Reconnaissance.

First; the sting of light against his eyes, breaching even the defence of his eyelids. Micheal awakened slowly from a most tiresome sleep. He stirred as he remembered how to use sight, in the room, the sound of soft clattering and heels thudding quietly against the carpet. He made a squeal as he stretched his body into alertness. “Too much light. Claire.”

“Oh great, you’re up” his wife was putting on her earrings at the dresser. “I was hoping you’d get up in time to confirm our date night plans for today”

Micheal rolled right into the partially made half of the bed, groaning, “ can’t we just stay home? I’m tired of going out in Lagos traffic every Friday evening”

She weighed the thought briefly as she paused to fasten her second earring. “I actually don’t mind.” She turned to him with a big smile. “I can drop Bobo off with my mom on my way back”

“oh? That kind of date night?”

“Babe, it’s been a week and four days”

“Get our wine on your way back” he replied, returning the smile.

She threw on her blazer, taking it off the wooden coat rack, and made her way to the side of the bed beside him. “Worst follow-up ever but - he saw the picture; he asked about her again.”

He heaved a sigh and rolled away from her. “We were doing so well, Claire.”

“Most times I’m OK with what you’ve told me - we stay away; it’s in the past; maybe at the next holiday; all the things you say about your mom. But honestly, sometimes I’m confused all over again.”

“You know I don’t - just help me make something up. I’m too tired. Maybe today - “

“- let me guess; you’ll open up over wine?” She tugs at him, shoulder first, towards her and plants a kiss on his cheek. “I’ve heard that like five hundred times babe.”

He turns his face to her as she backs away towards the door, dramatically blowing kisses his way. “I love you too.”

“I don’t love you, please?” she replies contorting her mouth into a funny shape.

The door clicks gently shut on her exit and He sits up with a sigh, slight worry colouring his face. His mind seldom dwelt on the memories of his mother but there were worse things from his childhood he was taking care to avoid.

He shifted the thoughts from his mind, looking at his wife drive off through the window. “I think extra wine would help tonight.”

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“Normally, work is calm, quiet, and easy. Not too much stress, I don’t like stress. For this side hustle, I allow some trouble. Removing people without any trace cannot always be simple. What I don’t understand is why Mr Zek has all these strange requests on this job. “

The suspicious figure shifted with some discomfort on the damp lawn where he crouched. He rummaged through his breast pocket to reach for his phone. “9:21 PM”, he confirmed the time.

“Mr. Omonoria will be back any minute. All these new things are making me uncomfortable. I wonder if Mr. Zek doesn’t trust me anymore. He keeps saying the client asked for all these things - Not enough that I have to change my style, he’s asked me not to leave something for the police to find.

He hissed quietly as he shifted further into the darkness behind the hedges, just as a car passed down to the end of the cul-de-sac. He felt his back pocket for the hard plastic case concealing his weapon of choice - His, usually, lethal needles.

“No, Boss trusts me; Oga trusts me. “He shook his head as he began to remember. *“He has only said good things since we met. The way he looked at me when I killed that wild dog attacking the choir boy in church; I can never forget it. No one ever looked at me like that - Not even Aunty Agnes after Daddy left and mummy went crazy.*

“You took care of that with expert precision. Mr. Zek remarked. You have a gift, Mr -? “

I was so shocked by the compliment I almost forgot my name as I took his card. "Benjamin Odunlana, sir. My name is Benjamin." I replied.

"Mr Benjamin sir, I am on a mission against some people in this world and I would have you by my side. If you're interested, that is. The father told me about how special you are . I think the things you do well can be applied on much larger scale."

Steeling his nerve, he snapped out of his brief reminiscence.

"If this is how Mr Zek wants to do this one, I must go ahead. He trusts me, so I will trust him. I'll finish and go back to the shop. Aunty Agnes has been shouting about my recent lateness."

A black Toyota crawled up into the driveway at 9:42 pm. Out of the car emerged a stocky man yawning and sauntering as he made his way to the front door of the large white Modernist Nigerian home. He was alone in his mind as he thought to take a brief nap before his wife could arrive. He shifted the bottle of wine he held under his arm and made for the door with his keys. Shutting the door behind him, he breathed in the still air of solitude.

All was steady outside the Omonoria residence, the street was deserted; houses had begun turning out their lights. The Darkness draped the lawns, and driveways and seeped into the study where Micheal had begun dozing off. As he fell into that gentle nap, head faced to ceiling, a hulking figure of a man had snuck into the backyard and was quietly making nothing of the lock.

The man was a giant but he stepped feline-like into the kitchen; feet to the floor with grace and cunning. Even in that deep night, he made his way to the dining, carefully moving about the furniture without disturbance. Slowly he pushed through the access door and he could make out the shape of the unsuspecting man. The doors gave way slowly as he pushed; there was a sudden squeak from the hinges - Micheal stirred, looking right at the door.

He hissed through his teeth, eager to resume his nap "damn wind"

The man, Benjamin was invisible in that corridor - his dark navy jacket, gloves and ebony skin as camouflage in the darkness. Slowly he resumed his approach; out of the back of his pocket, the needle was in hand as he rounded the corner of the very chair his target sat. Another creak in the wooden floor about the chair startled Micheal right out of sleep!

He was on his feet in one quick movement “Who’s there?!”

Confirming no presence in the room, he felt a bit silly and flopped back into the chair.

“maybe I should just stay awake till she co -”

The needle was administered and the darkness enveloped his mind as well. It would be the last time Micheal saw his house.

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Laura had returned in haste. Parking her Subaru awkwardly in the front driveway “Date night, date night….Babe is going to kill me, I’m so late.” she muttered. Hoisting the surprise wine and food from out the back of the car, she rushed as fast as her heels could allow to the front door. Slowly, she snuck in hoping she could appease for lateness with surprise. Making out the dim light from the hallway to the study, she quickened her tip-toed steps. “Honey, forgive me, I’m home. I hope you’ve not fallen asleep”, she whispered to herself.

Peaking into the room she noticed the familiar frame of her husband sprawled across the coffee table. A lump formed in her throat; she made an unsteady step forward towards him. “Babe?”

Stuttering, she continued “Babe, this isn’t funny - “

Her shaking right hand found his head and slowly she turned him to see.

“Madam, I've been waiting for you since”, from behind her, the voice raised the hair on the back of her neck.

Partly stupefied, she crunched her stomach trying to find a scream.

In a swift swing of an arm, the intruder made sure It never came.

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“We both don’t have to be here, you know?”

“It’s a burial shrouded in mystery, Ezekiel. Everyone absent raises eyebrows. No matter how estranged”

“Everyone is certain the wife did it. The prints on his body were there - Benji sounded pretty sure - “

“ - Let’s avoid discussing this for now. I’m queasy enough as it is.”

Marie smoothed the front of her skirt as she got to her feet leaving Ezekiel behind. “Time to pay my respects”, she said staring blankly towards the casket.

The morning air was excited with the promise of rain and her heart was several times more flustered. As she advanced towards the partially lowered wooden box down the aisle, Ezekiel gently grabbed her gloved hand. “Remember, you have to go to her within the hour.”, he said softly.

She let his hand fall away, nervously looking about the venue hoping no one was staring too intently at her - at them. She resumed her strides forward. *“I should look sadder,”* she thought. *“What sort of sister doesn’t cry beyond control at her brother’s funeral?”*

The priest gave her a warm look as she made it to the edge of the pit for her goodbyes. No words needed - he was comforting her with just his eyes. All Marie could do was nervously nod through a forced teary smile. *“ Fool! Who smiles?!”* she thought as she bit her lip.

“My first friend and brother, Micheal; from here on, our conversations are one sided. Goodbyes and patchy updates from me. Tears and heartache for me. The sorrow is mine now for love’s sake - the agony I pray our God takes.”

“ That was beautiful Sister Marie. It must take its toll looking as strong as you do” , the priest said softly.

“Father, will God forgive me for desiring revenge?”

“God forgives all things, my child; even of the ones suspected. Revenge is born of deep pain. This too can be forgiven.”

“you haven’t even the slightest clue.”

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The first sensation was a deep unending darkness. Micheal felt himself waking from the most tiresome sleep of his entire life. He awoke but his eyes saw nothing, his ears heard

nothing but himself; the feeling started to weigh in on his mind. Was this sleep paralysis? He thought. Surely not, he could feel dull walls of wood to his sides. His consciousness returned to full alertness with the growing panic. First with the right hand a feel for the top of the dark - wood to the touch. He felt all around; polished wood all about to the touch. Only his back felt velvet softness. This was not a dream, he concluded. “have I been buried alive - “ the screams that followed were the loudest of his life. He banged and barged with hands and legs, screaming with all his might; it was a solid twenty minutes before the hopelessness of his position begun weakening his resolve. He begun summoning any genius in him that might have stayed dormant all these years. “Think Micheal, think!” but he thought of nothing but clawing for his escape. As he started sobbing, eyes dry from his dehydration; as his body’s fatigue settled on his mind and will as well, he thought to check his pockets. First the right: smooth to the touch - empty. The left of his trousers was the same. The back pocket was empty too; he smoothed his tuxedo’s front pocket as the tears finally came strewing down. “One more pocket. Is this how I’m going to die?” If a person could have heard him, the cry he let out would have been the most desperate, most agonising they could bring to mind. Right in the breast pocket of his tuxedo, not knowing what he was hoping to find, he felt a pen. Renewed hope mixed in with a well of confusion and uncertainty. In that blackest night he fiddled with what he imagined might somehow save him - he could feel himself dizzy with the fatigue now. He searched for a lock, a latch - anything was welcome. As he tampered with his cage, he pressed on the end of the pen and a recorded message begun.

“If you still recognise my voice, I only wanted an answer all these years. I gave up needing it long ago - hence your current ...predicament. Mother was not to be lived with; I understood your great escape from her. Did you pause to think of me though? I understand taking out the frustration on her, poisoning her nearly to death, but did you bother to think of poor Marie?

All these years I’ve been asking myself; in therapy; by myself; through code with friends (if I successfully made any of those): in his mad craze of escape - under the weight of the abuse we shared from mother, why did my elder brother take advantage of me too? It took years to form that question, brother. Take some time to think about it”

The voice stopped. His remembered what he ran from. His mind stopped. His will deserted him.

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Claire's mouth was gravel and tasted like cardboard; slowly her eyes opened; the daylight forcing her eye lids fully apart. She tried to shield herself from the burn of morning gleam; she found her hand encumbered. Her two hands were in steel bracelets tethered to the bed. Her stomach sank as her eyes widened; she began to recall. She looked at her clothes - hospital robes. She only just noticed the devices about her she was plugged into. A device herself in this room that smelled of soap and baby powder.

"Micheal.."

"Nurse. NURSE!" she bellowed.

The door on the right wall of the room creaked slowly till ajar. In walked a woman dressed in black. She had a face that seemed eerily familiar. She turned to the hall she was exiting

"I'll take 5 minutes"

"Who are you? Why am I cuffed to the bed?" she sobbed "where is Micheal?"

Her visitor breathed out deeply "Hello, Claire"

"They let me in because I'm family."

"They're not big on letting murderers see just anyone."

Claire's face contorted into confusion; brows creased and raised as her mouth begun trembling. "Murderer?"

"I didn't kill anybody. Please where's Micheal"

"You're right. You didn't. In fact, that's why I'm here." She pulled a chair from against the wall and crossed her legs as she sat. "You didn't do anything - "

"- Someone was there. Someone hit me -"

" - Shh" Marie retorted putting a hand to her lip. "I only have 3 minutes."

" In an hour, your husband will be dead. He'll know why I did it, he'll know who."

The air in the room grew thin and the familiar sensation of searching for a scream gripped Claire.

“Screaming won’t do much good, would it?” said Marie, lifting a finger in her direction. “All these years as I lost my mind, after mother died, I wondered how to deal with you - you and the rest of the world who took him away from retribution.”

Only tears came out of her. “I don’t even know you - I have a son. I won’t - please.” she tugged at her restraints hoping to supplicate. “Please…”. Her whimpers became loud tears and she found her screams.

In rushed the guard. “Madam, madam, time is up!”

“I’ll be in touch, Claire. Bobo will be fine.”

“I’ll find you” Claire said coldly. “Tell them what you did!”

Marie exited the room shrugging against the screams as Claire cursed behind her. Once outside, she got into a black *car* parked at the hospital entrance. “bad enough that we’re being spotted together twice in one day; did he really have to come as well?”

Ezekiel smiled as he fastened his belt. “we need him for this part”

“Good afternoon Ma.” the brute remarked.

Marie looked from Ezekiel’s smile to the man in the back. “Let’s get it over with. I want to be buried somewhere near my mother , don’t forget.”