

The Prisoner's Dream

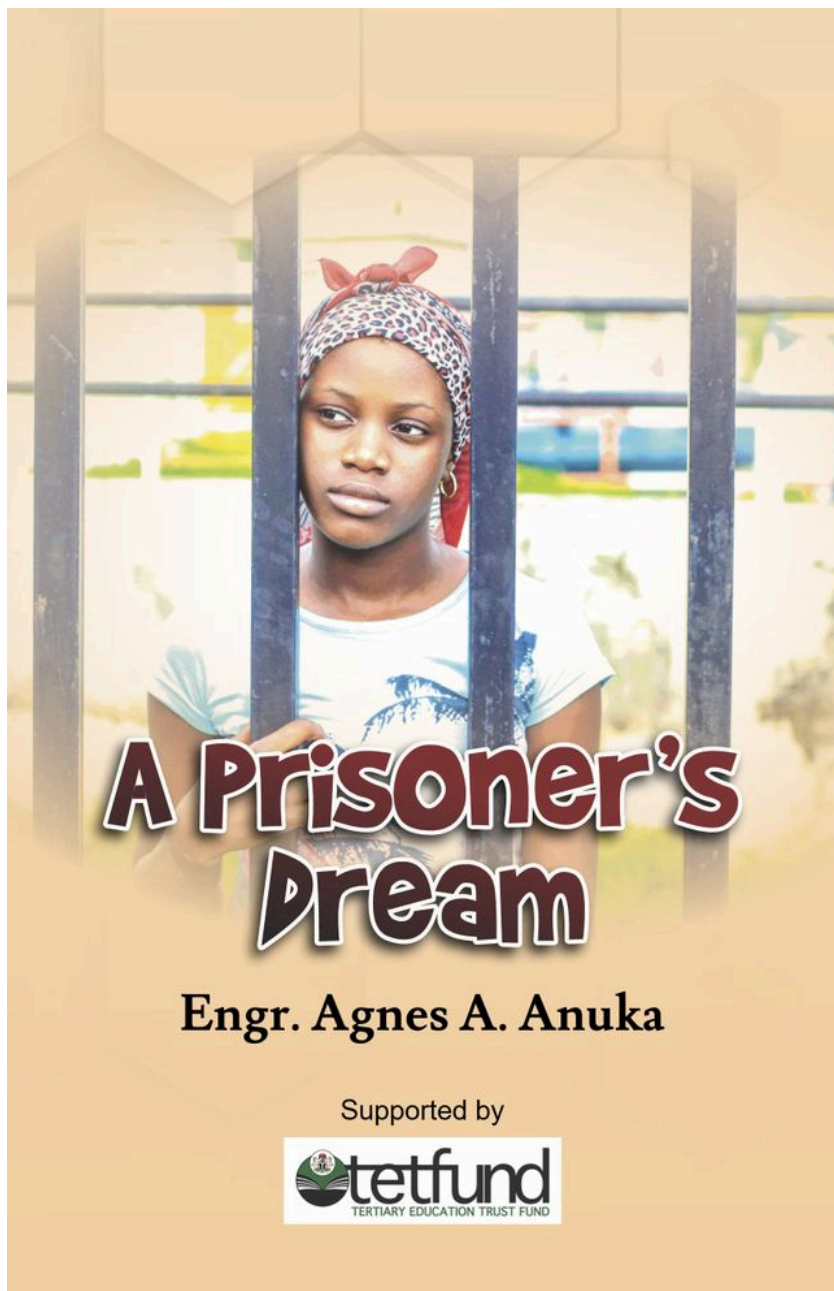
THIS IS A PLACEHOLDER. IF YOU WANT TO HAVE AN ACTUAL STATEMENT HERE, YOU HAVE
TO MAKE SOME CHOICES USING BOOK'S METADATA MODAL.

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Cover



*A Prisoner's
Dream*

By



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TERTIARY EDUCATION TRUST
FUND

Book Development Project

The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) has the mandate to establish and nurture Higher Education Book Development Project in Nigeria. Book scarcity has reached a crisis proportion in the country as evident not only in the quantity of books available, but also in the quality of locally produced books. Given the seriousness of the paucity of reading and learning materials in Nigeria's higher educational institutions, TETFUND Book Development Project is designed to reactivate and nurture research and the publication of academic books and journals in hard and e-forms in Nigerian higher educational institutions, thereby empowering tertiary institutions in Nigeria to benefit from and contribute to knowledge production and nationally and globally. Advancement in science and technology, especially ICT and the influence of globalization have profoundly transformed the context, from and the scope of knowledge production that Nigerian higher educational institutions should be assisted to fully participate in and contribute to the global system of generating and disseminating knowledge. The uniqueness of the present intervention lies in the fact that through it, TETFund will assist Nigerian higher educational institutions restore and sustain the capacity for academic publishing.

The promotion of indigenous authorship and the resuscitation of local publishing of books are critical instruments in addressing the dearth of textbooks, including basic text and specialized textbooks in various disciplines in Nigeria's higher educational institutions. Restoring the culture of indigenous authorship and the production of indigenous books would ensure the availability of books that address local need and reflect familiar realities and experiences.

The book production component is one of the three areas of intervention of the TETFund Book project. The others are the revitalization of academic publishing and the support of academic journals. This first phase of the book production intervention is directed at the production of peer-reviewed basic textbooks written by Nigerian academics for universities, polytechnics and colleges of education and specialized books in various subject areas as well as the publication of books of high quality PhD theses from Nigerian Universities that have successfully gone through a rigorous assessment process. This would contribute to solving the problem of paucity of books in Nigeria's higher educational institutions.

Tertiary Education Trust Fund,

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PREFACE

A Prisoner's dream is a cry for help. Every day, cases of child abuse hit the news and in all of this, the girl child is the most vulnerable. She has to face several challenges in a society where some people still see her as a second-class citizen. Many girls have accepted this fate and their dreams shattered in the process. A Prisoner's dream however portrays the strength of womanhood and proves that no matter how insurmountable the challenge may appear, victory for the girl child is certain if she believes in herself and aims at the skies in her pursuits. Lofty walls of child marriage, abuse, rape, trafficking and a lot of others have held the girl child in captivity for too long. Only an unwavering determination to rise above these walls through discipline and diligence would ensure the emergence of great women who will leave footprints on the sands of time.

DEDICATION

*This one is for my biggest fan, Mrs. Fidelia Anuka. I love
you mum*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm very grateful to God Almighty. My sincere gratitude goes to the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), my parents, Prof. and Mrs. Anuka and my siblings, Jemimah and Timothy. God bless you all.

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Chapter 1

"Aha, there comes our in-law." Ntone's younger brother, Nkoro, playfully announced, pointing at the figure of a man driving in a motorcycle towards their hut.

"You must be out of your mind." Ntone hissed, casting a stern glance at Anjor who had brought the motorcycle to a halt a few yards away from the teenagers. The children in the compound had gathered around the motorcycle and like the six blind men of Indostan, each struggled to have closer inspection.

"I heard your age mates are poisoning each other over Anjor. And here you are feeling pompous." Asinya chipped in. She was their step-sister. Ntone and Nkoro who were initially unaware of her presence simultaneously turned around.

"Good evening sir," Nkoro greeted. Anjor now stood in front of them. He eyed the melon in Ntone's hands. Their mother had asked them to peel melon seeds, and the only way they could complete the task before nightfall was to divide the melon between them and compete for 'first to finish.'

Anjor's presence seemed to increase Ntone's speed, her intention was to accentuate the impression that she was busy. Anjor merely nodded a reply to Nkoro, his gaze was still on the melon in Ntone's hand. He must have been thrice as the girl's age, but in the village, no one bothered about that. A woman without a man was akin to a dog with excreta splattered all over its body.

"You're welcome." Asinya greeted, startling Ntone and Nkoro again, who both thought she had retreated to the backyard.

"Won't you offer your visitor a seat?" Asinya asked.

"Certainly," Nkoro retorted, and ran inside to fetch a wooden stool. Anjor grumbled a few word of thanks, sat on the stool, and was glad to have a moment of privacy with the stubborn teenage girl who thought she was too good for him. Nkoro had carefully retreated to a safe distance away from them and even though Asinya had given the impression that she was at the backyard, Anjor knew that she was lurking somewhere in the house. She was a cunning woman and she had encouraged him to go after Ntone.

"Ntone, why do you treat me this way? I love you and want to marry you." He paused and cleared his throat when he saw a flicker in the girl's eyes.

"Sir," Ntone started, suddenly rising to her feet. Melon peel flew away as she brushed it off her skirt.

"The girl was ripe." Anjor thought, eyeing her carefully. The signs of puberty were visible and if he didn't act fast, someone else would.

"My mother would soon be back from the market. I need to finish peeling this melon seeds so we can prepare dinner. Besides, I have homework to do."

"I did not say you cannot do your homework, Oyinbo," he replied sarcastically. "I just need a reply to my proposal."

Thick clouds had gathered in the sky. The children in the compound had already started dancing in excitement of the oncoming downpour. The women placed their water pots in strategic places where the rain would drain into. Nkoro was also doing same, though his eyes frequently darted to Anjor who seemed unperturbed by the

prospect of a deluge. "Please don't come to my house again. I'm not interested in marrying you," the tone of the girl's voice had risen. Anjor shot her a ferocious look. His temper too had risen.

"Almost every maiden in this village would kill to have me," he thundered, rising to his feet. "I own a motorcycle and I make a lot of money from my 'okada' business. Little girl, you would regret this."

A lightning bolt struck in the sky. Ntone rose to her feet. She quickly carried the basin containing the peeled melon seeds inside the house. When she came outside to sweep away the peel that littered the ground, she heard Anjor's motorcycle roar into action as he sped off.

The rain had begun to splatter against the ground, and yet, there was no sign of her mother. She decided to wait on the veranda even though it was cold outside. Exhaling slowly, she prayed that the rain wouldn't increase its intensity until her mother came home.

"Mama, where are you?" she frantically muttered to herself, closing her eyes and opening them almost immediately. She used to do that as a child whenever she was expecting someone to show up. She felt a tinge of disappointment when she opened her eyes, and didn't see her mother.

"What are you doing in the cold?" Nkoro stood by the doorway watching her with unconcealed amusement.

"I'm waiting for mama." Ntone replied sombrely, gently placing her left hand under her chin. A flash of lightning temporarily blinded her, and she quickly used her fingers to shield her ears from the thunderbolt that followed.

"Come inside." Nkoro said in a loud voice.

Boom! More thunderbolts hit the sky. The rain no longer came down as small droplets caressing the earth. The downpour had already turned a flood from the entrance to the compound, and the water pots lined outside were almost filled to the brim.

"Mama is back." Nkoro shrieked. Ntone's eyes followed the direction of her brother's attention. Their mother had a large sack on her head as she waded through the pool. One hand supported the sack while the other held a bunch of unripe plantain. The two children instinctively ran towards her. Nkoro lifted the sack from her head and carried it in both arms while his sister took the plantain.

"You didn't have to get wet too. I'm already close to the house." Nna Awor, their mother pointed out. "Welcome mama." The children greeted, ignoring her concern. Her clothes were wet, and even though she was trying very hard to conceal it, Ntone knew that their mother had developed a cold.

"Mama, Anjor was here today." Nkoro announced.

Ntone shot her brother a look that seemed to say "Won't you even let her settle down?" Whether Nkoro understood the meaning of that look or not, he didn't acknowledge it. They dropped the sack and plantain on the veranda. Ntone watched her

mother from the corner of her eye. Nna Awor didn't answer immediately. Her face was grim as she slumped on the stool that Ntone had earlier sat on.

"Which Anjor?" she asked in a tired voice.

"The 'okada' man. He came to ask Ntone to marry him." Nkoro bent to whisper into his mother's ears. "Asinya strongly supported him."

"What did you tell him?" Nna Awor's gaze was now fixed on Ntone, challenging her to a reply.

"I asked him never to come back here again." Ntone shrugged, only expressing concern over her mother's health. The wet clothes still clung to her skin, causing the hair on her skin to stand on end.

"You did well," Nna Awor rose to her feet, her eyes glaring. "children destroyers! They want to destroy my children the way they've destroyed others. God will not allow them."

"Amen mama." Ntone nodded. "I know what I want and even though papa has abandoned us, I will not allow anything or anyone distract me from my dreams."

Ntone's words obviously had a soothing effect on Nna Awor. She smiled and nodded to her daughter.

"You will make me proud."

It was neither a plea nor a mere statement. It was an order.

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Chapter 2

Ntone looked at the blue hard-cover book with mixed feelings. It was her father's Ph.D. thesis. Her father was no doubt a genius and she was proud of him for that. A part of her didn't want to mind that he didn't even think about them not to mention that he didn't even care. Doctor Francis had obtained his doctorate in English and Literary Studies many years back at the prestigious University of Ibadan. She flipped through the pages, swallowing hard when she got to the acknowledgement page. Mama had told her that her father defended his doctorate two days after Nkoro's birth. Mama had even blushed when she revealed that when she gave birth to Nkoro, Papa wouldn't leave the baby's side. She had to whisper to a nurse to take him away so that he could prepare for his defence.

"You brought me good luck," he had whispered to the baby after his defence. Their father had however made no mention of them in the dedication and acknowledgement pages. Even then, they had not mattered to him. Two streams flowed from her eyes as memories of the past jolted her. They had lived in the university staff quarters until that fateful day when mama had strapped Nkoro to her back, held Ntone's hand and left the house with their belongings. Papa's words still echoed in her ears.

"Don't ever come back to my house."

It wasn't the first time papa had issued this warning as he suddenly started taking lots of alcohol and seemed to be angry all the time. He kept late nights and always reeked of alcohol. He was always throwing tantrums, and when mama refused to leave the house, he immediately solicited help from his relatives. That morning, his elder sister had arrived from the village with two uncles. Aunt Njan had refused to answer mama's greetings. Instead, she ordered mama to pack her belongings and leave with her children. Nna Awor had cried clutching papa's trousers as if her life depended on it. Ntone could still see the sad scene in her mind's eye as if it were yesterday. The loud sobs still reverberated in her eardrums. She remembered that she had cried too. The tears had gushed out like a fountain when papa who was already stinking drunk pushed her mother away from him. Nna Awor had lost her balance, and fallen on the sofa.

"Papa, please don't hurt my mother," she had cried, wishing that the nightmare would suddenly roll away and papa would come back to his senses. Then, things would go back to normal. Sadly, things never went back to normal and they had to settle in the village. People said that it wasn't normal; someone had used juju on her father.

They only heard stories about him, but he never came to see them. With a deep sigh, she put the project back inside an old knapsack.



Ntone flipped through the pages of the book and smiled gratefully when she found the page she was looking for. School had closed for the day and she was on her way home with her best friend Agbor. Shakespeare's works always held her spellbound and she couldn't resist the desire to read as they walked home.

"Don't you know that you aren't supposed to read while moving on the road?" Agbor chided, snatching the copy of the play 'OTHELLO' from Ntone.

"I just want to conclude all the compulsory literature texts before our WASSCE." Ntone explained, her eyes imploring Agbor to return the book.

"And you think reading on the road is the best way to finish your literature texts?" Agbor replied with a hint of sarcasm, at the same time shoving the text inside her friend's school sack.

"It's just that we would be writing the West African Senior School Certificate Examination soon and I really want to pass my papers in only one sitting.

"Everyone wants to pass." Agbor replied nonchalantly.

Ntone shot the other girl a curious glance, contemplating the reason for her display of indifference. "Isn't she interested in attending a university?" Ntone wondered, returning her gaze to the market women in front of them. The day was the market day at Nkonfab. A group of market women were removing bags of garri and yams from a vehicle. Ntone remembered that her mother had also gone to the same market to purchase yam tendrils. It was already a planting season.

"I would really love to write like Shakespeare." Ntone said, her mind racing back to the play she had been reading. "Do you think he was extraordinary?"

"How would I know?" Agbor shrugged, suddenly straightening the blue chequered school uniform. They were close to the Abinti two junction.

"My mother asked me to deliver a message to her friend. She lives across the road." Agbor declared, suddenly halting in front of Benson Hospital.

"Alright then, I'll see you tomorrow."

Agbor crossed over to the other side of the road, and continued her journey down the street. Ntone didn't know what to make of the recent change in her friend's behaviour. Something was obviously bothering her and she wondered what it was.

Later in the evening, Ntone observed that almost all the water pots in the house were empty. She picked up a bucket, slung a piece of cloth across her shoulder, and made for the stream. Ntone didn't want to be outside in the dark because dusk was gradually creeping in. She broke into a run hoping to fill up the empty pots before darkness finally descended. At the stream, she joined the crowd of women and children.

Only two men were present. The stream was almost running dry because the rains had stopped. Ntone stooped inside the stream and scooped the cloudy water into the bucket. As she lifted the bucket out of the stream, she desperately prayed for a cloudburst. She however knew that her expectations were only possible in a cloud-cuckoo-land. The rains wouldn't come down for a month or two.

"Ntone," a familiar voice called. She turned her head in the direction of the voice. Agbor's mother stood behind her with a water pot on her head.

"Is Agbor at your place?" her friend's mother asked.

Ntone was taken aback by this question.

"No ma."

"She isn't back from school. Did you see her in school today?"

Ntone was at a loss of words. She knew her friend's mother was waiting for a response but she was too confused to answer. Fear suddenly gripped her as she wondered what had happened to Agbor. Mama Agbor must have read the panic that was clearly spelt out on Ntone's face. She gently put down the water pot taking care to wipe off the water that had dripped onto her blouse before asking the next question.

"Do you know where your friend is?" she drew closer to Ntone.

"We left the school together, but when we got to Abinti two junction, she told me that you asked her to deliver a message to a friend of yours." Ntone replied when she finally found her voice. A moment of silence passed before Ntone added, "I hope she isn't in any form of danger."

Mama Agbor stared at her as if she were a ghost. Ntone lowered her gaze, fixing her eyes on her feet. She did that whenever she was nervous. If she had looked at mama Agbor's face after her first explanation, she would probably have known that her last remark wasn't necessary.

"I didn't send Agbor on any errand. In fact, I have no friend living at Abinti two junction."

Ntone instinctively raised up her head to look at mama Agbor.

"I really don't know where she is." the words came out in a stutter because she was shocked.

"Thank you my daughter. Now hurry before darkness overtakes you."

Ntone nodded, and placed the water pot on her head.

She trudged home amidst the chatter of villagers, not knowing what to make of the situation. Until she saw her friend, she would keep her thoughts to herself.

She resolved.

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Chapter 3

Ntone did not see Agbor during the morning assembly. Several thoughts raced through her mind as she walked to her classroom. A sigh of relief escaped her lips when she sighted Agbor already seated on her seat. She quickly walked over to her, hoping to have a moment with her before a teacher walked into the classroom. Ntone was flummoxed by her friend's countenance as she walked towards her. On other days, Agbor would have been all smiles, but today, she didn't seem to notice Ntone.

"I didn't see you at the assembly." Ntone remarked, playfully nudging her shoulder. "Don't tell me you were hiding in the classroom."

"I was late for the assembly, so I came to the classroom instead." Agbor replied casually, fixing her gaze on the blackboard. She had a distant look that Ntone found both frightening and amusing.

"I saw your mother at the stream yesterday. She was worried that you had not returned from school." Ntone said, bending over the other girl's locker.

"I went somewhere." Agbor replied, the tone of her voice suddenly rising. "Well, that's past now. Isn't it?"

"Your mother was worried about you. She denied sending you on any errand."

Ntone's voice had dropped to a whisper, even though the din in the class was too loud making it difficult to hear the next person. "Where did you go to?"

"It's none of your business, and I think you should start minding your business."

Ntone's eyeballs rolled in disbelief at her friend's outburst. The two girls had been friends since childhood and they had always minded each other's business. "Is this some kind of transformation that came with adolescence?" Ntone asked herself, feeling mortified. Agbor had raised her voice and now they had an audience.

Ntone's head was bowed as she walked back to her seat on the front row. Her ears stood on end when she overheard a group of girls loudly discussing with Agbor. They were the big girls in the class. Maybe Agbor had already found new friends. She thought further, straining her ears to catch what they were saying.

"Who does she think she is? She should mind her own business and stop telling you what to do."

Ntone swallowed hard after hearing the insinuation from Joan, who had achieved notoriety as a thief.

"Of course," the other girls chorused, and then suddenly, Ntone couldn't hear them again. The pitch of their voices had dropped to inaudible whispers. Ntone also decided that she was done wasting valuable time on eavesdropping. She brought out a notebook and pen from the sack that housed her books. She began to write a summary of the play 'OTHELLO,' getting delighted that she had finished reading the play at night. She would show it to the literature teacher and ask for her opinion. She decided as her eyes ran through the summary. The literature teacher however didn't show up when they were supposed to have Literature-in-English class. Absenteeism was the norm in the village secondary school. Immediately after the closing bell rang, she went to the general staff room, hoping to find Mrs Ekon, the literature teacher there. A padlock securely fastened

to the bolt of the door confirmed her fear. The teachers hardly waited for the closing bell before leaving. A feeling of disappointment overwhelmed her as she trudged back to her classroom to pick up her sack. Only a few students were in the classroom when she walked inside. Agbor and Joan were among those present and both girls were speaking in hushed tones. Ntone pulled out her sack from the wooden locker and sat on her seat. She had to wait for Agbor to end her conversation with Joan because they always went home together. Their conversation lasted for almost twenty minutes. When she thought the conversation was over, and Agbor was set to leave, she slung the sack across her shoulder and rose to her feet.

“Are you ready to go home?” Ntone asked, fixing a curious gaze at the duo as they walked hand in hand in her direction.

“Yes, but I would rather walk home with Joan.”

Ntone’s eyes darted from Agbor to Joan. Joan returned the stare, a flicker of amusement danced in her cold, dark eyes. Ntone let her gaze wander back to her best friend’s face and let it remain there.

“Agbor, what is going on? Why are you suddenly ignoring me?” Ntone said desperately. “If I have wronged you, I’m sorry.”

“That’s not necessary,” Agbor hissed, noisily chewing on a piece of gum. “I just want to be able to do what I want.”

“But I would never stop you from doing what you want to do as long as it is for your good.” Ntone replied.

“Ntone, you wouldn’t understand.” Agbor replied, and then the two girls strode off leaving a bewildered Ntone. A surge of heat ran through her causing her to clench her fists. Her mind took a fast trip down memory lane. She remembered their childhood, and how they had talked about their dreams and aspirations. They had both looked beyond the life in the village, promising each other that they would work hard to achieve their dreams. “What then has gone wrong?” Ntone asked herself, opening the clenched fists. She rubbed her palms together. They were clammy. She wiped the moisture on her school uniform and decided to start her journey home. She still couldn’t embrace the sad truth that this was the nadir of her friendship with Agbor.



Her initial reaction was an audible gasp. The gasp was accompanied by a familiar feeling that often haunted her even as far as in her dreams. She always hoped that one day her father would come for them. After enduring a good beating from the sun, the only explanation she could possibly give to a couple of Jeeps that would be parked in front of their house was that their father had sought them out after all. Her heartbeat increased tremendously, and she feared that she might drop dead from overexcitement. She was still a good distance away from the house, but since their compound was by the roadside, she was able to have a good view.

She hurried into the compound wishing her legs to move faster. It took a great deal of effort to suppress the grin from sweeping through her face and, for the first time, she

forgot to niggle over Agbor's recent behaviour.

As was expected, the children in the compound were already gazing in awe at the vehicles. Those who were bold enough to touch them ran dusty fingers along every part of the vehicle that their hands could reach. The children however were not the only ones who had come to stare. Their parents were also outside gazing in amazement at the latest attraction. A woman had left her baby inside to join the crowd of spectators. Ntone heard the woman's husband ordering her to go back inside and look after the crying baby.

"Haven't you seen a car before?" Although the angry husband fumed, he equally gazed at the cars.

"What about you? Is this the first time you are seeing one too?" the woman retorted, moving closer to the cars for inspection. Mama Tony, as the woman was called, had earned a reputation as a gossip. Nothing escaped her notice. She had to see and be the first to pass the information around. That was how she earned the nickname, 'talebearer.'

Ntone looked around the crowd hoping that someone would break the news her ears were itching to hear. The quizzical glances suddenly caused her to be queasy. She wasn't prepared for what she saw when her legs finally arrived their destination.

For a moment, she became paranoiac as strange eyes carefully examined her as if she was one of the specimens in a Biology laboratory. The wide grin playing on the only familiar face which turned out to be Asinya's only exacerbated her fears. She knew that Asinya hardly smiled, rather choosing to preserve her rare moments of laughter for those periods when something terrible happened to mama, Nkoro, or her. That was how Ntone was able to predict that a terrible event must have taken place.

"Good afternoon sirs. Good evening ma," she greeted the men and only woman who had settled comfortably on the wooden stools. They appeared to be having a little conversation among one another, at the same time casting bold glances in her direction. Asinya was also seated on a stool, her arms stretched in front of her. She was assuming the position of the head of the house. Ntone's mouth instantly twisted in a contemptuous sneer at Asinya's posture. Her stomach made a sickening sound as her eyes searched the faces of their guests.

"Good afternoon our daughter," they responded in unison, their eyes casting more intense glances on her. The youngest among them, a middle-aged man with a surly appearance had so far acknowledged her presence with nothing more than a quick glance that was followed by a distant look. He must have been in his forties as Ntone predicted. Her mind still roved on the subject of their visit. She growled when she didn't see his lips move in response to her greetings as the others did.

"Here she is," Asinya's declaration startled her.

The eldest amongst them acknowledged this declaration with a knowing nod.

"Why? What has gone wrong?" Ntone asked in a bewildered voice. Although all but the surly looking one had laughed at her confusion assuring her that nothing had gone

amiss, Asinya's contented look however stole every ounce of hope she had.

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Chapter 4

Nna Awor looked around the house in a taut face. While Asinya's expression worried her, Ntone's vague stare however terrified her. Without waiting for assistance, she dropped the sack of cocoyams to a heap at a corner of the little room that both served as their sitting room and bedroom.

"Akunjor, what brings you to my hut?" Nna Awor asked. Her eyes were fixed on the oldest man in the group. He met her gaze with a smile that was meant to disarm. The smile however failed to produce the desired effect for Nna Awor seemed to be on the verge of explosion.

"Relax Nna Awor. We have come with good tidings." He said, pointing wrinkled hands towards the cartons of assorted drinks in front of him. Nna Awor's expression remained grim.

"My sister's son here who lives in Calabar has seen a beautiful flower in your house in the person of your daughter Ntone. We have come to ask for her hand in marriage."

"Me?" Ntone puffed, placing her right palm firmly on her chest. "I am not marrying your sister's son. I have my dreams to pursue."

"Will you shut up? Haven't you enough common sense to know that it is wrong to speak that way to elders? You aren't even supposed to speak at all." Asinya shouted, standing upright to buttress her point. She was already thirty years old and still unmarried. Her sudden interest in the younger girl getting married was quite ironical.

"Oh, so this is your plan," Nna Awor replied, pointing her forefinger at her stepdaughter.

Ntone's gaze shifted to the man they had brought to marry her. He looked old enough to sire her. She deliberately brought her gaze to study every detail of his. He was completely bald and sustained a scar firmly plastered a little distance away from his right eye which caused her to suspect that it was the product of a brawl. His small black eyes were a big contrast to the wide mouth that underlined them and his bulging cheeks gave him the appearance of a sissy. His shoulders were broad and even though he was seated she suspected him to be of average height. From the oblivious look that adorned his face, anyone could easily conclude that he would rather be somewhere else.

"We come in peace. We just need your consent to marry your daughter. Our son here is a successful business man. He has built two houses here in Edor and one in Calabar. He has two cars and a cocoa plantation. You have no doubt seen the cars outside. Your daughter and entire family would be well cared for." Another middle-aged man among them spoke, flashing a set of grubby teeth.

Nna Awor's response was as swift as lightning. The man who had spoken instantly regretted speaking at all. With surprising strength and agility, she carried all the cartons of drinks outside. When she returned inside, the confused guests had already risen to their feet. That was when Ntone confirmed the height of the surly looking suitor. He was truly of average height.

"Woman, what are you doing?" the oldest man who was obviously the leader of the delegation bellowed, his neck veins bulging out.

"I told you, a woman shouldn't be approached concerning such matters. We should have gone to a senior male relative since the girl's father is not in the picture." The middle-aged man spoke forgetting too soon that it was his straw that had broken the camel's back in the first place.

Nna Awor sneered at his comment.

"Get out of my house. Go and look for someone else to buy for your son. Leave my daughter alone."

"We will come back. A woman has no say in these matters and you have no right to change our custom." The middle-aged man said as he found his way outside the house.

"Think about it." The leader shouted, pointing his staff at the enraged woman who stood at the doorway as if to ensure that they completely left the compound.

"You will regret this." Asinya hissed, running towards the group, no doubt, to placate them.

Ntone stood beside her mother watching the silent exchange between her stepsister and the unwelcomed guests. The crowd of onlookers outside had increased. Ntone instantly knew, that in a short while, the entire village would be talking about her.

Her eyes strayed once more to the group. They had carted away the cartons of drinks that her mother had thrown outside. Her stepsister seemed to be assuring them of something as depicted by their nods of approval and satisfied smiles. It was crystal clear that Asinya was up to something that was really not good. Ntone followed her mother inside the house when the neighbours began to ask questions. She knew them too well. They only wanted additional information to spice up what their eyes had seen.

"You will prove to them that you are not an ordinary girl." Her mother pointed out as they emptied the cocoyams from the sack.

Ntone knew that this wasn't a mere statement. It was another order.

Just then, the smiling face of Nkoro poked through the doorway causing mother and daughter to cast quick glances in his direction.

"Mama, please tell me that the Governor happened to stop by," he drawled, his eyes gleaming in delight. He had stayed behind after the close of school for the press club meeting. He was the president of the junior press club.

"You saw the cars?" Ntone raised an eyebrow.

"They were leaving when I walked into the compound. I even saw sister Asinya waving at them." Ntone eyed her brother but was unable to tell if he was serious.

"Your stepsister brought a man to ask for your sister's hand in marriage; a man old enough to be your father." Their mother replied, while her eyes searched for something.

A look of revulsion suddenly found its way to Nkoro's face. Lines of worry etched his forehead, causing him to look a lot older than his age. Ntone couldn't help wondering why her brother who usually laughed over such matters didn't find this particular one funny. Afterwards, when Asinya finally walked inside the hut, a sinister look that threatened to destroy anything that crossed her path flashed in her eyes. It was then that Ntone understood her brother's worry.

She indeed had every reason to tread cautiously.



It was cold outside. Asinya gently closed the door and was careful not to make a noise. She adjusted the wrapper that draped her face and was certain that no one would recognise her in the dark. Although she had taken care to dress in a long sleeved blouse and wrapper, the cold stung her like soldier ants bite. Dawn was still a few hours away. She crossed the main road and followed the bush path that led to Nta Egede's house. She thought of the talks about Nta Egede that went round the village. The villagers said that only the brave could pass through the mysterious bush that terminated in front of the medicine man's shrine. As Asinya trudged the path oblivious to the fearful sound of owls hooting in the bush, she thought differently. In her opinion, only those who were desperate would have the courage to tread the bush path. She sighed and was grateful that she had worn a thick blouse. The long grass stalks had the morning dew on them, and since she had to find her way through the overgrown bush, her clothes were dampened by the dew. She couldn't help wondering if it was really true that the ghosts of the people killed by Nta Egede haunted the path. Her eyes surveyed the thick darkness, half-expecting to see a mysterious form appear in the dark. When she didn't see any shapes appear before her, her imagination shifted to that of ghosts touching her.

Her thoughts continued to torment her until she found herself at the doorstep of the medicine man. She knocked and waited, her heart pounding furiously. "Who is there?" a gruff voice called out from inside the thatched room.

"A client," Asinya responded, folding both arms in an attempt to drive away the cold.

"Spirit or human?" the voice asked further.

The question drew an inaudible gasp from Asinya. "Did spirits patronise the medicine man too?" She asked rhetorically.

"I'm a human being." She replied shakily.

"The door is open."

She gently pushed the wooden door and walked in. Inside was completely dark, and for a while, the darkness blinded her.

"Asinya, you have come to destroy your stepsister. Drop your consultation fee inside the calabash in front of you."

Asinya thought that she was going to drop dead from the shock waves that revolted against her. "The weird stories the villagers told about Nta Egede were probably true." She thought. He was no human being. How else could he have known her name and motive without telling him? She was already beginning to worry about how she would find the calabash in the blinding darkness when the glow of an oil lamp suddenly illuminated the room. She took in the display of human skulls and blood in a fearful glance before dropping her gaze to the calabash placed a little distance away from her. She dropped a fee of five hundred naira note and waited. The blood stained curtain before her suddenly parted and when Nta Egede stepped out, she couldn't conceal a horrified stare. Now, she believed everything the villagers said about the medicine man.

They also said that he changed into different forms. Sometimes, he took the appearance of a giant and at other times, he was of average build. Asinya was shocked when a dwarf form emerged before her. His lower trunk was covered with a wrapper while his chest was left bare. His right eye was circled in white chalk. Asinya watched him perform a mysterious dance before her, panic gripping her as he burst into laughter.

"Nta Egede rules over the land of humans as well as spirits. Nta Egede has never lost a battle. Some wicked spirits decided to waylay me on my way to the forest," he paused, and nodded his head after a quick moment of reminiscence. "I passed them on the way and even greeted them. They replied, not knowing that it was me. I picked the leaves that destroy spirits and when I passed again, they were still waiting for me. I put the leaves in my mouth and greeted them again. They replied not knowing that they had inhaled the leaves of death from my mouth. That was how I finished them."

Asinya listened, praying to be out of the medicine's man sight as quickly as possible. If he destroyed spirits, she reasoned that he could change his mind and destroy her even there. The dwarf must have read her mind.

"Don't be afraid. I don't destroy clients except those who think that they are too smart and do not pay after my services."

"Who in his right mind would think of cheating this mysterious being?" Asinya wondered, trembling visibly. She watched Nta Egede produce a mirror from the same calabash that she had dropped the consultation fee. She could almost swear that a while ago, when she dropped the money inside the calabash, the mirror wasn't there. He looked at the mirror, at the same time, shaking his baldhead.

"That girl has a very bright future. You have to tread cautiously."

"Nta, does that mean that she cannot be destroyed?" Asinya was surprised that she could still utter a sound.

The transformation in the medicine man's feature was swift.

"Are you saying that she is too strong for my powers?" the dwarf roared. "You dare undermine my powers?"

Her trembling increased as a deadly look clouded his face.

"No, I didn't mean that." she begged, dropping to her knees.

"I will help you." He said after a moment's hesitation. "Your fee is only two thousand naira." "That's okay." She stammered.

He pulled out a bottle containing a powdery substance from the calabash.

"Spray this powder on her school uniform and any house wear of hers that you choose. Then, she will become even more stupid than a hen."

"Thank you very much." Asinya said, gently tying the small bottle inside the knotted end of her wrapper. She wanted to scream in excitement. The little 'witch' who thought that she was bigger than the entire village would soon become a derelict, stupid enough to marry a mad man.

"Do I have to pay now or later?" She asked, suddenly feeling very enthusiastic.

"Later."

Dawn was slowly creeping in when Asinya found her way to the hut. The mother and her children were still fast asleep. She smiled in the dark and determined to execute the evil deed as quickly as possible. Shortly, Ntone's clothes were drenched in an invisible powder. Having carefully followed the instructions of Nta Egede, Asinya stretched wearily on the bamboo bed. It wasn't long before she began to snore-the effect of long and tiring hours of scheming.

8

Chapter 5

Few months later, Ntone stood by the roadside waiting for a vehicle that was going to Calabar. Her mother and brother stood beside her with smiles plastered on their faces. Nna Awor was however torn by several emotions. The news of Ntone's admission into Achievers University to study English and Literary studies was a dream come true. Even though the girl's performance in the WASSCE and JAMB examinations had been outstanding, she couldn't believe her eyes when the admission letter was delivered to her. Surprisingly, today, Nna Awor's eyes had too much water in them.

"May the Almighty protect and keep you." She patted her daughter on the back.

"Mama, you've said this prayer forty times now." Nkoro teased as he was careful to mask the sadness he too felt at his sister's departure.

"Were you really counting?" Ntone laughed, reaching out to hold her mother's hand. "Don't worry mama. I'll make you proud."

"Yes you will." Nna Awor replied.

Ntone smiled gratefully at the woman who had single-handedly raised her through thick and thin. She felt like one plunging into the unknown. This thought sent a chill up her back.

The trio watched as the endless stream of vehicles whizzed past. They must have waited for about fifteen minutes when a vehicle that was flagged down by Nkoro slowed down to a halt in front of them.

"Calabar," Nkoro shouted.

"Enter." The driver, a very dark man, responded.

Ntone hugged her mother and brother tightly before joining three other passengers at the back seat of the Toyota Camry. The driver got out of the car and thrust Ntone's 'Ghana must go bag' into the boot of the car.

"May the Almighty continually be with you and may you be successful in everything you do."

"Mama, I thought you prayed this one already at home." Nkoro said, playfully nudging his mother's elbow.

"Don't mind him mama." Ntone shouted as the driver started the car. "Can't you see that he's trying very hard not to cry?"

The smile on her mother's face grew wider. It was comforting to see her smile in spite of the tears that betrayed the uncertainty of the future. Nkoro's eyes were bloodshot as he waved his sister goodbye. He also hoped for the day that he would leave the village like his elder sister.

Just before the vehicle swung into motion, Ntone let her eyes wander across the road. Agbor was crossing the road and a big bowl of water rested on her head. Her protruding stomach confirmed the truth of the news that had gone round the school. The pregnancy had prevented her from sitting for the WASSCE. Their eyes met for a brief moment and then Agbor looked away. She had tried to warn Agbor that her friendship with Joan would yield no good result but her friend had paid deaf ears to her advice. She waved at her mother and brother for the last time before the car zoomed off.

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Back in the hut, Asinya had a vague expression on her face. Nta Egede's powder had been totally ineffective.

"Useless!" she spat out the word with venom. The medicine man had given up after his realization that Ntone's spirit was too strong for his medicine. A streak of tear brushed against her left cheek. She quickly wiped it away with the back of her palm. It was useless to cry over spilt milk. As she recalled the large sum of money she had paid the medicine man, she cautioned herself and retreated. His medicine had failed! Two thousand naira had gone down the drain. Throughout the previous night, dreams of Ntone returning to the village in a presidential convoy persisted. She saw Ntone step out of a big car while many people struggled to shake hands with her. She was even one of those struggling to have a handshake with the girl. The crowd had been so great that she was squeezed in from different directions. When she thought that she was close enough to shake Ntone's outstretched hand, she stretched out her right hand. Someone must have pushed her for she landed hard on the bare floor and then woke up. She groaned in her reminiscence. That dream would never come true. She reminded herself countless times.

"Is Asinya home?" a familiar voice called out.

Asinya pretended not to hear. She was in no mood to speak to anyone, not even her best friend. Even though Evelyn had married Ndogho, the hunter, a couple of years back, their friendship had remained unbreakable. Like the old saying went, 'Birds of a feather flock together'; both ladies had been able to preserve their friendship by continuously interweaving strands of evil deeds together. In times past, they had served as accomplices to each other's misdeeds.

It was Asinya who hired two young men in the village to lie against the girl Ndogho had been betrothed to for many years. In the village, one person's affair was often everyone's affair. It was in this vein that the entire village knew that Ndogho was betrothed to Evelyn's cousin, Ettah. Ettah who was far younger than Evelyn lived with Evelyn's mother. Evelyn could not accept the fact that she would remain unmarried while the younger girl found herself a husband. When she lamented her predicament to Asinya, the latter volunteered to help. She bribed the young men to lie to Ndogho that Ettah was having an affair with one of the village chiefs. Ndogho who was of a fickle mind believed everything the men said. Ettah's tears could not convince him. Desperate to keep her lover, Ettah had solicited help from her older cousin, Evelyn. Evelyn was to plead with Ndogho to take her back. Evelyn was only too glad to help. Two weeks later, Evelyn's belongings were taken to Ndogho's house. A medicine man from the next village had given her the 'turn around spice.' A man's heart completely turned around if he ate food containing it. When Evelyn went to plead with Ndogho to take his fiancée back, she went along with a plate of food that had been carefully sprinkled with the 'turn around spice.' Even though Ndogho rejected the shallow pleas to accept his fiancée, he couldn't reject the food. According to Usuku, the medicine man who gave her the spice,

a few spoons of rice containing the spice would do the job. Ndogho had however eaten a whole plate of rice containing the powdery black substance and as expected, his heart completely turned away from Ettah. Evelyn became his heart's desire. When his relatives tried to caution him against marrying the schemer, Ndogho threatened suicide. Ndogho had even paid Evelyn's bride price to a greedy uncle of hers when her mother and elders in her family refused to have anything to do with the union. Ettah had left the village to stay with a distant relative at Etung. She couldn't bear the looks and small talks that went round whenever she moved around the village. Asinya and Evelyn had achieved notoriety as accomplices to each other's shenanigans.

The wooden door was slightly thrown back when Evelyn touched it. She poked her head inside, grinning mischievously at the sight of Asinya crouched on the floor beside the bed.

"What's wrong?" Evelyn asked, casually walking inside the hut. She had gained a lot of weight over the past two years that movement became increasingly difficult for her. The villagers said that she had grown fat from excessively eating the game her husband brought her.

Evelyn was relieved to find Asinya alone in the hut. She sat on the bamboo bed causing it to creak while she reached forward to pat her friend's back.

"Where is everyone?"

"Hmm," Asinya sighed, stretching both legs in front of her.

"Speak up my friend. What happened?"

A moment of uneasy silence passed before Asinya spoke.

"It appears you've not been in this village for a while or else you would have known about my misery."

"What are you talking about? I haven't really been in this village for a while. I went to visit my sister at Nkoh. She just gave birth to a baby girl."

"How are they doing?" Asinya asked, almost in a whisper.

"They are fine." Evelyn's voice was brisk. "Tell me. What happened in my absence?"

"After judiciously following Nta Egede's instructions and paying countless visits to his shanty in order to destroy the 'witch' who happens to be my stepsister, she was still able to pass all her examinations. The straw that has finally broken the camel's back is that she is presently on her way to Achiever's University in Calabar where she recently secured admission to study English and Literary studies. Nta Egede's medicine failed." She clasped her hands in a display of sorrow. "I paid him two thousand naira for nothing."

"This is terrible. Is it really true?" Evelyn asked no one in particular. Her mind was already working. She also had a special hatred for Ntone. Unlike the other girls in the village, Ntone wasn't a part of the shenanigans that had become the way of life in the village. Almost everyone knew that Ntone behaved in accordance with certain standards that were probably higher than those of the villagers. Evelyn hated her for this because it

made her look good and somewhat important. A thought had already formed in her mind and the grin on her face was an indicator that she was up to no good.

"Then we have to see Usuku." Evelyn said, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"Do you think Usuku can succeed where a powerful medicine man like Nta Egede failed?"

"You forget so quickly my friend. Wasn't it Usuku's medicine that turned Ndogho's heart away from Ettah and endeared him to me?"

Asinya suddenly rose to her feet and perched on the bed beside her accomplice. The grin on Evelyn's face grew wider. She knew she had scored a point.

"I do not want your stepmother to meet me here."

Asinya grimaced at the mention of the word 'stepmother.' Though the woman took her to live with her when her mother died, it still didn't qualify her to be called her stepmother. Her mother lived a miserable life until she died because her father had married Nna Awor instead. She had completely detested her after that.

"Please don't call that 'witch' my stepmother."

"Okay. I'll be on my way now. When you are ready to see Usuku, you know my place. I'll take you there and if her spirit is too strong, we will ask Usuku to kill her." Evelyn rose to her feet and walked towards the door.

"Thank you, my sister. I'll see you tomorrow."

Asinya rose to her feet to see her accomplice off. When she sighted Nna Awor and Nkoro moving towards the house, a lump stuck in her throat causing her to change her mind. "The earlier, the better." She thought.

"I will see you this evening." While she declared this, Evelyn responded with a surprised nod.

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Chapter 6

Achiever's University had gained popularity over time as one of the most prestigious universities in the country. Ntone stared at the colossal buildings that made up the department of English and Literary Studies in amazement. They were simply breathtaking. She beamed with pleasure as she recalled the manner the ELS 101 lecturer had explained the first two chapters of the book, 'She Stoops to Conquer' by Oliver Goldsmith during the 8:00 am lecture earlier that day. While in the village, she had never understood the play even after reading it several times. Dr. Ogar John had however taken time to explain the chapters to the class and he was impressed with Ntone's questions. She resolved to read the play again before the next lecture and stayed back in the lecture hall after the lecture to study. She however had to leave when the two hundred level students arrived for their lecture.

At the corridor, the paintings of several literary icons stopped her in her tracks.

"What made these people so different?" Ntone asked herself for probably the fifth time. Her eyes would not leave the paintings of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark and other legends that adorned the English and Literary Studies department of Achiever's University.

"I want to be like them." She muttered inaudibly, finally descending the staircase. Her mind still wondered from one literary icon to the other. Wole Soyinka was the first Black to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. The late Chinua Achebe's works, especially the novel, 'Things fall apart', had won many laurels.

She also thought of female writers like Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, and the young icon Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Ntone found a spot in the departmental garden and closed her eyes like one in a daydream.

"Are you sleeping?"

In an instant, Ntone's eyelids flickered open. She didn't like the intrusion on her daydream. Eno-obong stood before her, eyeing her with dark piercing eyes. "Are you alright?" Eno-obong asked. She clutched a stack of books to her chest.

"I'm fine." Ntone forced a smile feeling embarrassed that she had been caught daydreaming.

"Where are you off to?" Ntone asked as her gaze wandered to the books in Eno-obong's hands.

"The library," Eno-obong replied. "Do you care to join me?"

Ntone's eyes seemed to bulge out of their sockets. She had spent two months already in Calabar but still felt like a fish out of water. She always felt uneasy whenever she had to speak in a group. The fear that she would probably say wrong things since she came from the village prevented her from taking part in conversations. She was surprised at the relief she felt at Eno-obong's request.

"You want me to come with you?" Ntone asked, still uncertain about what she just heard.

"Yes," Eno-obong shrugged. "Why are you surprised?"

"Oh, it's nothing." Ntone replied, rising to her feet. She strapped her black knapsack across her left hand.

"Are you going to read all that?" Ntone asked, unsure of what to say next as the two girls walked together to the library. The library was just a stone's throw from their department.

"Yes. Isn't that the reason why I'm here in the first place?"

A glow found its way to Ntone's face at this reply. Eno-obong may have made a casual statement but those words seemed to infuse more zeal into Ntone. She must never forget those words. Ntone reminded herself.



Ntone could feel her stomach tie up in knots as she walked back to her hostel. She didn't even hear the porter when she requested for her hostel identity card.

"Hey you, Where is your ID card?" the woman barked the second time.

She flashed the mini frame at the woman who responded with an angry nod. Ntone however didn't wait to see the nod. She just walked on until she arrived at her room. After a quick meal and refreshing bath, she decided it was time to go to bed.

Her roommates engaged in a lively discussion and she knew that she couldn't just go to bed.

"Have they apprehended them yet?" Theresa, a light skinned girl, who was partly of Australian origin and partly of Yoruba root, asked in between a mouthful of pasta.

"No." Idorenyin replied. Her eyes were fixed on the phone in her hands as she read through the daily news update.

"What happened?" Ntone asked in a voice that was a little louder than a whisper. She felt exhausted from the long hours of studying in the library with Eno-obong, her new friend.

"Two boys raped a thirteen year old female. According to the story, the boys who are students of a state university live in the same compound with the girl. On that fateful day, when the girl came home from school, there was no one in the compound except the two boys. They forcefully took her to a room and raped her. She was unconscious when her parents found her several hours after the incident. Although she was taken to the hospital, she is still unconscious." Idorenyin explained.

Ntone shook her head, too shocked to utter a word.

"The culprits ran away and they've not been seen since then." Folashade said with a note of finality.

"Does this mean that the society is no longer safe for the girl child?" Ntone asked. Her question was directed to no one in particular.

"That is what it looks like." Theresa replied, even though anyone could have easily detected that Ntone had spoken to herself. "Last week, the story of a seventy year old man who raped a one year old baby was aired on the network news. I watched the news when I went to my aunt's place."

“As long as the long arm of the law does not catch up with offenders, the situation will remain the same and even deteriorate.” Idorenyin said, gently placing the phone on the table beside her.

Ntone shut her eyes in a brief reminiscence, recalling those days in the village when Asinya had tried to lure her into marriage. Then, she was only in the secondary school. It was another form of female oppression. A lot of teenage girls in the village had been married off against their will to men old enough to father them. If it wasn't for her mother, her stepsister would have bundled her off as an adolescent to a man's house. “Someone really has to be a voice for the girl child. Someone has to advocate for those who are too helpless to help themselves.” Such thoughts rummaged through her mind until she drifted off. That night, her sleep was troubled with nightmares. In a dream, Asinya was with a group of men and they were chasing her. In another dream, she saw a teenage girl who had been raped by her father. She was crying and asking Ntone to rescue her. She woke up the next morning, pondering over the dreams of the night. When she couldn't make much sense out of them, she concluded that they were just dreams and went about her normal business.

10

Chapter 7

The weather was blustery. Ntone had gone to the market with Eno-obong. Ntone needed to buy foodstuffs while Eno-obong needed a few wears. A downpour seemed inevitable as dust particles flew into their eyes momentarily blinding them. Ntone was grateful that they had bought all that they needed since dusk was already approaching. The buses and taxis that passed by were filled up and had no extra seats left. The two girls waited by the roadside for almost two hours, praying that a downpour would not start.

"I think we should walk back to school." Enoobong suggested, stooping to pick up her sack. Several people hurried past them. The colour of the clouds had turned to a hue of black and tiny water droplets were already grazing their skin.

"Wouldn't the distance be too much for you to trek? I can walk the distance myself but I'm concerned about you." Ntone replied, at the same time trying to make way for the ever thickening throng that flooded past them.

"I know of a shortcut that would lead us to school."

"Alright, let's go." Ntone picked up the BAGCO bag beside her and followed closely behind the other girl. They couldn't move beside each other as they made their way through the crowd. Ntone trusted the other girl's judgement because her parents lived in Calabar. Eno-obong obviously knew the environs very well. They went through a road that seemed to cut in between a line of shops. By the time they took the turning to the left, the rain droplets were already grazing their skin with increased intensity. The road seemed deserted and Ntone noticed that a few uncompleted buildings lined both sides of the road.

"We have to move quickly." Ntone said, her blood already curdling. "It appears we are the only people on this road."

"Relax." Eno-obong replied. "You have only the rain to worry about. I have passed through this road several times."

"I still think we should move quickly."

They moved on, content with silence as a companion until the sound of footsteps behind them caused them to turn round. Their eyes met with the fearful images of four men, moving menacingly towards them.

"Don't you dare move!" a voice barked. The girls couldn't see their faces in the dark but the outline of their figures against the darkness revealed three tall men and a short one. Ntone swallowed hard, as she was unable to control the wild race her heart was doing. Both girls knew that attempting to run would be futile.

Ntone took a step backwards and bumped into her friend.

"Didn't I tell you not to move?" the one who had spoken first barked.

"What do you want from us?" Ntone's fingers had already curled into a fist.

"Ha, ha, ha! Good question." Another with a gruff voice replied. "We want you."

The men drew dangerously close. A mixture of alcohol and Indian hemp oozed from them causing Ntone's stomach to churn.

"Please don't harm us. We are students." Enoobong tearfully pleaded, grasping Ntone's left hand as if for refuge.

"Shut up!" several gruff voices barked in unison.

Ntone's mind was working fast. Only a brilliant idea would save them. She reached inside her handbag and felt the spray can. Her heart warmed up in gratitude when she remembered that she had tossed the insecticide inside her handbag instead of the blue BAGCO sack. Their assailants would have been suspicious if she had to stoop to search for anything inside the sack.

"Do as I say." She whispered into Eno-obong's ear.

"Throw away your sack and run when I say so." "What are you saying?" Someone barked.

"We are just..." Ntone began, gently pulling out the spray can containing insecticide. She pointed the can in the direction of their faces and, without wasting a split second released the content on them.

"Throw your sack and run." She said to Eno-obong, who promptly obeyed.

Loud sneezing and coughing followed almost immediately while the two girls ran as fast as their legs could carry them.

"Follow them." An angry voice yelled.

The girls covered a good distance while the men followed in a hot chase.

"Keep running." Ntone shouted. While Eno-obong began to show signs of slowing down, Ntone had no difficulty in running. The strenuous life in the village had prepared her. They ran until they arrived at a busy road. It was a commercial area and many shops were still open. They stopped running and trudged on until they were enclosed by the safe walls of the university.



"I hope Usuku's medicine is not dead too." Asinya said in a loud voice.

"Ssh." Evelyn cautioned, placing a forefinger on her lips. They were on their way to Usuku's shrine. This was their second visit. On their first visit, Usuku had promised to send the arrow of destruction to the girl in Calabar. Three months had already elapsed. Asinya who had patiently waited for news of the girl's doom was disappointed when she heard nothing. The second visit to the medicine man was to find out what had gone wrong. Evelyn, her accomplice, had accompanied her again to the next village.

"Haven't you heard about what Usuku did to the stubborn chief?" Evelyn asked, readjusting her wrapper even though it was held securely in place.

She did that whenever she was about to tell a tale.

"What chief?" Asinya asked, puzzled.

"Chief Ibiam." Evelyn began, reducing her pace. Asinya did the same. "You see, for some time now, Chief Ibiam had been waging war against Usuku's village. His boys would lie in wait for the villagers in the surrounding bushes. They spared no one. Chief Ibiam wanted the land beyond the river. Usuku sent emissaries to Chief Ibiam asking him to desist from such despicable acts but Chief Ibiam would not listen. He even went

as far as slaughtering the wife of the Chief in Usuku's village while she was on her way to visit her mother in another village. Usuku's anger was let loose. He unleashed the waters in their river on Chief Ibiam's village. The village was wiped away in one night by a strange flood. Not even a rat survived it." Evelyn gestured by creating an O with her thumb and forefinger.

Asinya shook her head in bewilderment.

"Hmm, I hope he unleashes another flood on my step-sister."

"Your mind works really fast my friend." Evelyn laughed, clasping both palms. "We have to hurry. The shrine is still far away."

Asinya didn't seem to hear her accomplice. Her mind was still working on the possibility of Usuku sending a flood to drown her step-sister in Calabar.

"We must hurry my friend. It might rain." Evelyn said, casting a quick glance at the sky.

They walked through the meadow that separated Usuku's hut from the main road. The rotting thatch roof was gradually becoming visible. They saw a woman walking towards them and instantly recognised her. She was from their village.

"Quick, hide. It's Maggie." Evelyn whispered.

The two ladies quickly ducked behind the grasses to the right.

"Do you think she saw us?" Asinya whispered, crouching behind Evelyn.

"No, she was muttering to herself, and she had her face down."

They waited behind the grasses until the woman passed. When they emerged from their hiding place, they had grasses and leaves stuck to their hair and other body parts. They quickly brushed away the dirt and continued with their journey. They were still scratching their body when they arrived at Usuku's hut.

"I hope you come in peace." Usuku asked the moment they walked inside the hut.

"Yes." Evelyn responded. "My friend is worried that the medicine has had no effect on her stepsister."

Usuku laughed at this remark. When he laughed, his bare chest shook causing lumps of flesh to perform a wild dance. He had the height and build of a warrior.

"Then she doesn't know how Usuku's medicine works."

Evelyn nodded to her friend in a gesture that clearly said, 'Didn't I tell you?'

Asinya was still feeling irritated by the scratches the tall elephant grasses had left on her body. She returned a perplexed look.

"Sit." Usuku motioned to a low wooden bench in front of him. Both ladies promptly obeyed.

"You said I should destroy the girl, didn't you?"

"Yes." Evelyn responded, when Asinya didn't answer.

"Usuku's medicine is programmed for the right time and season. Didn't you tell that to your friend," he shot Evelyn a searching look.

"I told her, but she wouldn't listen to me. It's good that you've confirmed what I told her."

"You have nothing to worry about. The news will soon get to you." Usuku said, turning to stare at Asinya.

"What news?" Asinya asked, momentarily forgetting her irritation.

"The girls doom. I am Usuku, the mediator between men and demons. I do not lie." He rose to his feet, his eyes rolling fearfully as the words came out of his mouth like a war chant.

"Go. I do not speak in riddles. My words are clearer than the sun. The girl's doom is sure."

"Thank you." Both ladies echoed, as they rose to their feet. They scurried out of the hut as if they were being chased. Even when they had covered a good distance away from the hut, the medicine man's chants still resounded causing them to run until they were safely out of the meadow.



"This is a case of murder. It cannot be handled by the school." The chief security officer of the university spoke in a raucous voice. Ntone however didn't hear him. Neither did she see his lips as he spoke. This was because her eyes had unleashed a flood that was temporarily blurring her vision.

"I didn't do anything." She cried further. "I cannot kill a human being."

Her mind frantically raced through the only memory she could recall for the umpteenth time. Theresa and Folashade had both gone to their respective homes for the weekend leaving her alone in the room with Idorenyin. When she woke up in the morning, her eyes met with a gruesome sight. Idorenyin lay on the bed in a pool of blood with a knife pierced through her chest. She had called for help while she tried to pull out the knife from the girl's chest. She was still trying to pull out the knife when girls from the other room knocked on the door. She had been too shocked to notice that there were bloodstains on her bedcovers, the rubber carpet and since she had tried to pull out the knife from the dead girl's chest, she was also drenched in blood. The case was immediately reported to the university's security office. At the security office, Ntone was shocked when the security officers said she was the chief suspect in the murder. They even had evidences to support their claim. The knife had her fingerprints and she also had blood on her. Ntone had informed them that she locked the door before they went to bed the previous night. On close examination of the doors and windows, they were still intact and there was no trace of a 'break in.'

"The police have arrived." Mr. Michael rose to his feet as two police inspectors and a constable walked inside the room.

Ntone wiped the tears with the back of her palm. She didn't know what was happening around her. "She must have been lost," she told herself.

"You're welcome, officers." Mr. Michael shook hands with the men. Ntone returned their questioning gaze with a curious one.

"We have to take the suspect to the police station for interrogation." A tall and lanky one among them announced. Mr. Michael only nodded.

"You have to follow us to the station." The tall man addressed Ntone.

"I didn't kill my roommate. I was equally shocked when I saw her lying in a pool of blood. I didn't know that trying to pull a knife out of her body would implicate me." Ntone sobbed.

"You still have to follow us." He said, sounding impatient. Ntone nodded and followed them out of the university security office. A crowd of students blocked the entrance and they had to push their way through the throng. She saw the fingers that pointed in her direction. Her eyes blinked helplessly at the flashlights from cameras as people took pictures. The tears were transparent enough for her to see the media team as they viewed her through large video cameras placed on their shoulders. She could also see the cloud that loomed over her threatening to destroy all that she had ever worked for.

11

Chapter 8

Ntone lay in silence listening to the guttural sounds coming from the other inmate. She closed her eyes, hoping to sleep off. The buzzing sound of mosquitoes as they feasted on her caused her to be alert again. She slapped several parts of her body, wincing in pain as the mosquito bites stung her bare skin. She couldn't sleep. She painfully sat up on the bed. The sad thoughts began to filter in again, provoking the tears to flow. Although the female warden had promised to post the letter for her, she doubted that her mother had seen it. If Nna Awor had seen it, she would be in Calabar by now. She tasted the salty liquid gushing out from her eyes. It seemed to bring back more pain. Her best friend, Eno-obong had abandoned her for fear of being connected with the murder. Seven months had already gone by. She was still awaiting trial and since she had no money to employ the services of a lawyer, the case was still pending.

Idorenyin's father, the provost of Hallmark Polytechnic, had insisted that she remained in prison custody. They said that there were clear evidences that she was the culprit.

"You had better get a lawyer." The man had roared at her, with fiery red eyes that threatened to burn her into ashes. The testimony of the other roommates served as embers. They had told the police that she had a fight with the late girl three days before the incident. Ntone recalled with sadness the little fight she had with Idorenyin. Ntone had mistakenly brushed her arm against the other girl's table. Idorenyin had placed a bottle containing cough syrup on the plastic table. The bottle which landed on the ground broke into pieces causing the thick yellowish liquid to splatter against the floor. Ntone had been petrified because the cough syrup belonging to Idorenyin had cost quite a lot of money. Her fear was confirmed when the other girl lashed out at her calling her a clumsy village girl. If Idorenyin had stopped at that, it probably would have ended there. Idorenyin had however gone ahead to say that Ntone was evil and that since she came into the room, the evil she had brought from the village was manifesting in everything she did. Although Ntone had initially pleaded with Idorenyin to forgive her, the other girl's tirades however provoked her to return an angry response. A quarrel had ensued and it was the presence of the porters at the scene that quenched the fire.

Theresa and Folashade had reported this incident to the policemen. The porters had also attested to the fact that both girls had been at each other's necks three days before Idorenyin's death. According to the policemen, it was only logical that Ntone had been provoked to murder her roommate after the quarrel.

More tears gushed out of Ntone's eyes as the events leading to her detention danced before her like ghosts in a nightmare. She was innocent. She told herself, "In the end, truth will prevail." Her mother always said that whenever her stepsister told lies about them to the villagers. She didn't know when she slept off. The clanging of the metal gate few hours later told her it was morning.



"Miss Ntone Francis, you have a visitor." A female warder announced. Her big and burly frame covered the entrance as she unlocked the gate.

Ntone nodded and jumped down from the top bunk. She followed the warder to the empty room at the entrance that served as the reception. Her legs abruptly stopped moving when she saw the thin frame of a woman clad in a familiar wrapper. Although the woman had aged as portrayed by the sunken cheekbones and weight loss, Ntone recognised her in an instant. She drew near to the corner where the woman stood with folded arms. Their eyes regarded each other solemnly until Nna Awor reached out and hugged her daughter.

"Mama, I didn't do it. It's all a ploy to destroy me." Ntone sobbed, resting her chin on her mother's shoulder.

"It's alright my child. I know you didn't do it." Ntone disengaged from her mother's arms and found seats for both of them.

"How is Nkoro?" Ntone asked.

"Your brother is fine. He wanted to come with me but I didn't let him." Nna Awor coughed, blinking back the mist that had gathered at the corners of both eyes. "I couldn't afford the transportation fare for two people."

Ntone's eyes curiously ran over the older woman's face. She had a sickly look.

"Mama, are you okay?"

Nna Awor made an effort to reply. Her effort only produced a dry cough.

"It's just a cold. I will be fine."

"Mama, I've caused you a lot of pain. I..."

"You better stop saying that. It's only a phase and we'll come out of it stronger. You don't look healthy yourself." Nna Awor's eyes moved quickly, sadly taking in her daughter's dishevelled look. "I brought you a few clothes and I hope they will let you eat the food and fruits I bought on the way." Nna Awor bent forward. Her voice dropped to a whisper as her eyes stole secret glances at the warder's cordon.

Ntone nodded.

"They still allow me a few privileges because I haven't been tried yet."

"I'll get you a lawyer."

"Mama, where do you intend to get the money? I know how hard you have worked just to raise your fare down here?"

"Do you really think that I would let you rot in this place? You really think I would let my investment go down the drain?"

Ntone's head dropped as the water gathered again at the corners of her eyes. She knew she couldn't hold them there for too long before they sought their freedom.

"How is Asinya?" she asked, feeling guilty that she hadn't asked earlier on.

"She's even more lippy now." Nna Awor frowned. "She suddenly became excited the moment she knew that I was travelling down here even though I didn't disclose the reason to her."

"It's okay, mama. We will get through this."

"It's time to leave." A female warder approached them. A deep frown crossed her face as Nna Awor handed Ntone a black polythene bag.

"Where will you stay?" Ntone quickly asked, as the warder stepped closer.

"Don't worry. I'll find a way."

"Please I want you to be safe." She hugged her mother.

Nna Awor nodded and, after disengaging from her daughter's embrace, gestured to her to follow the warder. They held each other in a brief gaze before Ntone was led back to the murky cell. The metal gates clanged after her, causing her heart to quake. She wondered if she would ever get used to the noise they made. They were a bitter reminder of her lost freedom.



Seven months had elapsed before the court finally gave its verdict. The case had been adjourned thrice. On the last sitting, the judge declared that there were clear evidences to show that she was guilty of the crime. She could still see the tears on Nkoro's face as the judge sentenced her to life imprisonment with hard labour. He had raised his transport fare by working on hire for the villagers on their farms. Her mother had stripped off the wrapper that covered her lower trunk. She would have pulled off the black underwear that clung to her bare skin if the police men had not taken her away. They had called her a mad woman when she was only a grieving mother. "But how could the same system that had declared her guilty when she was innocent be able to tell the difference?" She asked despairingly. Idorenyin's father, an uncouth man had thanked his lawyer and the judge profusely saying that he was grateful that justice had finally been served. It must have been just after he made this pronouncement that the heavens unbridled a torrential downpour. Unlike the dead girl's father, the heavens must have been angry that an innocent girl had been denied justice. Or maybe, nature had also joined her mother and brother in weeping for her. Anyway, the heavy downpour and a little scene that occurred when Idorenyin's father fell face down into the pool of water that flooded the courtyard as he made his way to his car were clear indicators that the heavens were not happy.

She could still hear her mother's howls as they led her away.

"Truth will prevail." The distressed woman had cried.

12

Chapter 9

The cold seemed to penetrate through the prison clothes into her bare flesh. She struck a match and lit a candle. A faint glow illuminated the room. A kind female warder diligently supplied her with packs of candles and matchboxes throughout the five years that she had spent behind bars. Her cellmate, a middle-aged woman who had earned a jail term for murdering her husband, stirred in her sleep, muttering a few incoherent words. The other inmate who was released the previous year usually complained about the light. This one arrived just the previous day and Ntone had only heard her say four words, 'Where do I sleep?' Ntone had immediately pointed at the bunk bed beneath hers and that was it.

The woman sneezed. Ntone knew that the flame was disturbing her breathing. A small window above the bunk served as the only means of ventilation. She remained still as she was unable to flip through the pages of the hard cover notebook before her. She gritted her teeth as the woman's eyelids flickered open and began to count in her heart. A verbal explosion was inevitable.

"Don't you sleep?" the woman asked in a loud voice that was as deep as a man's voice. Ntone stopped counting at the number, forty one. She didn't know if a reply was needed. She however stammered a response.

"I'm sorry ma, I love writing."

"What do you write about?" the bed creaked as she sat up.

"Go on. I'm interested." She said when Ntone remained silent.

"I write stories that portray the pain of women who have been abused."

A moment of silence passed. The woman had her head bowed. Ntone swallowed hard, thinking desperately.

"That's good." She nodded. "You are a brave girl."

I wish my daughter was brave too." Ntone smiled gratefully. "Tomorrow, I'll tell you my story. It will help you." She muttered drowsily and sprawled back on the bed.

Ntone heaved in relief, and bent over the notebook. Her pen seemed to bleed with her heart as she laid bare the pain that lurked there. The security officers always demanded sex from female prisoners in return for small favours. Derogatory names were used to address the female prisoners and the plight of the girl child in the society. She just wanted to let it all out. She believed she could still dream about hope for the downtrodden. She wrote about her expectations for the girl child. The girl child was the rose that should be allowed to bloom. She thought about what her cellmate had said wondering if she too had been abused. Hours later, when she flipped through the pages of the book, she knew that the prison walls could not stop her from expressing her dreams.



"Hey! You better get to work." A female warder barked, referring to Mrs. Johnson, Ntone's cellmate. They were scrubbing the toilet floors and Mrs.

Johnson had briefly risen to her feet for a brief rest. "Don't you think you are overdoing this hard labour thing?" The chubby woman grunted, referring to the

sentence of life imprisonment with hard labour that she was serving.

"One more word from you and I would have you taken to isolation. I don't care if you are a celebrity."

Ntone looked up from her crouched position on the floor, and almost immediately continued scrubbing. Mrs. Johnson hissed and stooped once again beside Ntone. They scrubbed the tiles on the floor and wall until they saw the departing figure of the warder.

"She called you a celebrity. Are you one?" Ntone blurted out, the moment she was sure that the warder was completely out of sight.

Mrs. Johnson laughed mirthlessly, suddenly scrubbing the wall with greater zeal.

"I am a writer and I've authored several books. My name is Barbara Johnson."

Ntone gasped, briefly releasing her hold on the spiky brush. It fell on the ground with a loud thud. She quickly picked it up, hoping that the sound would not attract the attention of the warders. When no one appeared, she looked at the other woman in unconcealed amazement. The name Barbara Johnson rang numerous bells. Who hadn't heard of Barbara Johnson? Her works had received widespread acclaim. Ntone had read quite a number of books authored by her.

"Are you really Barbara Johnson?"

"Don't I look like the photographs you've seen?"

"Oh my God!" Ntone gasped, suddenly noticing the resemblance. It was really her. She rubbed her eyes, peering closely at the woman. "What are you doing here?"

"I promised to tell you my story. Maybe, this is a good time to do so." Barbara Johnson said, suddenly flinging the brush aside. She sat on the floor and Ntone did same.

"I am here because of my husband. We were married for twenty five years and had a daughter. I started writing before I met my husband. During our courtship, I asked him if he was okay with the fact that I was a writer because I wouldn't stop. He replied by saying that he was my biggest fan. Things however changed after I gave birth to Susan, my daughter. He began to complain about my works, saying I wasn't spending time with the baby. This of course wasn't true. He griped so much that I stopped writing. The international community was surprised that I had decided to stop writing. Several times on interviews, people wanted to know the reason for my prolonged silence. I always replied by saying that I wasn't strong enough to write anymore. My daughter completed her secondary education and gained admission into the university the same year. I decided it was time to continue addressing the issues that I felt were plaguing society. I couldn't close my eyes anymore to the plight of women. My husband started complaining again. He said I was a sexist and that I was indirectly saying that I was also abused by my husband at home. He threatened to destroy my works even though I tried my best to be a good wife and mother. Last year, I received three Orange fiction awards. The book I began to write after many years of silence seemed to touch many lives and helped hurt women to heal. I received the literary icon award, humanitarian award and lifetime achievement award. My husband had watched the show on television because he refused to accompany me to the award night. I arrived home however to see the most sorrowful

sight I had ever witnessed in my life. My husband had burnt the original manuscript of my work, 'Beautified Pain.' It was my most recent work. It had not even been typed yet. I watched my sweat, ideas, and pain burn into ashes. My husband had burnt it and my daughter stood beside him watching. Till today, I don't know what he told her to get her on his side. She had always supported me and countless times, I had seen that gleam in her eyes that told the world how proud she was of her mother. It suddenly occurred to me that this same daughter had turned down my request to accompany me to the award ceremony. My work was gone and I could see my husband's mocking eyes as they danced before me in victory. I watched my daughter hiss and stomp to her room. I opened my mouth to scream but nothing came out. My legs couldn't support me anymore. They suddenly gave way and I found myself on the floor. Afterwards, when I rose to my feet, I didn't know what was happening around me. I was dazed. The sinister grin still played on my husband's face. His eyes were cold as they regarded me like a spectator in an event. I must have played the role of a mad woman well to get his unwavering attention. I ripped my gown apart, pulled off my shoes and ran on bare feet to our bedroom. He followed me there."

"You will never ever write a single line again in your life." He said.

"Those words pierced through my heart like a dagger. I couldn't take it anymore. It dawned on me that he hated me for being so powerful. He didn't like it. I painfully realised that my husband was one of the characters I wrote against. For many years, he had killed my dreams and I had allowed him to. I thought of the ideas that I would have shared with the world during those long silent years but I had allowed my ink to waste. Now, he had burnt my work threatening to completely destroy me. He didn't predict my next move and neither did I. I reached for the flower vase on my dressing table, and flung it at him. The vase, which was quite heavy, hit him squarely on the forehead. It was only after I saw him fall to the ground that I realised what I had done. He died before we got to the hospital. My daughter disappeared after spitting in my face. I was charged for murder and that is how I found myself here. I told the court the circumstances that led to the incident pleading that it was an accident. My daughter however testified against me saying that I had on several occasions threatened to kill her father. No one believed me. I was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour." "Now you've heard my story. Why are you here?"

"Just like me." Ntone muttered in a grave voice, recounting the incident that had brought her to prison. "Don't ever lose hope. We might be here for a reason. This might just be your breakthrough ground." Ntone chortled at this comment.

"It's life imprisonment. Don't forget that."

"You have started by becoming a voice behind the lofty walls. I wasn't inspired to do that, but even the stench of the prison couldn't drown your aspiration. Don't end up like me, regretting those long silent years. You can be the voice behind the prison walls."

The sound of heavy boots caused the women to look up. They jumped to their feet at the sight of the warder.

"You two have the nerves. You would certainly go without food today." She thundered.

For the first time, Ntone didn't mind the threat. Only the echo of Barbara Johnson's voice reverberated in her head. "You can be the voice behind the prison walls!"

13

Chapter 10

"My friend, I know you are in there." Evelyn rapped on the wooden door. She cast a furtive glance around the compound, hoping to find someone. She noticed the metal padlocks dangling in front of the doors of each house. Asinya's door however had no padlock dangling before it. This only implied that someone was inside the house. She knocked again, and then turned to walk away when she got no response. She descended the staircase with an intense feeling of disappointment. The door suddenly creaked, causing her to turn around. Asinya stood at the doorway.

"I suppose you don't want me to see you anymore." Evelyn said, relieved that the other woman was at home.

"I was asleep." Asinya yawned.

"Aha, the evidence is beginning to show." Evelyn laughed, clasping both hands. At this remark, Asinya gently placed her right palm on her protruding stomach.

"Is your husband at home?" Evelyn asked, peering into the living room.

"What kind of question is that?" Asinya's face contorted into a frown. "What would my husband be doing at home at this time of the day? Won't he attend to his business?"

"Sorry o. You wouldn't even let me inside before you start whining over a harmless question. I only wanted to be sure that no one else was around."

"Come inside." Asinya said without interest. Evelyn was already inside before she finished speaking. She sat on the leather upholstery, taking in every item in the sitting room. "Asinya was indeed lucky." She thought. She had married the wealthiest cocoa farmer in the village. This was of course after repeated trips to Usuku's shrine. Despite the fact that Evelyn paid regular visits to Asinya's house, she never got used to the display of affluence that could be seen in every item that adorned the house. She could feel the envy burn through her. Asinya had been smart enough to tie down a wealthy man. These days, she blamed herself for wasting Usuku's medicine on a mere hunter. She should have thought of a richer suitor. In a flash, a thought that she had managed to suppress for too long reverberated within her. A grin played on her face as the thought progressed to a plan. Asinya must have mistaken the wide grin for one of Evelyn's display of excitement. Evelyn however knew better.

"Have you heard?" Evelyn asked, the moment Asinya sank into the sofa beside her.

"Heard what?"

"Nna Awor."

"Oh." Asinya shrugged, securely knotting the wrapper on her chest. "I hear she is really sick."

"I saw her yesterday. She is as dry as crayfish. Some people say that she is thinking too much about her daughter. Others say she has stepped on juju." Asinya laughed.

"Usuku is great. It's about time the 'witch' and her useless children paid heavily. In her next life, she wouldn't dare hook up with a man who already has a child."

"Of course," Evelyn agreed, struggling to conceal the envy that seemed to rip her into pieces. She wondered if she could survive the agony that threatened to swallow her with each second that passed. She swallowed hard as her eyes fell on the other woman's

protruding stomach. Evelyn had been married for six years, yet she had never been pregnant. The villagers said that the gods were repaying her for all the abominable deeds she had executed. They sang about her in the moonlight dances and, during the day, they gossiped about her in the market place. Those who knew her were afraid to patronise her in the market where she sold foodstuffs. The story of how she used evil powers to marry her cousin's fiancé had spread like a wildfire. Evelyn however did not care about the stigma as long as Ndogho remained under the influence of the charm. He still loved her and never complained about her inability to give him a child even though his family members were asking him to take a second wife.

Asinya's sudden leap to wealth was not the only source of Evelyn's grief. Asinya who had executed more horrendous deeds could still conceive. Why then did the gods choose to be partial in their judgement? These thoughts hunted her as images of her friend's triumph over her painfully danced before her mind's eye.

"I have to go now." She rose to her feet, forcing a smile.

"But you have only just come." Asinya sounded perplexed. Evelyn knew that the concern written all over the other woman's face was only an act. Now that she had found herself in the ocean of luxury and comfort, she wanted no reminder of her past including her, Evelyn.

"Yes," Evelyn scratched her unkempt hair noisily, the smile still plastered on her face. "I just remembered that my husband's friends are visiting this evening. I need to get yams from the market for dinner."

Evelyn could swear she saw a smile flicker across Asinya's face, although it disappeared in a split second.

"Alright, my friend. Thanks for stopping by."

Asinya rose to her feet and walked Evelyn to the door. They said their goodbyes and Evelyn took her leave.

"She didn't even offer me a cup of water." Evelyn muttered inaudibly, as she walked down the road that led to her husband's village. She perceived that Asinya was still looking at her. When she reached the four-corner junction, she turned to the left and continued trekking. She was on her way to Usuku's village. The thought that had formed in her mind was about to manifest.



Two days had elapsed since Evelyn's visit. Asinya was inside the building attached to the main house. It served as the kitchen. She was preparing dinner. A smile played on her face as the sound of familiar footsteps drew closer. She knew it was Tony. She quickly scooped a spoonful of Egusi soup onto her palm, appearing grateful that the soup was ready.

"Is that my husband?" She asked playfully.

"It's an admirer." Tony replied, now inside the kitchen. "Someone is torturing my nose."

Asinya laughed and moved closer to her husband. They held each other in a brief embrace.

"Would you like us to eat here or in the house?" Asinya asked after disentangling herself from his arms. She fetched a rag hanging on a log of wood and used it to lift the soup pot from the stove. After spreading the rag once again on the wood, she placed a kettle filled with water on the stove.

"You're only staring at me. You haven't answered my question."

"Have you forgotten that I'm your admirer? Why should I take my eyes off you?" Tony replied. His eyes were still fixed on his wife.

"Well," Asinya sighed, gently rubbing her palms on the wrapper that was loosely wound around her bulging stomach. "I've never heard of a man who admires a pregnant woman."

"Then I'll be the first and that's because my wife is the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Shut up, and tell your wife where you would love to eat dinner." She chided playfully.

"I'm okay here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes I am. I would love to help in washing the dishes after the meal."

"My husband, you don't have to bother about the dishes. You've had a busy day. I'll do it."

"Don't worry about me. I just want to be with you all the time."

"Thank you, my husband. I'm indeed lucky to have you."

"I am the lucky one." Tony laughed.

They were both silent for a while. Tony found

a stool beside the door and sat on it. Outside, the moonlight dance was on. They could hear the loud voices of children as they sang a familiar chorus. Whenever Asinya heard this chorus, a bizarre feeling seemed to overwhelm her causing her to tremble. The song was about her friend Evelyn.

Have you heard about Evelyn, the ugly maid?

The young men would not look at her

The old men refused to touch her

No one would marry her

Now they say a man has looked at her

She has taken another woman's husband

With nothing but a spoon of rice

Soaked in the 'turn around' spice

But I hear another strange thing

The 'turn around' spice has turned around something else

She who was a maid

Has suddenly turned to a man

For she can never conceive

Several frightening thoughts raced through her mind as the voices grew louder. What would happen to her if the villagers discovered that she also used the 'turn around' spice to turn Tony's heart? She shrugged at the thought. Though a bit relieved by her decision to sever all ties with Evelyn, she couldn't wave away the overwhelming feeling of unrest.

"Are you feeling well?" Tony asked, noticing the sudden change in his wife's features.

"I'm well, my husband." Asinya replied, turning her back to him. "Please get me the green bowl. It's beside you."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when a flash of lightening briefly illuminated the kitchen. A loud thunderbolt followed. The door slammed shut and the utensils fell to the ground. A loud thud caused Tony to scream. His wife had fallen with her face to the ground and a stream of foamy substance oozed from her mouth.

14

Chapter 11

Ntone knew she would never forget that night. An odd feeling had kept her awake all through the night. She had tossed on the bed causing it to creak loudly. The downpour that began at midnight seemed to herald the approach of an inexplicable event. Tired of tossing, she got down from the bed provoking it to creak even more loudly. "Mrs. Barbara was probably fast asleep." She thought after observing that the creaking of the bed had not affected the other woman's sleep.

Ten years behind bars had taught her a lot about thriving in hardship. Despite the thick darkness, she easily located the black sack under Mrs. Barbara's bed. She removed a candle and matchbox from the sack. In a short while, the room was faintly illuminated. She pulled out five hard cover notebooks. The other four were already filled up. She flipped through the pages, smiling at the corrections made by her roommate. She was grateful that her roommate had read through the manuscript. As she concluded the work, her spirit suddenly dampened. Life imprisonment was simply life imprisonment! For ten years, she had expressed her feelings and dreams in writing under the supervision of Mrs. Barbara. Now, the tears simply streamed down her face reminding her of the bleakness of her situation. The ink also flowed onto the tear-stained pages, revealing the agony of an aggrieved woman.

*It's been a very long journey
I've shut my eyes to the fears ahead
Believing in the triumph of womanhood
Trusting that truth will prevail
It's not enough to let the tears flow
It's only just to join in the struggle...*



At the sight of the warder, the rake in her hand suddenly dropped to the ground. The warder who drew closer with menacing steps had her eyes fixed on her. Barbara was heaping rubbish into a large sack and seemed oblivious to the warder's presence. Whenever it rained, the rubbish of the entire state seemed to flow into the prison environs. They always had extra work to do after a downpour. Ntone shot her cellmate a curious glance while the other returned an anxious stare and continued with her duty.

"Ntone Francis," the warder called out. While Ntone waited for her to speak further, she thought she saw a smile on the warder's face. It however faded just as quickly as it came.

"A letter has just arrived from the Supreme Court requesting for your immediate release on grounds of wrongful trial."

Ntone opened her mouth to speak but the words simply got stuck to her throat. Her legs were probably glued to the ground. She couldn't move them. "Was she dead?" She wondered. Her gaze shifted to Barbara Johnson, the woman who had given her hope throughout her stay behind prison bars.

"Ntone Francis, we have to go now." The lightskinned woman announced but was surprised at the still figure of the prisoner. She probably anticipated a completely

different reaction.

Ntone remained glued to the spot. She felt as if she was spinning in circles. She was probably spinning too fast for she suddenly slumped on the bare earth.

After regaining consciousness, she was helped to her feet. Still speechless, she followed the warder to the reception. Her mother and brother were there. Dazed, she walked towards them but suddenly stopped when she saw an entourage leave the office of the Chief Warden. Two men flanked by military escorts approached her. Although she had never seen him in person, she knew he was the Vice-Chancellor of Achiever's university. She didn't think it was real. Her mother and brother now stood before her. Their faces danced before her like Christmas bells on a church roof. More people walked towards them including the Vice-Chancellor. Everyone was speaking, but she couldn't make much of what they were saying. Nna Awor must have cried for a very long time. Her swollen eyeballs contrasted with the broad smile on her face. Ntone felt like an artifact on display for a group of excited school children. When her mother hugged her, almost squeezing the life out of her, it seemed like she had been shredded to a million pieces.

"Idorenyin was murdered by a boy she dated on campus because she left him for someone else." Ntone wasn't sure about who was speaking. There was definitely no way she could see anyone through the thick mist that clouded her vision.

"You are now a free woman."

And that was it. The clanging of metals as a prison security man unlocked the gates didn't have the semblance of a dream. Nonetheless, she didn't just run through the gates. Her back was turned before anyone could stop her. She had to say goodbye to the friends she had made in prison. And there was Barbara Johnson! It was a most heartrending sight as she tearfully hugged the other woman.

"Thank you," Ntone cried, releasing large teardrops on the other woman's clothes. "One day, you will also leave this place and I will pray for that day to come quickly."

Barbara nodded tearfully, as she patted the girl's back.

"Don't forget the manuscripts." She reminded in a sad voice.

Ntone smiled through thick and salty tears as she pulled out the dusty sack from under the bed. After one last embrace, Ntone pulled off the yellow prison wear.

"May God be with you," Barbara prayed, amidst a flood that swept through her face without warning.

"I'll never forget you. Thank you." Ntone replied shakily, and followed the warder out of the cell.

"I told you my child that truth will prevail." Nna Awor said, as Ntone rejoined the group at the gate. Ntone nodded.

"Sister, let me help you with the sack." Nkoro, who was now a lawyer offered, after observing the way his sister desperately clutched the sack to her chest with one hand while the other held her skirt in place.

"The government has granted you a scholarship throughout your university education." Nkoro informed her, his voice dropping to a whisper. Ntone wondered at the change in her younger brother's features. He was a grown man. She smiled at his burly appearance. How she had missed out on a vital part of his life! Her mother on the other hand had aged and there was no evidence of black hair ever growing on her head. In spite of the fact that she had greyed completely, her agility was quite surprising.

"Why are we still here? What are we waiting for?" Ntone asked anxiously, as she handed the sack to Nkoro.

They were still at the gate and she noticed that the Vice-Chancellor was having a serious conversation with a group of people.

"I think we are waiting for the press."

"The press?" she asked, almost shouting. "I don't want any press interviews right now, especially with the way I look."

"I don't think the situation at hand is still about you, my dear sister. The university handed you over to the police without proper investigation and the court wrongfully convicted you of murder."

"What about the police?"

"Don't worry. You'll see." Nkoro assured. "Now, what do you have in this sack? It's quite heavy."

"I wrote it in prison. Do you think it can be published?"

Ntone watched Nna Awor and her brother exchange surprised glances. They both had tearstains on their cheeks. It took a while before Nkoro finally found his voice.

"I studied law in the university just to prove your innocence. There's nothing I would not do for you."

As hope shone before her, the smile that had been concealed for too long by the agony of her predicament suddenly broke free.

"They are my dreams from prison."

The mother smiled amidst tears, while the brother gently squeezed her shoulder.

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Chapter 12

"Please sir, all I want is for you to go through the book."

Ntone studied the man behind the desk with keen interest. He wasn't even looking at her. He was obviously more concerned about the stack of papers on his desk than the four hundred and ninety seven paged book in her hand.

"Young lady, the university uses books written by renowned authors and we've already made our choice. There's nothing I can do for you."

The tears burned in her eyes. Although Nkoro had told her not to allow the cold treatments get her depressed, she wondered if that was even possible. For months, she had visited several agencies, educational centres, schools and universities seeking for a platform on which the book could be accepted and marketed. To her dismay, no one would cast more than a perfunctory glance at the front cover.

"Thank you, sir." She said, rising to her feet. The English coordinator of Achiever's university still had his eyes on the stack of papers when she walked out of the office.

She arrived at Nkoro's house about an hour later. Nna Awor was outside spreading clothes.

"Mama, I was going to wash them. You didn't have to wash."

Nna Awor smiled, the creases on her forehead deepening.

"It's okay my daughter." she replied. "I don't like being idle."

"How did it go?"

"It's the same story." Ntone replied, throwing her hands in the air.

"Is Nkoro back from work?" she asked in an attempt to steer the conversation away from her 'Dreams from Prison.'

"No." Nna Awor replied. "I hope you dropped copies of the book with them. It doesn't matter whether or not they want to look at it now. They might want to look at it later."

"I did, but some people would not even look at me, not to mention the book. How do I drop the book in such places?"

"Don't worry about those who refuse to give you their attention. It's merely because they can't stand the truth."

Ntone peered curiously at her mother as she poured the dirty water away.

"What truth?"

"You intimidate them, my daughter."

Ntone chortled as she collected the bucket from her mother.

"Thank you, mama." She said, briefly revelling in the image that her mind's eye had created. She saw herself towering above those government officials who had refused to give her their attention. She beamed gleefully as she saw them quake before her.

"Let's go inside my star. You must be hungry."

"Yes mama." Ntone replied, and followed Nna Awor inside the Duplex. Nkoro had recently completed the building in Calabar.

"We have a lot of work to do. Your convocation is in two weeks."

"Yes mama. I know." Ntone said, quickly wiping off a tear streak that had rolled down without warning. The forthcoming event brought back painful memories of the past, reminding her of ten wasted years. She bitterly thought of what progress she would have made.

Inside the sitting room, the aroma of tomato stew filtered in from the kitchen. Although she felt exhausted from the long hours of trekking, she didn't think she could eat anything. Her head was throbbing and a mixed stream of emotions seemed to wash through her. She found her way into her bedroom and sprawled herself on the bed.

"Ntone, your food is ready." Nna Awor called out from the kitchen. "I hope you are not asleep."

"No mama, I'll be right there in a moment." Ntone said with closed eyes. She needed to speak with someone. She rose from the bed, picked up her purse, and left the bedroom. Nna Awor was still in the kitchen.

"Mama, I need to see Mrs. Johnson." Ntone announced, from the doorway.

"But you have only just arrived and you haven't touched your meal." Nna Awor grimaced.

"I know, mama." Ntone replied, feeling sorry that Nna Awor was unhappy. She seemed to have more wrinkles on her face whenever she was unhappy.

"I hope you're alright."

"I'm not mama, but I'll be." She smiled, and dashed out of the house before Nna Awor could voice another word of protest.

The sun was gradually receding when she alighted from the bus. She crossed over to the other side of the road where the prison was situated. She could feel the nausea return with each step she took towards the lofty prison walls. In spite of the countless visits she paid Barbara after her release, she never got used to the feeling.

She casually exchanged pleasantries with the prison security men and walked briskly towards the entrance. Her nostrils always picked the stench of prison garbage even when she was quite a distance away. Her eyes took in the dirty black rooftop that served as a covering to the poorly ventilated building in one long disgusted stare. She felt a knot tie up in her stomach, and spat on the sandy earth.

"Ntone," Her heart leaped at the sight of Jennifer, the boisterous seamstress. They had been in prison together. Jennifer was thrown in gaol after she attacked her husband's mistress with a kitchen knife.

"Good evening ma," Ntone greeted. She was surprised to see Jennifer in a pair of jean trousers and a blue T-shirt. Her jail term was probably over.

"Good evening my dear. How are you?"

"I'm fine ma. I had no idea that you were out."

"Oh." Jennifer laughed, placing her left hand on Ntone's shoulder. "I was given seven years. I regained my freedom a week ago."

"I'm really happy for you. What brings you here?"

"I came to see the girls. You know they've been like sisters to me."

"That's true." Ntone nodded.

"What about you?"

"I'm here to see Mrs. Johnson." Ntone replied, suddenly feeling alive. The mere mention of Barbara Johnson's name always evoked that feeling within her. Barbara Johnson had always found a way to dispel her fears. She however didn't miss the abrupt transformation on Jennifer's face.

"I guess you haven't heard." Jennifer's voice dropped to a whisper.

"Heard what?" Ntone asked, her mind racing in different directions.

"Barbara died in her sleep two days before my release. They said she died of heart failure."

It must have been coincidental. Without warning, the skies unleashed a flood on the earth. Ntone would not listen to Jennifer's pleas to get shelter from the rain. Even the guards couldn't compel her to shield herself from the piercing rain lashes. Her eyes simultaneously joined the sky in releasing water. The skies must have also felt her pain for they cried even more, as they released a torrent that seemed to last for eternity.

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Chapter 13

The vague look was still on Ntone's face when Nkoro poked a smiling face through the doorway. She didn't remove her gaze from the book lying on her dressing table when he walked inside the room. He had both hands buried inside the pockets of his bell-bottom pants.

"Sister, I'm not happy with you. Your convocation ceremony is today and we really hoped to celebrate with you. But here you are, letting depression steal your happiness."

"What's there to celebrate about? Should I celebrate the fact that I graduated from the university at the age of thirty three?"

"I understand how you feel," the young lawyer replied. He sat beside her, following the direction of her eyes. "But would it have been better if you had remained in jail?"

There was no response from Ntone. She had braided her hair for the convocation ceremony at her mother's insistence. The braids now hung loose like curtains draping across her face.

"Barbara died." She said, trembling visibly.

"I know that, but I don't think Barbara's dream for you was to be despondent. Neither was it for you to stare idly at your 'Dreams from Prison.'"

He offered her his hand and rose to his feet.

"I come bearing gifts."

"What gifts?" She asked casually, being certain that this was one of his quirks.

"You may want to tie your braids into a knot. I want to see your face."

"Are you kidding?" Ntone glared, finally removing her gaze from the book. "What has that got to do with what you have to say?"

"You will know very soon."

She reluctantly held the braids into a knot with a red ribbon. Nkoro couldn't suppress a chuckle at the perplexed look on his sister's face.

"A couple of Americans just flew into the country."

According to them, someone probably read your book and sent it to them online. As I speak to you, they are in our living room with a very tempting offer. They want to do a movie here in Nigeria based on your story. They also said your book has been nominated for several awards and I did hear them clearly when they said your book has been nominated for this year's Goi Peace Foundation and UNESCO award."

"I think you've been bamboozled." Ntone gave a dismal laugh.

"I thought so too, but after a quick internet search, I discovered that Michael Pandor and Larry Ronald, members of the governing board of the Goi peace foundation and UNESCO awards are presently seated in our living room."

She must have run faster than a deer. The sight she met at the living room left her in unconcealed shock. Her eyes met with a crew of journalists, cameramen and authors. The hours that followed ushered in an unprecedented transition into a different phase of her life as she answered question after question. The dour expression that had debased her appearance for a very long time was erased completely when the last question was thrown to her.

"What inspired the book 'A Prisoner's Dream.?' "I've been a prisoner for too long. I'm not only referring to the physical structures that held me in captivity for ten years. It's the prison that society made me believe was womanhood. I'm tired of the limitations and oppression that we have been forced to believe are an integral part of womanhood. I'm just one out of the many drowning women dreaming of a way out. 'A Prisoner's Dream' is simply me echoing my fears and dreams to the world."

"Thank you, Miss Ntone Francis." The young American reporter acknowledged, extending her hand for a handshake.

For a brief moment, Ntone let her eyes dart across the room. Tears flooded her eyes as they met with her mother's. Nna Awor and Anjor were all smiles as they watched the proceedings from the dining room where they were both seated. This time, the tears in Ntone's eyes weren't the ones that she was accustomed to. They were tears of inexplicable joy; an entirely new feeling.

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Chapter 14

"And now, the recipient for this year's Goi peace foundation and UNESCO award in Literature is Miss Ntone Francis." The Master of Ceremony's voice boomed over the microphone.

Ntone walked up the aisle of the King Stone theatre in Washington D.C amidst a standing ovation from an audience of over three thousand people. People from every race, tribe, and culture were represented and as the shouts grew louder, she prayed inwardly that she wouldn't miss a step. The flicker of coloured bulbs momentarily blinded her but she felt so good that going blind for a few seconds seemed okay.

"Thank you..." she began, after taking over the microphone. Her eyes gleamed with every word of thanks to her mother, Nkoro, the late Barbara Johnson and her sponsors. "Finally, to all the women in this struggle, I assure you that we will rise. This is indeed my dream."

After receiving the best writer's award and the peace award, she descended the podium. The auditorium boomed loudly with an excerpt from her novel;

It's been a very long journey

I've shut my eyes to the fears ahead

Believing in the triumph of womanhood

Trusting that truth will prevail

It's not enough to let the tears flow

It's only just to join in the struggle...

She rejoined her mother and brother at the front row knowing that the struggle had only just begun. Her voice would ring across the ends of the earth. She told herself.

"I told you that you had no choice but to be a great woman." Nna Awor said.

Their eyes met and they smiled knowingly at each other. The same thoughts occupied their minds. The absence of a father, schemings of her late step-sister, gigantic prison walls and prejudice of society could not stop her simply because she had cared to dream.

THE END

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APPENDIX

Oyinbo- Nigerian way of referring to people that are not of

African descent

Okada - Nigerian way of referring to a motorcycle

WASSCE—West African Senior School Certificate

Examination

JAMB—Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board

ID- Identity card

Juju- A spiritual belief that makes use of spells, talisman, amulets and incorporates the use of magical powers.

UNESCO—United Nations Educational, Scientific and

Cultural Organization

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Ntone grows up in a village where her dreams and aspirations appear as delusions to many. Her desire to rise above the prejudice of the society she finds herself meets with several challenges. Two choices dangle before her even as series of horrifying events threaten to crush her to pieces. She can either remain glued to her dreams through an unwavering determination, or drown in the filth of oppression.

Agnes Anuka lectures in the Department of Petroleum Engineering, University of Calabar.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Agnes Anuka, the author of

The Wings of Time, Beyond our Tears, Waiting for Dawn and The Bet with Fate is a native of









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