

“...I know who leads the axe men," her voice quivered.

"Are you absolutely certain about this?" he responded.

"Yes, we need to meet at the usual spot. I'll be waiting for you."

"Come on, it's nearly 10 p.m. This can wait until tomorrow... hello? Hello?" His frustration grew as he received no response. He cast his phone aside in irritation, seized a shirt from the jumbled heap of clothes on his bed, and swiftly zipped up his jeans. He took care not to create any noise as he exited his room. With the composure of a skilled seamstress threading a needle, he locked his door. He padded down the hallway, his feet soundless on the floor. He held his boots as he aimed for maximum stealth. His vigilance extended until he reached the gates.

There it was—he was almost stumbling on it before he could notice.

"Hey, shhhhh, go away, shhh," he hissed. The creature met his gaze, its eyes wide, and tail began to sway. "That's it, boy. Be off." Ensuring he wasn't observed, he vanished into the night's embrace.

She awaited him in their designated meeting spot—an abandoned building that was a library project stalled by governmental apathy. The edifice had transformed into a hangout for lovers. Its concrete stairs doubled as impromptu seats and tables for intimate gatherings. Although, it was a popular location, yet the usual vibrancy had waned in the late hour. Darkness enveloped the space, and she trembled, hearing only the pounding of her heart. She was beginning to regret venturing out that late. She checked her phone: half-past ten.

Why was he taking so long? Anxiety tugged at her, urging her to flee. "Hey," a voice sliced through the silence, startling her. She almost stumbled before he steadied her. She strained to discern his features in the obscurity, her gaze lingering on his boots. "Don't startle me like that, I thought you already left" she clutched her chest.

Gboosh! He struck her on the head with an axe.

She collapsed, her face impacting the ground as blood seeped from the back of her head.

Seven days earlier

After enduring six long months of home confinement due to an ongoing lecturers' strike across tertiary institutions in the country, Olu's elation was palpable as he returned as a finalist to the University. This academic year was exceptional, granting finalists like him the chance to resume student representative positions. In his case, he had contested and triumphed in the election for student union leader, a victory he secured before the strike commenced.

He not only assumed his political mantle but also prepared to don the captain's armband for the school's football team. The anticipation for his leadership extended from teammates to supporters and coaching staff alike. He aimed to lead the team to a more triumphant performance at the national university championships this year. It would serve as redemption after the lackluster attempt of two years ago. "Back at the Great Ife!" he posted on his *WhatsApp* status, while he waited for his mother to join him in the car.

After a long ride and intermediate bits of advices later, He bade his mother farewell as she dropped him at the lecture hall. Adjusting his shirt, brushing off his boots, and refining his hair with a pocket comb, he activated his phone's camera for a quick check. His day was set; lectures till midday, and training by evening.

The lecture hall buzzed with energy.

A group of guys exchanged greetings, while clusters of girls critiqued each other's fashion choices. Olu navigated through the lively scene. He exchanged shaking slaps with some of the guys, and hugs of familiarity with the girls who swarmed him like bees drawn to honey.

He glanced at his phone and typed, "Where are you?" The reply guided him outside the hall. His eyes scanned the corridor, but the awaited figure was elusive. He typed again...

"Right behind you."

The voice jolted him.

"Guy!" he gasped, before embracing his friend.

"It's been a while, my brother."

"My mum insisted I visit my uncle in Abuja until the strike was over. I got back late last night, as I told you," Kabir explained. Not much had changed since their last meeting. Kabir still wore his goggles, backpack, and a water bottle by his side."

"Hi Clara", Olu said, took him a while to notice she was standing close to Kabir. She smiled back.

Suddenly, a shoulder collided with Kabir's, and his phone crashed to the ground.

The perpetrator nonchalantly moved ahead. Olu pursued him. "Hey!" The guy stopped. It was Buluma. He wore a black shirt and a bandana that camouflaged his baldness. His gaze remained fixed as if Olu were invisible. Olu clenched his fists as Buluma smirked.

"Perhaps both you and your mini buddy should watch your path next time."

Olu grabbed Buluma's shirt, poised to strike, until his movement was arrested by Kabir's firm grip. "Ease up, man. Leave him be," Kabir said. Buluma patted Olu, smiled, and departed. Olu attempted another attack, but Kabir blocked his path again. "He's seeking trouble. My phone isn't even damaged." Though still discontented, Olu yielded to his friend's appeal.

The sports complex housed a small building containing indoor sports equipment. It doubled as makeshift offices for staff and coaches. The room Olu followed Prof into was cramped, a design afterthought, perhaps by an impatient architect. A table with two chairs was the room's sole furnishings. Prof seated himself, while Olu stood and folded his arms behind him.

"I know you're disappointed about not becoming captain. That was intentional; you have other responsibilities."

An odd silence enveloped the room after this statement. Olu wondered if they were the only occupants left in the complex. "Please sit," Prof finally invited him. Olu sank into the chair.

"Thank you, sir."

Prof cleared his throat, removed his cap, and unzipped his coat. He retrieved a small white paper from the drawer which he handed to Olu.

"During the last council and senate meeting, the vice-chancellor received a letter from a group calling themselves 'the axe men'. They are promising a reign of terror on campus. They threatened violence against men, rape and murder of women, and the torching of the senate building"

"In response, the university as resolved to establish a committee of students and staff to identify these group members before they unleash havoc. This is your invitation as students' leader to work discreetly with me and the police to find the culprits," Prof concluded.

Prof shook his head, cleared his throat, and removed his glasses. Then, he retrieved a handkerchief from the drawer; he wiped the lenses before putting them back on. "The group also stated in that letter that their initial targets would be women and young ladies on campus, particularly female lecturers. You understand the implications, don't you, son?" Olu observed attentively and nodded, rising from his chair and heading towards the door.

He unlocked the door and exited the office.

Professor Bade drove into the University's staff quarters.

She waved at the lanky security guard as he stopped her. She was well-acquainted with this routine. Playing along, she engaged in a light-hearted exchange. "Madam, is your tire not in need of a vulcanizer's touch?" The guard inquired, scratching his scruffy beard. Professor Bade replied with a smile,

"No, Oga, my mechanic inspected it not long ago."

The guard's countenance fell, but he persisted, "Ah, Madam, show some kindness to your boy, let him have something for body and soul." With another smile, Professor Bade rolled up her window and accelerated. Upon entering her house, she noticed the oppressive heat. After opening the windows, the fans whirred to life.

She heard a heavy thud at her door.

The knocks intensified. "I'm coming, hold on." As she opened the door, she was forcefully shoved to the ground, landing heavily on her backside. In an instant, she was yanked to her feet, her mouth taped shut. Restrained on a chair, her hands were bound. A masked figure with dark gloves held her chin up, the only features visible being his eyes and lips. He appeared to be their leader, his gaze locked onto her. "Professor Bose Oluwanifishe Bade, fear not. We possess something within your house," he declared, tapping his fingers. His cohorts proceeded to ransack her home.

"I've found it," one of them exclaimed, emerging with a gleaming metal object. Panic coursed through her as she recognized it.

The leader received the metal, waving it tantalizingly close to her before clutching it to his chest. Tearfully, she shook her head. Laughter erupted among the intruders, and the leader returned the metal to his companion, who placed it in a bag. As they prepared to leave, the leader issued a chilling promise,

"Tell him we shall return and find him before he finds us."

Olu checked his phone, realized it was growing dark as he approached home. He prepped himself for the interrogation he expected from his mother. The old security guard's presence was as constant as the building itself, his request for a tip equally unwavering. Olu handed him a 100 naira note, prompting a wide smile. "Only this for me?" he asked, hoping for more. As Olu explained that he was already late, the security guard shared that some boys had been searching for him. Nodding his thanks, Olu ran to the house.

As he opened the door, He was greeted by a shocking scene. Discarding his bag, he rushed to his mother's side, untying her and removing the tape from her mouth. "What happened here?" he inquired urgency in his voice. Mrs. Bade, catching her breath and flexing her stiff wrists, replied, "Some Lunatics...came..and discovered...an axe in your room." Fear coursed through him as she asked the inevitable question, "Now you're going to tell me how that axe got there and your connection to those vile miscreants?"

The night was eerily still.

The clouds were illuminated by objects that resembled small torchlights. He splashed water on his face, drying it with a towel. His room remained dark—his preference. Retrieving a black bandanna, he tied it over his face, securing it at the nape of his neck. His sunglasses and beret followed suit. Gazing at his reflection, obscured by blackness, he grinned. Scanning the room, he confirmed his side bag was ready, holding all necessary items for the night's endeavor: a small knife, kolanuts, a blade, and a torch. He slung the bag around his neck and stepped out.

The gang had already assembled around a blazing bonfire, humming a tune known only to them. His pace quickened. As they caught sight of him, cheers erupted: "Generalissimo!" He continued, arriving at the fire's center and fixating his gaze on the flames. Shutting his eyes, he extended his arms and opened his palms. The humming ceased, the gang watching expectantly. Suddenly, he clapped his hands sharply, and thunder cracked, extinguishing the fire. Repeating the action, the fire roared back to life, more intense than before. Jubilant cheers followed from the gang.

Raising one fist, he silenced them. "Aye, mighty men of the black race, welcome," he proclaimed before dropping his fist. Gang members knelt with bowed heads, and then they rose at his command. A boy was brought out of the dark; he was dragged to the front of Generalissimo by two other gang members. His arms were tied to his back. "Please, Generalissimo, it was a mistake. Please have mercy," he pleaded. Generalissimo smiled, and then he frowned. "There is no mercy in the land of the spiritual, once you go against the beast you get axed out." "No... General!" the boy pleaded with tears in his eyes. "Bring me the axe," Generalissimo ordered. They handed him the shiny metal. He ran his fingers around the sharp edges of the blade. "Say hello to Lucifer when you get to hell."

The screams of the boy filled the darkness.

"Who is Generalissimo and what does he want?"

Olu stared at the expressionless face of Prof before focusing on the notes of students' gossip that he had gathered since the day his mother was attacked. He had expected to work with an actual committee, but so far, only he and Prof were the members, and their meetings had been in the office at the sports complex. Prof had insisted no other student could be trusted at the moment.

The gruesome killing of Buluma, who was stabbed along his chest, was the talk on campus. When the police had been invited by the school to open an investigation, Olu had reported all the bullies from the gossips in every department as potential suspects, but the police could not make any arrest until there was substantial evidence.

Even though the attacks from the gang had continued; three female students and a female lecturer were ambushed and beaten to a pulp, a male student had his fingers chopped off for trying to intervene in one of their attacks. Sentiments around campus were divided over the activities of the group; while the majority of the students didn't support the violent style, some appreciated that the group seemed to be standing up for what they perceived as injustice. One lecturer who was beaten had been rumored to have a history of talking down to students and failing them when they defended themselves. The other three female students were her apologists, who helped her with the names of the students to be targeted.

Meanwhile, Kabir was more concerned with his relationship with Clara at this time that it looked like a bad idea bringing him into the committee, even if Prof were to agree. The relationship itself had been a surprise. Clara and Kabir was not exactly the perfect match. But for some reason, Kabir had been able to absorb her into his lifestyle. She followed him everywhere, and would not talk to anyone else. They were always seen together especially at the lovers hangout on campus. Perhaps, that was the way love worked.

But, Clara had been texting him, throughout the day, to show him "something". He had ignored her.

He glanced at his mobile phone and realized it was getting late; he quickly exchanged goodbyes with Prof made his way out of the office and strolled home. He high-fived the security guard at the post as he made his way to the quarters. He greeted his mom, who nodded in response. "Your food is on the table, but you will only eat after having a shower, young man." He smiled and shook his head. In the next few minutes, he was back at the table, gulping down jollof rice and chicken stew.

His mum was glued to the TV. The news of the activities of the axe men on the university campus was still making waves, with analysts attributing the actions of young adults to failed

parenting and misplaced priorities in society. Olu joined his mum on the couch as she listened in on the back-and-forth conversation on TV.

“I hope you have rescinded that post they gave you in school. Let the Police and the school do their jobs by themselves, okay?”

“Okay, ma”

He waved his mum good night and went to his room. His phone rang again; it was Clara.

“Hey Clara”

There was a small pause and a humming sound at the other end; he could almost hear her heartbeat.

“Are you running?”

“Hey, I don’t have much time. I know who leads the axe men...”

Olu rushed in the cold of the night to where she was. There she was, lying flat on her back, blood trickling down from the side of her head. He rushed over to her side and tried to lift her up.

“Clara, wake up!”

“Freeze! Put your hands behind your back, this is the police.” Olu stood up, his hand held up with tears-filled eyes. *Run, you can’t let them catch you.* He darted towards the road as the police officers approached. He saw the oncoming car too late; his mouth went agape when he saw the driver, the police officers quickly stopped the pursuit but it wasn’t enough to prevent the collision. He tumbled several times, until he felt life leaving him.

The driver attempted to run, but he was quickly apprehended by the Police. And a blood stained axe was found in his possession.