

Ọmọ Ile (Son of the Soil)

Kunle was a force to be reckoned with. There was not a single person in this Lagos that didn't know of him and his... well... antics. His gist seemed to be the hottest topic on the tip of everyone's tongue. Today it's Nkechi. Tomorrow, Tolani. But as a sure boy, he no send anybody. I would often laugh when another friend or acquaintance got caught in his web, a 'could never be me' warrior. So when he slowed his Mercedes to a crawl during my morning jog, I knew my village people were after me.

"Excuse me, miss," he purred.

His cologne wafted towards me and surprisingly drowned the stench of the polluted water simmering below the Lekki-Ikoyi link bridge.

Keep walking, Aisha!! I screamed internally.

As I picked up the pace, his car's growl grew louder, as though also calling for my attention. With a grunt, I stopped. There was no way I was going to outrun him- Kunle was known, after all, to never give up.

As I glanced towards his ajar window, a smirk crawled unto his face. At that moment my breath hitched. I stood there, drinking in his dark brown skin, perfectly tapered fade and full lips. His rolled up sleeve revealed Chinese characters tattooed across his wrist. *Okay, he is HOT.*

Aisha. NO. Don't give in, I repeated, sending curses to whichever one of my enemies was fashioning weapons against me.

"Can I help you?" I tried to sound as unimpressed as possible but something about the smile on his face made it obvious he wasn't buying it.

"I'm..."

"Kunle." I said bluntly. There was no need for small talk. If I let him go on for too long, I too would be another body on his hit list.

He chuckled loudly, parting his lips to unveil the pearliest whites. *Nice teeth too? SHIIIT. Aisha FOCUS.*

"I guess you know who I am then."

"Yes. Your reputation precedes you."

"Well, I guess there's no need for introductions... lets not waste any time. You're hot, why don't I get your name and number and take you out some time?"

Now I was the one laughing. Was this guy serious? There was no way my sweaty body and faded t-shirt were appealing. So what game was he playing?

“I’m sorry, I don’t give out my number to strangers.” I snapped, before turning on my heels and jogging right back the way I had come. The workout would have to wait. I’m not too sure if my mind conjured a stunned Kunle yelling, “wait”, and I wasn’t going to stick around to find out.

The smell of Tinu’s signature Sunday brunch enveloped me as I slumped on the living room couch. I massaged my temples in sync with the blaring sound of Fela’s *Zombie*, hoping the meticulous movement would ease the tension working its way round my skull.

“Ahahn, aunty fit fam. Back so soon?” Tinu, my best friend turned housemate, teased. She walked through the kitchen door, drying her hands on her acid-wash grey jeans. She chuckled as I rolled my eyes at her heavy sarcasm, before hurling herself onto the couch and practically landing on top of me.

“Madam, will you get off me!” I whined. Tinu’s curves were pretty much crushing my rather petite physique. With another hearty laugh, she rolled over, giving me a few seconds to catch my breath.

“First off, my journey to fitness is very much still ongoing. Second, you’re rude.” I spat, matter-of-factly. “I’m only back so early because I was stopped by Kunle on the bridge.”

Tinu stared at me blankly, unsure of what she had just heard.

“The same Kunle?” She inquired, glancing at me through her wide glasses frames.

“Which other Kunle would make me cut my run short?” I retorted, slightly irritated by her line of questioning.

“Thank you JEHOVAH. Aisha baby is about to get some action!” She exclaimed.

“Shut up Tinu. The whole neighbourhood can hear you!” I snapped, trying to bring her back to her senses.

She sat back down with a sigh, grinning from ear to ear; her hopeless romantic tendencies were beginning to get the better of her. If I concentrated hard enough, I could hear the gears whirring in her brain as she pieced our future together.

“There’s no way in hell I’m giving him a chance.”

“If you tell yourself that enough times, maybe you’ll begin to believe it,” Tinu whispered. The kitchen smoke alarm began blaring as the smell of burning sausages swirled around us. Tinu blew me a kiss before bolting to the kitchen to try and save her masterpiece.

As the door swung back into place, I mauled Tinu’s words over. She was right. I hadn’t been on a date since I had moved back home, so maybe a little fun wouldn’t hurt. But Kunle? Of all the people in Lagos. Never. With a sigh, I beelined for the kitchen to help Tinu set up the brunch spread, a certain charming smile lingering in my mind.

Weeks passed and the thoughts of Kunle only grew stronger. A part of me was disappointed that I hadn't heard anything from him since that morning on the bridge. From what I had heard, when Kunle wanted something, he stopped at nothing to get it. So why wasn't he outside my door with a boombox and handpicked flowers already?

Tinu burst into my room, drawing me out of my childish daydream.

"Aisha! What are you doing?" She yelled, yanking my duvet off.

"You better start getting ready ooh, don't make me come back in here! Tonight's about to be lit." She hissed, before waltzing out and leaving the door open behind her.

Kelechi, another Lagos big boy, was hosting what everyone was calling the 'party of the summer.' That was just semantics for rude babes, tech bros and unlimited booze; everyone was bound to be there. Tinu was more of the party animal, while I didn't really see the appeal. But as her trusty wingwoman, my job was to scout the potential and guide her hand to the catch of the day. With a groan, I hauled myself out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

After a couple hours, we were en route. Tinu's tipsy self sang out of tune the entire car ride, and with every passing second I fought the urge to throw her out of the moving car.

By the time we arrived, the party was in full swing and overflowing with people. We spent the next hour squealing as we hugged girls we hadn't seen since last summer and avoiding the borderline uncomfortable stares from the men we passed by. Once I lost Tinu to some light skin dread head, I made a run for it and slipped into one of the open rooms for just a moment of quiet. The loud music coupled with a few too many shots were making my head spin. Once the door shut, I let out a sigh.

"We meet again, I see."

A shiver ran down my spine. That smooth voice could only belong to one person. As I turned around, Kunle's frame came into view. He walked towards me, with that infamous smirk plastered on. The air in the room seemed to still as he drew closer. His scent grew stronger with each step and so did the tension swirling around us.

"Well hello to you too." The words spilled out in a breathless rush, and Kunle's smile grew. He knew what he was doing. And it was working.

"I never got your name, beautiful" he purred.

Now, my back was pressed against the wall and I silently begged for it to swallow me whole. His eyes were painted with an indescribable hunger and it was clear I was just what he needed to satiate it.

"You don't give up, do you?" I replied, still holding his gaze.

"Now where's the fun in that?"

We were mere feet apart, breathing in sync. I tried desperately to remain standing, but something about his stare was edging my knees to buckle. Was this real or was I trapped in one of Tinu's telenovelas? Here I was, pressed against a wall with a hunk of goodness towering over me. If this were a movie, this would be the part where his estranged wife burst in to separate us or the moments before a steamy make out scene. But this was real; Kunle didn't do relationships, and I wasn't about to give it up so easily.

"Alright then. I'm Aisha," I said, my heart racing as he continued to stare me down.

"Aisha. What a beautiful name." My name had never sounded so melodious. Goosebumps erupted across my arms at the very sound of it.

"Thanks" I sighed, unsure of what to do next.

"I have a name. Now all I need is your number." His charm was unlike anything I had ever encountered. Maybe it was just the Yoruba demon in him, but this level of charisma deserved an award.

Tinu's constant pleas that I 'live a little' flashed through my mind, coaxing my throat to give in to his demands.

I mean, a date won't hurt, right?

"Fine." I shrugged, as Kunle's eyes grew wider. Victory was his.

"080..."

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Tinu was more excited about this date than I was. Since I gave her the low down of the night at Kelechi's, she wouldn't stop buzzing. She curated an outfit perfect for the restaurant and booked me a hair and nail appointment at our usual salon. According to her, "you gats slayyyy."

'See you at seven ;)' was the only text I had gotten from Kunle all day. My eyes darted to the clock every so often, hoping time would speed up and he would be here.

As soon as the clock struck seven, his horn blared loudly.

"He's here!" Tinu shrieked, shoving me down the stairs. As I opened the front door, Kunle's eyes brightened. He was clad in black trad and a bouquet of pink roses balanced on his left forearm.

Tinu waved goodbye from our front porch as Kunle whisked me away.

"So," he sighed, placing his hand over mine. Sparks coursed through our joint hands, igniting an unfamiliar heat within me. Kunle kept his eyes on the road, and I locked mine on him. I watched as he manoeuvred the car with one hand, wondering how driving could be so sexy. He shot me a sly look, as though reading my thoughts, before placing his hand on my upper

thigh. The heat grew, spreading rapidly through me. Before he could move any further, we were pulling into the restaurant.

The valet held the door open whilst Kunle took my hand and led me through the arched doorway. We were greeted by an eerie mist and a jazz live band as we made our way to our reserved table. Soon enough, our orders were placed and the waiter had retreated to the kitchen.

“You look beautiful tonight, Aisha.” The bass of his voice awoke an army of butterflies in my belly; there was just something about the way my name rolled off his tongue.

“Thank you, Kunle. You don’t look too bad yourself,” I teased.

“I’ll take it,” he replied, with a hearty laugh.

We spent the rest of the evening unravelling layers of each other. He listened to me ramble about work, politics and conspiracy theories with attentive ears. His stare was laced with desperate desire and I yearned for his touch. To dive into those eyes and quench his thirst.

The drive home was mainly quiet, but in the most comforting way. With jazz music humming in the background, we revelled in the peace of each other’s company. The entire night was on replay and I couldn’t believe what was happening. Was I really falling for Kunle? But more importantly, was he falling for me?

Months went by, and our relationship only flourished. We had date-night every other Thursday, spent Saturday mornings jogging across the link bridge and were planning our first trip to Morocco together. Outside of work, we were always at each other's houses and Tinu wouldn’t stop complaining about Third Wheeling in her own home. As much as I sympathised with her, I was happy. I had never felt such strong feelings, and sometimes it all seemed a little too good to be true. But I wasn’t going to let doubt put stones in my Garri. Despite his reputation, Kunle was damn near perfect. I had always believed in happy endings and with each passing day, my certainty that he was the one grew.

Our 5 month anniversary was approaching and I thought to surprise him after work one Thursday. It wasn’t a date night so I knew he wouldn’t be expecting me.

As I pulled up to his gate, Mr. Samson the gateman approached me with a nervous smile.

“Ah aunty Aisha, good evening ooh. Oga is not around.”

Kunle’s gate hung low so his car was very visible from where I sat.

“Samson you’re funny ooh. Isn’t that Oga’s car?” I inquired, wondering why he would lie.

“Ehn... I think...” he murmured, barely coherent.

“It’s not a problem. I need to pop in and get something. I left my... shoes” I laughed, leaving my car running and hopping out. Samson called my name and begged for me to wait, but I paid him no mind.

Kunle’s door was propped slightly open, so I let myself in. His house was eerily quiet. I assumed he was just asleep. There were two half empty glasses on the coaster table and a pair of sliders decorating the living room. *That’s weird*, I thought. I crept upstairs and made my way to his room, bursting through the door.

“SHIT!” Two voices screamed as I stood there, my vision beginning to blur. Kelechi scampered to cover his half naked body, and Kunle stared at me with wide eyes, beads of sweat from *whatever* they were doing dripping down his forehead. There it was again; that hungry look. But this time it was different. A look that once sparked such desire was now one I never wanted to see again.

Without saying anything, I turned on my heels and stormed out of his house. My heart pounded at a deafening rate and with every step it broke even more. I heard them scampering after me as I made my way out the door. Samson looked at me with such pity and finally it made sense. I got into my car and drove off, with no clear destination. I’m not too sure if my mind conjured a guilty Kunle yelling, “wait”, but I wasn’t going to stick around to find out.