disclosing location until they each got a clean bill of health.

After two full months, in recognition of their distinguished service to the country, His Excellency nominated them for a national merit award. In due time, he decorated them in person, as Members of the Order of the Niger(MON), in gratitude. An honorary title which Badrick alone politely refused to take.

Marvelling at the Rasta man's rejection of the esteemed title but not the 'unofficial thanks,' Jude said, "Money's good, you know? It's not money that's bad."

"Yeah-man, why?"

"The love of it 'is' the root of all evil."

Realizing the import of his words, Badrick threw his mane backwards. His shoulders rocked with boisterous

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laughter that made his eyes twinkle with mirth. "Dunza ain't no Babylonian thing. I and I use it fe spread love, ya know?"

Jude shook his head from side to side in mock disbelief, laughing too. They laughed some more, Jude reaching for his mobile phone where it lay vibrating with a message alert. The screen rippled with the letters, IDLE. "Wait a minute."

The message read, 'Lacuna's escaped from custody. A man hunt's on for him, Oracle and his cronies.

The Chief Justice turned me loose though. See you in two hours' time.'

Jude leaned unto the backrest of the sofa. It crossed his mind that the best time to sharpen his knife was neither before nor during the course of a battle but after victory. Lacuna, he knew, was an ember of a dying fire; a fragment of a burning coal, glowing, smouldering, could reignite another inferno. No longer in the infernal grip of ignorance, he knew how Lacuna could make his escape from Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison - with the help of his kind. They were everywhere. He could leave it in the hands of the powers that be to sort things out. Too, he could dust his pants seat, and walk away having played his part. However, he wasn't rushing into either option. He needed time to sort himself

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out, and this place was the right place. The place was secure, conducive and enabling. He could pin-point attention to certain personal issues...

Jude contemplated his new position. Now, there's enough money to burn. His salaries stopped while the trouble lasted, got restored, paid in arrears plus compensation. The president ordered the payment of all that was due to him since it all began. Besides, there's unofficial thanks from 'The Federal Government.' In his own way, the Chief Justice redeemed his pledge. Altogether, he was worth twenty-five million naira to his credit. What else does a man want? For the first time in a long time, he thought as humans do, that he had eventually joined them in the land of the living.

Like the early man after discovering how to sow crops and rear animals, decided to lead a settled existence, and practise 'the art of peace.' No more wandering, hunting and gathering of fruits. Jude will settle down. The impulse to resign from active service grew palpable within him. His phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. He picked it up, punched the call receive button and said, "Hi The Mamba."

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"She's gone. I'm done. She just boarded a flight." "Oh, fine. So?"

"So?"

"When are you returning?"

"Does it hurt to miss me?"

"It hurts real bad. When? Let's talk." "About what?"

"The art of peace... in Canada."

He heard Lynda gasping and imagined her burning up. After a brief pause, her voice came through, this time, small, "Murder will out! Will you?"

"What?"

"In a civilized way? I never thought you ever think of such things." "I didn't sign up for celibacy."

"So, can we be civilized?" "That's what I want to know."

"I'm coming... day after tomorrow."

It took a shrug from Idle to pull Jude out of the burrow he found himself lost in thoughts. He sat up on the sofa, reached for the glass on the stool beside him. "There's Adam's ale, man."

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"Thanks amigo." Idle sat down. "Well, well, well, I struck gold this time, you know?" "We struck gold. What are you going to do now?"

"Nobody eats a hot dish of pottage in an itching rush."

"Whatever you decide, make sure it's a product of deep thinking." "Your hide and seek game being over, what are you up to?" "Resign, I'm thinking. Emigrate and practise 'the art of peace.'"

"Yeah, you didn't sow much wild oats I know, ...its high time you cultivated 'improved' varieties.

"You get my drift amigo."

"I'm cutting out of here in the morning."

"Really, my mind's not made up, but I may leave in a couple of days. Anyway, you may carry on."

"I'll do, and keep in touch." Idle leaned onto the backrest of his seat. "I feel good. Thank you, amigo."

"Nobody says thanks for what belongs to him, amigo. You've done me a gazillion good turns, and thanks too."

"Ease off."

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The next morning, after Idle and Badrick left, Jude decided to do something in the meantime. What exactly it was, he didn't know. He found himself thinking more and more about Lynda, and he thought the conviction was there, that he could do with a woman like that. With that on his mind, he soon forgot the world around him. He lowered himself onto the double sofa in the balcony to bask in the early morning sun. Jude lay daydreaming. He envisaged the shape of things to come. His eyes shut, his lips curled up at both ends in a smile that came from deep within his inner man. His phone rang. He ignored it. It rang again. He reached for it. It was Lynda! Jude cradled the phone close to himself like it was Lynda. "Hello pumpkin."

"Hello king of the jungle," came the male voice, low and rough. "How would you like to watch me skin The Mamba? Cock your ears. I'll cut her open, dump her in the lake, and lie low until I get you. You'll find her in the belly of the beasts... except you play ball. I won't give you a second chance."

"Who are you?"

"Cock your ears again. Never mind who I am. I've been paid a good sum of money to do her in. I'll do. And I'll find

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you the way I found her, and solve you like a problem... I will. There's a way out. Only one way. Again, cock your ears..."

## CHAPTER 13



Jude did more of the listening. He figured out what the tenor of a voice wanted. One hundred million naira, submitted in person. 48 hours of grace! It didn't mention the location. He knew the hostage taker was not a criminal, caught in the act, and so seeking to escape - not desperate. Neither was he a lunatic who abducted someone for some irrational reasons. He came across more like a political terrorist. His motive spelt vengeance in capital letters. There was no gainsaying he was a member of the Dust Devil. Only one name came to Jude's mind-Lacuna.

Jude thought the abductor may salivate all he wanted, but he'd find the ransom just a pie in the sky.

Lynda's life was on the line. That's the rub. If holding her hostage was a way of getting hold of him, yes, they'll have him. Sentiments apart, whosoever once said, 'the best of friendships is forged in fire,' was very correct, he thought. He would not turn his back on her.

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Jude found his smaller phone, and composed a message, worded in cold anger, and sent to Idle. Furious as a fire breathing dragon, Idle truncated his journey, and backtracked with Badrick behind him. They arrived at 9:15. "We were almost parting ways when I got your message. Where are we delivering the ransom?"

"Not 'we'. Me. The place is not yet disclosed, until I say the money's ready," Jude explained. "Dead line?"

"48 hours."

"We'll find Lynda, we'll find the man," Idle reassured him and went to work. He tracked Lynda's phone by her number using Spytine which he said he liked for discreet, secret tracking. He located Lynda's iphone in two ticks, using her phone number. "Here we are. She's somewhere in Marina, Lagos."

"Let's go."

"Why not?"

Jude dialled Nick's mobile phone number. It rang once, and again. Then, Nick's voice came through. "Hello."

"Hello" "It's still not over." "Not over?"

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“Not over... Lynda’s taken hostage, a hundred million naira ransom, to be delivered by me, ...in person. It’s somewhere in Lagos.” Jude heard Nick’s sharp gasp over the phone.

“I know a hostage negotiator.”

“I’m not going to need one. I’m doing the negotiation myself. Lend me the chopper.” “She’s all yours.”

Nick arrived in the helicopter at 10:30 a.m. The four of them set off to Lagos. Jude gave them a rundown of his plan... Others listened. In approximately one and a half hours, the helicopter made its gentle descent towards the outskirts of Tarkwa-Bay beach on the Onisiwo artificial

Island in Lagos... It was a serene place, accessible by helicopters or boats, but not by road. They paid their entry fee and settled on the seats under coconut trees. Jude wanted the abductor to think he was anywhere but Lagos, so he dialled Lynda’s number. “Yes, are you ready?”

“I’ve got the money. What’s next?”

“That’s my champ! Proceed to VI, Lagos as fast as you can. Let me know when you arrive, for further guidance.”

“Victoria Island, right?”

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The line went dead. His phone rang almost immediately. It was Lynda's number again. The hard, cold tenor voice said, "No tricks. Come alone."

"Come with Lynda. No tricks."

"You aren't calling the shot, boy..." A brief pause. "Are you?" The line went dead.

Idle said he was sure that the man was somewhere in Marina. They hired a speed boat, leaving Nick to look after their only means of quick escape. In ten minutes, they were in Marina, homing in on Lynda's phone with Idle at the lead. Their quest brought them to the base of a 35 storey skyscraper.

The multipurpose building jotted skyward like a gargantuan phallus in defiance of the scorching sun. Being seen together will jeopardise their mission. So, Jude let Idle go first. He was to trace the particular floor where Lynda's phone was located, and give them a signal via text message. If possible, Idle was to identify the face behind the tenor voice on Lynda's line. They watched Idle walk into the elevator and punched in the number of his destination floor. A middle aged woman hurried in after him before the door closed.

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Jude and Badrick walked in opposite directions, seemingly oblivious of each other. It felt like a bad quarter of an hour since Idle left. An impatient Jude turned around. He walked back to where the elevator stands. He heard the creaking elevator coming back down, and stood still to wait. When it finally landed before him, its door opened. Two men towered behind the albino midget in it. Jude could have died in shock. His silicone mask, expressionless as his real poker face, revealed nothing.

The three stepped out of the elevator and went past him at a slow pace. He made to step into the elevator, seeming to ignore them, as his phone vibrated with a message alert. He whipped it out. 'Floor number 16,' the message read... 'Lacuna's in room 45, Eleganza hotel and suites. It happened so fast I had to step in. Come now.'

Jude put the phone back into his back pocket. He glanced over his shoulder. Oracle was looking backwards at him, squinting his eyes. He muttered something and drew his gun. Oracle turned around in unison with his two companions. "Hey. Just a moment." The midget pointed his favourite snub-nosed handgun at Jude's heart. "Something's catawampus about you, man. Tell me, what is it?"

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“I beg your pardon.”

The two other men pointed their guns too at him. The one said, “Prove to us you aren’t Jude. We can’t see how this tracker shows that you are in Lagos when you haven’t indicated so. Sure, you’re up to something, aren’t you?”

The other reached out a hand to feel Jude’s cheek. Next, he tore at the mask on his face and yanked it off with a force that could have broken a weaker man’s neck. They crowded him into the elevator. Oracle frisked him for weapons. He found his .45 and mobile phone. Behind them, Jude saw Badrick far off, looking back. He felt glad that Badrick didn’t run to his aid as the elevator began its ascent. When it stopped at last, he noted 16 on the floor indicator.

They dragged him into the first room that led off the lobby. “Once beaten, Jude, twice what? We knew you arrived in Lagos earlier than you wanted us to know. You aren’t the only one who’s good at tracking others... One, here you are, crawling in like a cold blooded crocodile. Why? Two, where’s the money?”

“For one, and two, where’s Lynda?”

Oracle scoffed. “Do you have the goddam money, or not?”

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Jude couldn't bring himself to like the midget's dead voice. His dirt-brown eyes pierced Oracle's dancing blue eyes, forcing them to freeze in a momentary counter-stare. "Do you love to swap Lynda for Lacuna?"

"You don't have Lacuna. We have Lynda." The midget's dead voice quivered. His gun hand shook slightly, and Jude knew he'd hit him below the belt.

"I see it in your eyes, runt. You're scared." Oracle spat, "You see nothing!"

You could slice the tension in the room with a six inches blade. While he put the fear of God in them, Jude remained cool as a cucumber, though brain ticked a million times faster than his heartbeats. To that point, he'd complied with the three gunmen to let them take him closer to his mark. In one explosive move, he punched one of the men so hard he crashed with Oracle into the staircase. The other man's gun spat twice before Oracle's bullet hit him in the belly. Jude sprang out of the door. While the other man sorted himself, he raced along the tiled corridor trying to catch a glimpse of numbers on the doors. Oracle came after him like a rabid terrier, shooting.

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Jude dashed into an open door, startling a waiter who seemed to be putting the room in some order. He slammed the door behind himself and locked it. "This is one hell of a trap."

The waiter pleaded, "What's going on sir?"

In a suiting voice, Jude said, "You'll be alright. Let me use your phone for our own good."

The stunned waiter obeyed. He fished out an infinix S2 and put it in Jude's hand. Jude called Idle, Badrick and Nick in quick succession. They each knew what role to play. The gunshots down in the lobby told him what to do. Also, he heard Oracle running back. Jude unlocked the door, told the waiter to leave, and stepped out fast. He hurried the other way, found room 45 and rapped on the door. "Amigo?"

"Yeah, c'mon!"

Opening the door, the sight of the sexagenarian held up by Idle's gun greeted him. He heard Idle asked, "So why on earth would you do that?"

His eyes shifted from them to the two bodies that lay on the tiled floor, in the crimson pool of their own blood, and

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back. "It's my pleasure, Lacuna. Don't answer him, answer me. Where's Lynda?"

The old man looked at him with bleary eyes. "You know I'm worth more than a paltry one hundred million dollars, don't you?"

"So, why did you ask for it?"

"That was only a psychological warhead. It's the only way I can make you walk into our net. You see."

"That's cheering. We ain't got time, where's Lynda?!"

The response came from the thumping on the door of the wardrobe to Jude's right. He yanked open the door. An unkempt Lynda, gagged and bound, stared at him from behind the few clothing that hung in there. Jude virtually snatched her out of the wardrobe. She mumbled something before he could undo the gag on her mouth and blacked out, collapsing into his arm.

A rap on the door reminded him of Badrick. He laid Lynda on the ground, picked a gun from one of the corpses on the ground. "Dread, nuh true?"

"True, I-a dread, bredren."

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Jude opened the door. Badrick, bleeding from the nose, smiled so wide, he could take in a wide pan cake. He led Oracle into the room at gun-point. Jude closed the door. He searched Oracle, retrieved his phone from his pocket and locked him into the wardrobe. The sound of hurried multiple footsteps prompted him to turn the key in the lock of the door.

Lacuna said, "If you're done prancing, it's my turn."

Despite Idle's gun pointing at him, the old man began to rise. Idle pushed him back onto the armchair. His right hand shot out with a jab that jarred Idle like an ostrich's kick. Idle staggered backward. He aimed his gun again.

"No!" Jude screamed as he blocked another blow from the old man. He winded Lacuna with a solid punch to the chest, and kicked him down. The party outside the door, bent on barging in, sprayed the door with bullets. Idle and Badrick shot back from within. The gunshot from the party ceased for a brief moment, and came in a renewed burst. The door yielded. It flew open inwards. Badrick and Idle punctured the three arrivals in vital parts in split seconds. Jude kicked Lacuna hard as the old man dove for the other

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dead man's gun. While Lacuna lay writhing on the ground, Jude sent Nick's signal.

Out in the corridor, more footsteps came running. Jude took a peep. "Shit!" He stepped out, picked the automatic guns from the three dead men by the door. Badrick and Idle grabbed one each from him, and joined the brawl that ensued. The newcomers, in their number, caught in-between Jude and his friends on the one hand, and the security men of the building on the other hand, never ceased shooting both ways.

Jude left Idle and Badrick to it. He spotted the black bat on the horizon as soon as he smashed the glass of the window. He sent another kick into Lacuna to give the old man a reason to stay writhing on the ground. Next, he lifted Lynda and propped her against the wall by the window. He brought Oracle out of the wardrobe and tied his hands behind him, and climbed onto the windowsill.

Jude perched precariously out of the window with shattered glass. He had no time and interest in looking down on the world from the sixteenth floor of the storey building. Nick, with the door of the chopper open, guided at snail's speed past the window of the twenty four storey skyscraper.

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Jude signalled him to repeat the manoeuvre. He joined Idle and Badrick, assessed the situation, and pulled Idle back into the room. "Help with Lynda, Nicks here."

This time, Nick came in slow motion. The chopper hovered as near the window as possible. Jude and Idle swung unconscious Lynda through the air into the open door of the chopper. Working like some oiled machines, they bound Lacuna and threw him in. They threw Oracle in after him, and Jude motioned Idle to jump in.

Behind him, Badrick was responding to gunfire with sporadic shots. Jude took over to keep the gunmen off the door. "It's your turn to go,"

Badrick limped to the window and climbed up. On a prayer and a wing, at Jude's command, "Go!," he sprang through the air into the helicopter. Jude was surprised at how he propelled himself with one good leg. He sprayed his last round of shots, and followed suit, leaving behind the hellish cacophony of gunshots.

## CHAPTER 14



Lucana's escape from the Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison was a feat. The devil deserves his due. It was a security embarrassment. Jude rose to the occasion, worked with his 'friends' and salvaged the situation when they roped him in. They turned him and Oracle over to the DG-SSS, earning the team a new accolade that shot them further up the national heroes' limelight. Lacuna, slippery as an eel on the 'Most Wanted List' for two decades, re-arrested! It was a cause for national jubilation.

However, on the heels of this celebration broke the news of a new jailbreak! It jarred the entire nation with implicit threat to peace, life and living in a tangible form again. Jude knew he'd now watch his own back for the rest of his life. Allies, friends and foes abound. And he must carry on. In the nadir of despair about the latest news, his sufferings seemingly futile, he asked questions, answered the questions and questioned the answers, by default... Number 5 and X, at large! Bad. Really bad.

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He heard her snoring softly and cast a glance at her. Lynda curled up like a cat on the double bed. The details of how she fell into the hands of Lacuna and his stooges replayed in his mind. She said she fell for their airport-taxi ruse. It started away from the airport in the right direction. Some twenty minutes later it veered into a side street and the driver wouldn't respond to her alarmed questions, even at gun-point. He parked mid-road instead of talking. A yoghurt van following close behind pulled up beside it. Two men got out and held her up with automatic machine guns. A third, Oracle, slipped a bag over her head. In this way, they whisked her away. However, her abduction availed her certain insight into the personality of Lacuna - he was a charming, master manipulator. If Lacuna could pull a revenge bid like that all alone, how much more Number 5 and X together. His mobile phone nagged him out of his nightmarish thoughts. It was the DG-SSS. He requested Jude to meet him ASAP. He heaved himself out of bed, his mind made up. He'd see him, and in that instance, submit his resignation letter.

By 8:00, Jude sat before the DG-SSS. He knew that his 'former boss' held him in some esteem. That humbled him, but it didn't affect the decision he'd taken. He listened to the

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mysterious man speak, and thought he was candid. It was about Number 5 and X. He said the onus lay on Jude to find them in furtherance of his good works for his fatherland. Jude countered by tendering his resignation letter, which did not elicit an iota of surprise from the DG-SSS. Rather, he plunged into a persuasion session that seemed a screed to Jude. When Jude rose up though, he found himself thinking of only one man - Lacuna.

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Lacuna, feeble as a child, sat listening. He grimaced at the mention of Number 5 and X. Jude pressed on. "You aren't doomed. Pin your hope on me. You'll do some time, not die by execution, if you tip me on how to get them."

"I could tell you a million places. They won't be there. Not even I can find them now. There's honour among thieves, and that's a fruit of love. However, certain factors are stronger than love itself as has happened among us. I read the hand-writing on the wall. You cannot, so you won't understand. They won't be anywhere I could reach them now. That's why I should not be here. They will find me, kill me, in sacrifice to the Dust devil. That's the way it is."

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Jude marvelled at how fragile and vulnerable Lacuna both sounded and looked. "I see. That's why you're refusing to eat. You're scared of poisoning, aren't you?"

"We're experts at administering it in the most subtle ways."

Jude thought a sadist fears the very pain he enjoys causing others. He shrugged. "You're in safe hands if you make things easy for me. That's how I can help you."

"Is that a deal? I wish I could key into it. No. I can't."

"I understand your position. But, I know that the only person I trust here per time, is me. If I take my leave, the next caller might be the very one you dread. Let's help each other."

Lacuna glanced at the digital clock on the wall. His beady eyes narrowed in contemplation. "Hmm. Let's give it a try then," he said with a feeble voice, "I'll have an answer ready in a moment. Just...just, let me rest a bit."

Lacuna lowered himself to the bed, lying on his back. Really, refusing to eat or drink for the past three days told on him. A hunger strike, it seemed. With weak hands, he pulled the white sheet over his head, evoking the image of a

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mummified corpse in Jude's mind. Only that the man's torso rose up and down in rhythm with his breathing. He left the old man alone, and went out of the room for a while. When he returned and sat on the same armchair, a nurse slid in through the curtain like a ghost. He carried a tray of drugs in his left hand, nodding at Jude who responded in the same coin. With a sinewy hand, the nurse pulled back the sheet. There was a pillow and other sheets arranged in a humanoid form, covered by the upper white sheet. No Lacuna! Jude jumped to his feet. His heart skipped more than a beat. The surprise he felt made his breathing laborious. "How on earth..."

"We never lose the power to surprise, old boy," the nurse said, "put your goddamn hands in the air." He trained a semi-automatic rifle at Jude. His steel grating voice sent a chill down Jude's spine.

It was too late to pull his own .45. He raised his hands as ordered. "I'm surprised! Where is he?" "Never mind. Now, you're ours."

"No, I'm not."

"Don't doubt me." The nurse pulled out a sleek mobile phone and dialled a number. He said, "I have him."

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“Believe me. You don’t have me.” He saw the flicker in the nurse’s eyes. “I detest little boys doing things that are better left for adults. Who taught you how to wield a gun? Hu?”

“Cut the crap. I have orders to keep you alive for just five minutes. I could defy it.” “Well. That’s not bad.”

“Keep quiet now, and stand still.”

“Like this?” Jude kept on distracting him. “One last word...”

The butt of a rifle descended on the nurse like a ghost’s cudgel. It happened so fast, he blacked quicker than a gasp. Lynda stood over him as he dropped to the ground, grinning. “I couldn’t bear staying there alone. With everybody out, the place grew sort of- how do I put it?

Claustrophobic.”

“So you came calling. Are you my moma?”

“You’re a rough diamond, aren’t you? Let’s get the hell out of here.”

The blow to the nurse’s head was so hard he didn’t come to in good time. Jude took Lynda’s arm and led her towards the door, about to leave without him. It was a very slight sound that seemed out of place to him. He turned around.

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The nurse, lying on his belly, took an aim with the rifle in his hand. Jude pulled his .45 in reflex action and shot him in the head... Lynda's smoky eyes turned starry as she placed a hand across her heart in a show of regret. "That would've been a fatal mistake."

"Yeah, it sometimes happens when one leaves a gun in an unconscious foe's hand. ...Number 5, X and their underlings would be hibernating somewhere until they could slip out to safety." "Within the interval, anything could happen."

"The hope in the victory of good over evil, seems like testing the water with both feet, if we only sit and pray." He went back for the nurse's semi-automatic, picked it up with a left hand and raised it onto his shoulder. "Those two cannot hide forever."

"What about us?" This whole thing's telling on us."  
"You're right. It's telling on us."

"So?"

"..." The chopping of the helicopter reached his ears. He heard it descending into the open space beside the bungalow.

Badrick, Idle and Nick came out, each carrying a semi-automatic rifle. "Nothing doing?" "Lacuna. He vanished."

## CHAPTER 15



He was glad that the phenomenal good agenda did go belly up. Jude stuffing a piece of chicken into his mouth, contemplated how indescribable the impacts of the social and political ramifications would have been on the country. He shuddered at the thought of it all. Good enough, he kept reminding himself, the iron mask on the face of the Dust devil has dropped and the faces behind it sufficiently revealed – Number 5, X and Lacuna - though they've escaped behind mysterious circumstances that left more questions than there were answers.

Of the trio, Lacuna rated the most subtle although Number 5 was the head of their organization. He was a presidential aspirant who nursed high hopes that never came to fruition. When he lost the elections thrice, he resolved to fight foul, thus initiating the alliance with other disgruntled elements on the political frontline. Also, secessionists from different parts of the country bought the idea of forming a united front to institute the phenomenal good agenda. They believed that justice had to be enforced

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by themselves if they must have it! In this way, Lacuna created the monster organization styled the Dust devil. The man Lacuna was a pathological manipulator. An incorrigible one whose mental energy fed on the thrills of deception. His exceptional organizational skill was vital to the growth of the Dust devil, but he deputized for Number 5, on purpose.

Time came when the Dust devil began to suffer some blows from Jude and his friends, and to lose grounds. This culminates in the destruction of 'the other man,' a robot, to be installed as the president of Nigeria. An internal conflict ensued within the Dust devil. The conflict escalated despite the arrest of the three leaders. When Lacuna plotted his escape from prison without Number 5 and X, it was a self-preservation bid. Number 5 and X later beat the beefed up security, and escaped in pursuit, calling for his head. Their escape revealed how far reaching their influence remained even in dispute among themselves. They had staunch loyalists in every organization everywhere in the country. However, it became known that the secret society is not a hundred per cent clandestine as hitherto believed. Its members don't operate in the air but among us. They mingle with us. Jude thought it behoves every Nigerian citizen to become conscious of his environment. Everybody should

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strive to know whoever lives next door to a healthy limit. He prayed the government to promote the principles of community policing with all its might. This will make for spotting certain characters that hide in the obvious, under our very noses, perpetrating nefarious activities to the detriment of the society at large. In this way, we become collectively responsible for the security of our country. And no matter how bleak things appear, the sun that rose in the east will definitely set in the west. Somebody once wrote that, "The gloomiest of weather does not stop the progression of the sun." Nigeria will arrive! The thought lifted Jude's spirit. While he savoured the feeling of tranquillity within his soul, his phone rang. It was the DG-SSS. "Have you heard it, man?"

"No, boss. What news?" "Watch it live on NTA. Quick!"

Jude held the phone to his ear. He was oblivious of the dead line as he rushed to switch on the TV. The Number 5 and X in shackles, sat resigned, facing the TV audience. Behind them stood three security operatives which Jude didn't recognize. And after them, a crowd of journalists teemed at the background, waiting for whatever piece of information that might drop.

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The newscaster said the two men spotted by men of the Interpol at 2:00 a.m. checked into a low profile hotel in Ghana, using the pseudonyms Mr Morgan Obi and Mr Max Abanda. He quoted the new president of Nigeria as saying "They are bound to make mistakes..." in his communication with the Interpol via the office of the Chief of Staff. The duo sought information about a feeble old man who actually lodged in that hotel. As at when he was discovered to be Lacuna, men of the Interpol rapped on his door. True to his nickname, Lacuna, meaning a blank space, his room was empty!

Two out of three caught, things are looking up, thought Jude. He switched off the TV as soon as the news on the political terrorists was over. Jude dialled Idle's Number.

"Hi amigo."

"Hi yourself, amigo. How's it going?" "Sweet and bitter, man. What's up?"

"Number 5 and X showed up in Ghana. They're in custody again. Interpol nabbed them."

"That's great! I hope they lock them up in cages this time around. It means I can really be idle once more."

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“Yeah. You deserve a good break, amigo. Perhaps a trip to an island where a cool breeze blows with lots of reggae music in the air will do you a load of good.”

“You’re dynamite; I’ll try the crown of the Caribbean Sea.” “Jamaica?”

“Jamaica.”

“I hope this isn’t just a flight of fancy. I hope you mean what you’re saying.”

“So do I.”

“Well. It’s a good thing to dream.” “Dreams are good, man. Catch you later...”

When Jude sat down again, his mind roamed back to Lacuna. He will make his mistakes too, and get caught, he hoped. Then, like Roy infiltrated the Black Swamp men way back that made Jules the living dead hell-bent on bombing him, the remainder of the Dust devil could be infiltrated too... The Dust Devil would be history. Like a fish would rise to breath, Jude hoped Lacuna would surface somehow, somewhere, and cause a ripple that would attract the keen eyes of the Interpol to him. He would keep his own eyes

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peeled, and his ears to the ground for news of the feeble old man.

In the meantime, Jude thought he could do with some music. He plugged his ear piece and treated himself to Buju Banton's 'Close one yesterday.' Jude loved the lyrics. He sang along, the part that goes, "Said I had a close one yesterday, jah put an angel over me, be strong, hold a firm meditation. One day things must get better. Don't you go down, keep your head above the water, one day, things must get better, be strong..."

A shadow fell on the wall before him. He couldn't care less. Jude continued singing Lynda's favorite scent, Perfect Lady, wafted into his nostrils and she shook him from behind. "You make me think you've lost your mind, quack Rasta man," she said, laughing like a drain. "You said to remind you when it's time for the next news broadcast,"

## CHAPTER 16



He followed the current programmes of the federal government with contentment as she stepped up efforts at ventilating grievances. In a bid to further decontaminate the nationwide tension. She dialogued with her citizens and gave orientation through every available media. She rolled out programmes to accommodate all interests with a particular focus on the youths. Jude applauded her youth compliant policies. He thought everything was turning around, making the country a veritable paradise.

Sipping a glass of Adam's ale, he thought he could only enjoy the moment, nursing neither fear nor hope like a dispassionate umpire at a tennis match. He was glad that Jude the circumstantial flier was now an abiding one. Jude wished every citizen should be a victory for common sense.

Together with Lynda, Jude went through preparations to meet with the president with a sense of awe. His skin tingled with the cold filtered air in the room as they dressed up. He had a slightly uncertain idea about the reason for his

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Excellency's invitation. Jude guessed it'd have to do with his resignation letter.

He was right. At the presidency, the president handed the letter approving his resignation. Then, he gave each of them a brown official envelope that felt crisp to Jude's touch, which he required them to open right before him. They tore them open at the flaps in turn, and found their letters of appointment as special advisers one and two to the president on political terrorism, required to hit the ground running!

"I need you both close to me," said the president.

Jude glanced at Lynda who met his gaze with the same question in her smoky eyes... They said their thanks with profusion and took their leave. You could say they were honoured from the treatment they got at the presidency, and you'd be right.

Back home, Jude found himself thinking nothing but 'Who am I? What am I doing with my life?

"To Lynda he said, "Do you still want us to emigrate?"

"We could pitch our tents right here and practise 'the art of peace,' can't we?"

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“Why not? The grass is green enough here too,” said Jude. He winked, and smiled broadly. “Yeah.” Lynda rested her head on his shoulder. “You know how I feel right now?”

“Real good, right?” “Right, real good.”

“I feel the same way too.” “The feeling is contagious” “I caught it from you.”

“No, it’s the other way round.”

Jude’s negroid lips parted in a gentle smile that emanated from the depth of his heart. He rested his head on the posh leather of the armchair, crossed his legs and drifted away in thoughts, a virtual philosopher. He thought time comes from the past, the present and the future. He reflected on how these periods relate and affect humans. Tomorrow they say may never come... Should the past be forgotten, and the future sacrificed, that one might focus on the present? No. The people perish where there’s no vision, says the good book. We ought not cling to the past, be derelict of the present, in our focus on tomorrow either. No. He thought whoever it was that said those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it was right. Remembering the past is not for lamentation but for informing decisions we take today with tomorrow in view. An attitude that will help

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one to avoid the mistakes of yesteryears. Jude wished every citizen, by all that he holds sacred, to appreciate our common history and the relationship among the three periods of the country. He wished everyone would live lives worthy of emulation for all the benefits, and that of those for whom they bear the light. Someone said that the gloomiest weather does not stop the progression of the sun. How appropriate! We shall overcome... He shut his eyes and saw the president eyeing him with contentment in his crystal-clear eyes, his head cocked, and his thin lips parted in a smile that spoke volume, all on his mental screen.

Lynda fiddled with the remote control tuned from channel to channel. The news headlines caught her attention-  
LACUNA CONTACTING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT  
IN VIDEO MESSAGES, SAYS HE'S HALE AND HEARTY,  
THE DUST DEVIL NEEDS TO BE

APPEASED. She drew Jude's attention to it. Jude leaned forward on the chair and listened to the commentary on the news item. "This is a threat."

"Yes... It must not be taken for granted." "It's been said, he'll make mistakes."

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“I hope so, but when? He might do some damage before the mistakes begin to happen. We shouldn’t wait for him to start making mistakes. The earlier he’s ferreted or lured out, the better.”

“One can’t smoke him out not knowing where he is. Luring is the thing to do, but how?” “That’s the rub though not impossible.”

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From the shadow of the staircase, he took brisk steps towards the car parked in front. The young driver held the door open for him. He got into the car, settled down and removed the Nike cap on his head. “We’re good to go.”

The driver kick-started the vehicle and eased out of the premises through the back gate in the dead of the night. Two hours later saw them heading out of Benue state capital, towards the big river. At last, the car stopped at the foot of the old bridge over the Benue river at Makurdi. As they got out of the vehicle, the dank air assailed them with the smell of mud. Instantly, they began to swat mosquitoes. Two dark figures emerged from beneath the shadow of an umbrella tree, swatting mosquitoes too. They stepped into the floodlight of the car. Lacuna, got out. At the age of sixty, he

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didn't move like an aged man. He wasn't the feeble man way back when he would neither eat nor drink for fear of poisoning. He seemed rejuvenated by top-notch Medicare and in-door exercising in hiding. He was a fitness freak in his prime and was known for saying, "I'll do it till I die," now that he is aged. He gestured the two men to the booth of the vehicle. They led the way under the bridge carrying two strong leather bags. In two ticks, a speedboat started and headed off the bushy shores of the river into the night. Lacuna returned to his ancestral islet.

## CHAPTER 17



**F**or once Jude felt really on top of things. He knew the terrain more than ever before, and felt glad that the Dust devil agenda opened his eyes to the true state of things. It was terrible. However, it was good. It is the bitterness of some things that teaches the appreciation of the sweetness of others. The onus lies on one to choose that which he desires.

So far, the presidency rolled out a nationwide disarmament programme for members of the Dust devil organization. They came out in their numbers from every part of the country, and turned in all manner of weapons in total surrender at the disarmament venue, which of course was Eagle Square. They expressed contentment and confidence in the Government during the opportunity given for entertaining comments/questions after the president's address through the guest speaker, from the national orientation agency. An excerpt of the speech titled, 'The Nigerian Coat of Arm,' goes thus: "...The eagle, is a symbol of strength. We are strong. The horses symbolize dignity. We have dignity. The black shield, the fertile soil of the

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country... farming is our tradition. We are stronger united, with regal respect. We are blessed with the fertility of our soil in which lies more prosperity than anyone can imagine. Agriculture is our tradition, and our education is invalid without learning the uses of our cutlasses and hoes. There's dignity in labour and success is ours as a country at the price of positive efforts channelled in the right direction. Youths are leaders of tomorrow, embrace dialogue in all situations. Shun all sorts of strife and rancour, that together we invent a more congenial neighbourhood, ourselves..."

Jude's mobile phone set off ringing, distracting his active listening. He reached for it. It was Idle. "Hello, amigo."

"Amigo, how's it going?" "Perfect, man."

"Lucana's back in the country. What's your take?" "It's true. How do you know?"

"I listen."

"The INTERPOL dogged him through the Ghana-Togo border. Again, through the Cotonou-Togo border and finally through Lagos-Cotonou border into Nigeria. He kept slipping through their fingers like a slippery flathead catfish."

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“It beats me how he keeps shaking them off at every turn, amigo.”

“He’s Lacuna, blank space, seem apparent but never there. The more you look at him, the less you see.”

“Anyhow you paint him, he’s human and not a spirit. The world out there’s hot for him, so he’s going to lie low awhile. When the heat cools off, he may rear his ugly head.”

“The heat’s not going to cool anytime soon. I’ll keep the fire alive while we ransack all nooks and crannies. We’ll find him.”

“The earlier, the better...” “Sure. He can’t hide forever.”  
“Well. Let’s hope so.”

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The rumbling of thunder and flashes of lightning across the darkening sky heralded a gathering storm. The air reeked of humus as the sexagenarian lay on a camp bed under the almond tree he’d planted when he first visited his ancestral home as a teenage boy. Way back then, the four hectare islet was accessible by canoes paddled by the then near primitive men. The remains of all sorts of human bones strewn around is suggestive of a haven of cannibals. The more the torch of civilization beams its light, the more the

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succeeding generation, embracing civilization, moves out to different cities in ones and in groups. None left and ever returned. The old men passed on, leaving an uninhabited islet which others dreaded like a lion's den. However, Lacuna valued the almost entirely rocky islet surrounded by crocodile infested water. For one reason or the other, they have cultivated a taste for human flesh and added that to the menu of species that they deliberately set off to hunt. Perhaps, years of dumping the remains of human meat and entrails into and around the habitat and water contributed to teaching the crocs the tastiness of them. This made the isle a no-go area for most people who dreaded the reputation of the islet as the home of men who ate fellow men. Lacuna built a modern brick house in it. He disguised it against view from any aircraft in the sky, and colonised the islet with a few of his personal trusted hands, for the coverage it afforded him in times like this. Of course, there were relics of the mud thatched houses of the previous inhabitants. They were nothing to attract a daring adventurer except he's ignorant of what the islet stood for. None of Lacuna's cronies, Number 5 and X, knew of the place. He never spoke of it. Here, his constant companions were two cubs of different species which he secured from the zoo that needed to create space for other species...

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His countenance, dark as sooth, was an apparition of grudges. His loss in the robot installation project, coupled with the treachery from the other two, congealed into a palpable desire for retaliation. The video camera with which he prepares his messages dangled on a strap on his wrist. He switched it on and studied his latest message titled 'Dust devil never dies.' In it, he spoke with the cold fury of the rising of a new Dust devil, more formidable, in a different form. The bottom line, he said, was vengeance. He mentioned ten names of well-placed personages as targets with Number 5 and X uppermost. Soon, very soon, he said, except a meaningful sacrifice goes as tribute to the Dust devil, his own brainchild. Satisfied, he switched on the mobile phone he dedicated to this end too, and transferred the video. In a couple of minutes, he released it with venom.

The first drops of rain began to patter. The wind blew stronger. Lightning crisscrossed the evening sky as the thunder rumbled; or the Dust devil's spirit grumbled. Lacuna rose up, picked up his camp bed and ambled into his brick house. His big cat cubs followed him in as if they had faith in the god that went ahead of them. The storm intensified. It may wash away his footprints, but not the schemes on his master mind.

## THE DAY OF THE BEAST – 1

High up in the sky, the clouds drifted off in haste, revealing a fiery glare from an angry sun. A jazzy instrumental music wafted from a wide all-purpose hall late that afternoon in June. It was in the clubhouse of Livestock Research Institute of Nigeria. In its informal atmosphere, the clubhouse fostered a unique kind of social life among workers at unofficial hours.

It was a conducive place where the big boys talk serious business over frivolities like mafia politicking. In the clubhouse, you could see movies, or play whichever game caught your fancy, sitting on a posh cushion chair, comfortable, free.

The clubhouse offered divers funny activities in ways that appeal to you. In the airy room, thankful for its hospitality, you reciprocate by patronage, not knowing how or when the idea slipped in. You could indulge your appetite with chilled beer, grilled cane rat, antelope, deer or 'something,' from the standard bar and restaurant that graced the rear wall of the large room.

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Far past the bar and restwursnt, in a well-lit corner, stood a newspaper stand. Jude sat, dead to the world, engrossed in an article in the folded magazine, clutched in his trembling hands. Tiny beads of sweat broke out of his pores, making his white cotton shirt stick to his skin. The relative peace that subsisted after the Dust devil saga afforded him the luxury to lead a normal life. Lately, he fell into the habit of postponing his regular workout programmes, relaxed. Nevertheless, that afternoon, he read with a burning sensation.

Jude read the article on the front page of the magazine, titled THE LIST OF THE DOOMED with much trepidation.

Beneath the article, was the picture of a mangled corpse lying on a lawn tennis court. The casualty supposedly awaited his club members where the attack took place. The unknown attacker, the article said, struck out of the blues and disappeared without a trace, leaving the disembowelled corpse behind. Its paw-prints, entering and leaving the court, were visible though. The bold departing footprints showed boldly up to the edge of the car park of the sports club, but not on the tarred part. How nobody saw it was a surprising mystery to everyone.

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Hooves are to herbivores as paws are to carnivores, ran the virulent speculations.

There was a wide opening on the throat of the corpse. His right arm twisted backwards in an awkward way from where the upper bone- humerus-was broken. The beast ate up his left thigh, revealing the whole thighbone. What a way for a man to die!

The wealthy businessman of far reaching influence, Chief Edi Jason's death shocked Canaan city like the onset of a sudden war. It got everybody asking what manner of beast could so maul a man in the heart of a populous city? Inside the heart of the Canaan City, canines were the most likely suspects.

Subsequently, many dogs in the city underwent one form of test or the other to determine what they've been eating in the past twenty four hours, according to the article. Veterinary doctors and other scientists examined their teeth and claws for traces of human flesh and blood in a bid to determine their culpability. They drew blank, and the best of the most informed speculations turned out immediately impotent, baffling the populace.

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The police reported to have taken a look at all pet dogs all over the map of Canaan city, especially those that came across as aggressive in their neighbourhood. Calabar has an assortment of dreadful pet dogs. Dogs that were by nature liable to do damage, given the occasion. The police questioned their owners, in quest for the most likely suspect, and said investigation was still going on. They listed more dreadful Pit bulls, aggressive Alsatians a.k.a German shepherd, colloquially called police dog, and intrepid Bull Mastiffs in the city for further scrutiny. There were the renowned Rottweiler breed and a handful of the Great Danes on the list. The burning questions remained: 'Which of these beasts did it? Did it act on its own? Or was anybody behind it? If so, who?' These questions defied answers.

There was the combing of the neighbourhood for stray dogs too. There were none in Calabar!

Jude rose up, put the magazine back on the stand and strolled out through the side door, seething with cold rage. He noted the increase in the number of entrants as they watched and listened to a panel of agitated discussants of the flat screen television on the wall. He slipped past the wide

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windows, leaving the comfort of the air-conditioned hall into the bright daylight outside, squinting his dirt brown eyes.

Outside, behind the hall, a game of table tennis was simmering between a sweating fat round woman and a calm looking man in sparkling white vest over a pair of grey tracksuit pants. "Good afternoon Mr Bola Wood," Luke said, walking past them, admiring how the woman put spins in the Ping-Pong ball, panting. His approach must have distracted the man. He hesitated to strike the ball and lost the battle "Good afternoon Mr Ochada, wait a minute," he said in a fluid voice. "Have you seen the video?"

"No. What's in it?"

"Bad news... Take a look and see, man. Do check your Whatsapp account. It's not funny."

"Later."

"No. Now."

"Hmm!" Luke scoffed, going down the steps. He took long powerful strides through the path between the swimming pool to his right and the badminton court to his left.

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Beyond these, he came to his Toyota RAV4 at the car park and retrieved his mobile phone from its glove compartment. In his whatsapp account, he found the video titled 'THE CALABAR MAULING 1. A defenceless man screamed, put up a brief feeble struggle and fell to the ground as the attack progressed. The attacker didn't show in the video while it went on. But the growling was audible enough to hint that the attack was carried out by an inhuman thing. The biting, tearing and deepening of the gap in the thigh played out as if it was a ghost man-eater was devouring the man. Luke wondered how the video recording was done. An idea that pointed beyond reasonable doubt at a human collaborator. He must have fastened the camera to the body of the beast somehow. Who was he?

Luke replayed the gory video once more, shuddering at the harrowing killing of the man. It was real. It was the business magnate. It was a gruesome death! Luke felt guilty, though there was nothing he would have done about an anonymous threat letter to the man, he felt he should have done something, but he learnt of it too late.

Luke felt pity for the helpless man. He thought that the release of the video was a deliberate attempt at spreading

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fear. Yes. Intimidation was no doubt the endgame, but why? This, was the mushrooming of another episode of terrorism, in a bizarre dimension...

At the moment, Jude felt like it was the much proclaimed end of time. He seemed to recognize the feeling that goes with Armageddon. The end of the world has come, he thought.

He got behind the wheel and drove out of the clubhouse premises feeling lost. That Friday afternoon, Luke got to his rented apartment perturbed. He would take a quick cold bath as usual before eating, he thought, but a message alert changed all that. He opened his whatsapp account once more. A video titled 'THE MAKURDI MAULING 1' greeted him. It was a dastardly attack on an elderly man. The unseen thing tore the old man, clawing, gnawing, and biting. Then followed was the signature eating up of a part of him. This time, his entire right arm and upper chest. The video convinced Luke that it was the end of time indeed. The victim, a renowned importer cum exporter, Chief Graham Obi, finally lay mutilated in a puddle of crimson liquid on a white tiled floor.

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The man had also reported the receipt of a threat letter but claimed that his personal security outfit could protect him.

Luke, disconcerted, wondered who on earth was the raw animal behind the beast. He thought of what specific beast he used. The despair in which he found himself caused him to lose appetite for virtually everything... He lay still, in silence... Luke found himself walking with quick short steps and a deep sense of urgency along a dark, indefinite alley. The half-moon threw a deep yellow hue on everything underneath as he went down towards a cluster of untenanted buildings in quest of something. What he sought, he couldn't tell, yet he knew he wanted it so badly. It was crucial. Soon, he stepped onto the pavement of the first building, and a sudden roar, loud enough to waken the dead, startled him from behind.

He was sore afraid for his dear life, but death loomed imminent over his head! His anxiety deepened into an abysmal despair in which he felt hapless. Him, running, going nowhere: the ferocious beast, coming, not getting any nearer! The irrationality of the distance between them not closing, unexplained, deepened his despair as he laboured to

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breath. What was this beast? Helpless, panting hard, Luke lifted his heart to God in humble supplication. An unusual reaction that again confirmed that there is no atheist in a foxhole. He did not want to die! He struggled within his mind, and opened his eyes with all the will power he could muster, thus pulling himself out of an irrational reality of a nightmare with a gasp.

He found himself lying with his legs crossed under him on the couch in his unlit sitting room. Drenched in cold sweat, dreading such depth of helplessness, he attempted rising up but his legs felt numb from being crossed under him for too long. He heaved a deep sigh of relief, grateful, for the unpleasant numbness of his limbs was a lesser evil than the nightmare itself. Wondering where nightmares come from, he reached for the light switch by the bedside and pressed it, the digital clock on the wall showed 11:45 p.m. It was a long way before dawn, he mused.

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The sweet earthy smell of humus hung heavy in the damp hot air of the plantation. Dry leaves and twigs crackled under his footsteps as he meandered through the midst of cocoa trees. An inhuman companion trotted after him.

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Together, they went down the slight slope and emerged from the canopy of the cocoa plantation into the full glare of the early morning sun. The broad tarred road before them demarcated the farm from the staff quarters from where the refreshing fragrance of new-mown lawn began to replace that of the decaying remains of organic matter behind them. It was the sweet, sweet smell of home. He ambled ahead of Jag across the road. The old man went round to the back of the last brick-red bungalows by the roadside. This was his choice abode for the serenity of its location.

The bungalow squatted in the centre of the well-manicured lawn that he was fond of mowing by himself. From the frontage, you could see straight down the road for a little over a mile where it intersected another tarred road. With Jag at his heels, he went around the building and through the array of apple trees that made the backyard a veritable Garden of Eden. His eyes roving over the branches of the trees, Cynthia wasn't on her favourite basking spot. He turned to the right flank of the building. There she lay on the septic tank. Her old skin lay new-shed beside her. Cynthia's new scales over a mix of dark and light brown colours glistened in the golden rays of the roosting sun. The ball python reared its small triangular head, flicked her

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forked tongue with her black lidless eyes on him. It was a cold dark gaze that could have petrified someone else. The languorous man ambled closer. He reached out a slender hand and patted her head. He let it slide down her sleek neck as she began a slow slither forward. He picked her up with what seemed every ounce of his strength. Cynthia curled herself around his slender shoulders and torso, and so he bore her via the back door into the garage in the building. He let her into the plastic cage that was her home. "Sorry, my guest is mighty scared of you. You could say he's ophidiophobic, so to speak. See you later."

He locked the cage and turned around. Jag already sat on his hindquarter, taking in what went on before him. The Alsatian rose up to make way for his interspecies friend and master. The fragile old man stooped and tickled him behind his drooping ears. "You'll have to hole up too, Jag boy. That man's never at ease with you in sight. You could say he's cynophobic, so to speak... I won't lock your door though, in case things go a mite askew. I know you understand me, don't you Jag boy? I trusted him once, ...not anymore..."

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Jag shut his eyes and moaned in appreciation of his gentle touch, and his silvery voice. Dr Noah ushered him into his kennel. He left the door open, but said, "Stay."

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In the ascetic sitting room, the clock on the wall showed 10:45 a.m. They sat contemplating each other like two disputing cocks. The hooded visitant broke the ice. "The speculation is rampant."

"And so what? No one's sure of a thing."

"Nobody's sure but you aren't immune to suspicion. Don't fool yourself that no one's curious about a monastic animal doctor whose closest associates are a passionless serpent and an intrepid Alsatian."

"Curiosity is good, but there's a downside to it," was his terse response.

"It killed the cat?"

"You got my drift, it killed the cat. Let people mind their own business. Let them leave a solitary old man alone."

"...people are entitled to their thoughts, don't forget."

"There you go. As a person, I can't let other people's speculations become the laws by which I live my life. What

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has anyone against Jag and Cynthia? Jag's my best friend, and Cynthia, though cold, isn't a bad girl, is she?"

At the mention of the beasts, the hooded guest cast a sweeping glance around the tidy living room. He seemed to withdraw into his shell like a threatened turtle. He dreaded any dog, big or small, that belonged to someone else and not himself. He often said he'd seen his family's dogs do damage growing up, and so learnt not to trust another man's dog. "Did they check jag up?"

"Of course. He got a clean bill. He doesn't eat long pork, does he?"

"What's 'long pork?'"

"Human flesh."

"Oh, that. I understand about the dog in a lonesome place like this, Noah. Not about you living with a vile snake under one roof."

"How dare you call her 'vile'?"

"That's my opinion of it."

"'Her', not 'it', retract your words!"

"Oops! ...let's get down to business, shall we?"

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Dr Noah glared at his visitor, muttered something under his breath and leaned onto the backrest of the leather-covered chair. His visitor waited for him to calm down, and continued,

“The beasts arrive today at dusk, take custody of them. You’re the animal man, take good enough care of them. Make them mate and give us strong cubs in real time.”

“Crossbreeding these things is an ethical issue, what’s in it for me?”

“Good money. Keep them out of public eye, keep your mouth shut. Good money.”

“Name the good money.”

“No naming the good money. It comes with a pardon of your secret sin too.”

The animal doctor squirmed on his seat at the mention of his secret sin. He would have vanished into thin air if it were possible. “That’s the promise of the moon to a starry eyed school boy. A paltry five million will do for crossbreeding, rearing and zipping my mouth.”

The visitant pulled his hood further over his head and face. He held up his right hand to indicate ‘pause.’ “Don’t

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harangue. Make sure you deliver in real time, Noah. I said your sin will be forgiven, trust me.”

The veterinary doctor winced, turned pensive, and shrugged. “It’s a done deal. ...money?”

“I shouldn’t pay upfront, should I?”

“Good man, pay. You should.”

They initiated the transaction that only remained for Dr Noah to play his part...

The old man waited the full time it took the new-born cubs to be weaned. He showed up and took custody of it as soon as Dr Noah hinted him that all was set. Even though he took over custody of the cubs, he required Dr Noah’s input to raise them into the kind of beasts that he wanted. For the promise of ‘more money,’ he made Dr Noah relocate from his beloved quarters in Ibadan, the capital of Oyo state, to a dreaded islet somewhere in the Middle Belt with him, passing on the care of Jag and Cynthia to Dr Woods, another animal doctor in the neighbourhood.

Together on the islet, they set out rearing the cubs in earnest. Time flew, and the animals grew unusually fast, big and strong. They responded to training like a pair of good

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scholars. Rebel and Elsa each assumed a sphinx-like posture. They lay their tawny gargantuan bodies docile before their master with his aid, Dr Noah by his side. That evening, the two old men sat under an almond tree before a brick house. It was the only modern building upon the islet. All around it, there were the tell-tale fragments and rumbles of long fallen mud thatched houses that once stood scattered upon the islet. The one in hooded jacket told Dr Noah about the islet, especially its history as a haven of cannibals in those long gone days, when nobody willingly ventured unto it. A complex connection of factors led to the young ones, growing, to depart in ones, twos and so on from the islet. It must have been that they discovered that life outside their cannibal islet was healthier, illumined and progressive. None left the islet and ever returned. The older men and women passed on as is natural of any aged generation, leaving the islet unoccupied. Knowing the reputation of the islet to outsiders as a no go area, he thought it a perfect hide out from the world out there. That was why he arranged for bricks, transported them in powerboats at nights, and built the camouflaged house with modern facilities on the islet. None of the three masons he brought to build the brick house lived to tell any tale. No living soul knows a thing

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about his little hidden world, his kingdom. Not even his cronies during the chronicle of the Dust devil. He asked the animal doctor to return Rebel and Elsa to the room that served for their housing, and lock them up. The doctor rose up, calling the beasts by name. They rose after him and he led them way to the building. Shortly, he returned to the shed of the almond tree and lowered his fragile frame unto the plastic chair opposite the other man. A brief silence hung around them as they contemplated each other their usual way. Then, he said, "It's high time I took my leave."

"Yes. The contract's perfectly discharged, and I'm glad about it."

"I'm happy you're glad that we pulled it hitch free this far."

"We have no other option, do we?"

"No, we don't... Now that I'm done, pay up the balance of my money."

"Of course, you deserve it, and I will. There's one more thing before settlement."

"What's it?"

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“Remember I said your sin would be forgiven too? It’s a bonus for your single minded services. You’re pardoned. No one will ever hear of it, I guarantee you that... You’ll have to pardon me too on one point.”

“Meaning?”

“Let’s see the groundskeeper. After that, you’ll understand and forgive me too.”

“Is there a groundskeeper? You never mentioned him.”

“Yes, I didn’t... for your own good.”

“Don’t you want to pay me?”

“Money’s no object, you know. I only need a conclusive settlement of this issue, once and for all - permanently.”

“Permanently?”

“Yes, you heard me right. Let’s go.” The hooded old man, with a hand steady from long practice, pointed a Ruger SR40c recoil operated handgun at Dr Noah. He led Dr Noah at the tip of the gun to the back of the brick house, and further down a wavy path into the cluster of vine clothed trees. He squeezed the trigger. The bullet struck the animal doctor on his back faster than he could react.

The hooded old man said, pushed back the hood of his jacket. He “I’m Lacuna, the groundskeeper, you should have guessed...”