

THE LEGACY

A novel by Pelè Raymond

Cover Design by Pelè Raymond

For my parents, Frank Ugboajah and Sabina Ofoegbu

For my daughter, Ijeoma

For me

“A man cannot order his life and thoughts as though he were the historian of his own generation. For in his own time, a man is just an actor. He sees events take place before his very eyes, and in some way or the other, he participates in them. Only decades after will it be possible for him, in tranquility, to recollect his contributions, and the events that generated them.”

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PART ONE

An End to Innocence

ONE

*“Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, know that something is
after its life.”*

I Am a Man

The 500 bar was packed. This was a big night in Old Lake, a small farm town in rural Minnesota. It was Saturday, New Band Night, and you never knew who would be performing. A handwritten sign above the stage simply read: “Tonight’s NEW band: *Danshiki*”. Below the sign was the regular house band, busy playing a popular “Somebody-did-me-wrong” song, and most people near the stage were singing along and dancing in step.

He sat uneasily in a dark booth against the back wall, keeping to himself and staring intently at the picture of Samuel Adams on his beer

bottle. He took a sip from a frosted glass, and enjoyed its smooth, familiar taste, all the while keeping his eyes trained on the bottle. The smell of sweaty bodies and alcohol filled his nostrils even as far away as he had chosen to sit from the multitude of swinging dancers. Mentally, he blocked out the people around him. He felt a slight swell of pride in this singular achievement, continuing to keep his eyes trained on that which was clearly his own business, concentrating faithfully on the bottle as though he were listening to an old friend above the din of the crowded bar.

"Hi, there," A girl sat down across from him, shattering his self-made illusion of solitude.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Abe shifted uneasily, but nodded.

"My girlfriends and I want to know if you're Indian, Black, Mexican, or what." He raised his glass and took another slow, thoughtful sip of his beer, almost in lieu of a response. That old question again. Abe had always felt politically marginalized, growing up as a light-skinned African American in the Midwestern United States.

"My mother is a white American," He muttered, knowing that a truthful response would at least get her to leave quickly.

"And my father is black, from somewhere in Africa." Satisfied, the girl departed, back to the crowd from whence she came.

Abe returned to concentrating on his beer. However, he could not help but notice the shocking bright yellow and green colored robe worn by a man who made his entrance through the side door behind him. The man shuffled noisily into the bar with a brisk pace. He paused in the doorway and proudly adjusted the long, flowing arms of his attire by folding each one carefully in turn over his shoulders. The man appeared to be of African descent, and was wearing a *danshiki*, the popular West African form of clothing, which Abe knew quite well from his own research. Abe had admired the attire so much that he owned one himself. In fact, he had adopted it as the marketing symbol and moniker for his R&B/Reggae band.

Abe marveled at the bravery of this man, probably one of the only African people in this small town, as he proudly arranged and rearranged his flowing, over-sized garment. Abe smiled to himself. If the gentleman's clothing was any indication, then there was hope after all, and at least one person in this remote bar might actually appreciate Abe's

band. It was the one consolation he had as he sat alone, self-consciously, first member of the *Dansbiki* band to arrive for their gig at the Old Lake 500.

He finally looked up, relieved, when a band mate slid in beside him, a full twenty minutes late. Shawn was a light-skinned, handsome African American with a muscular build that made him popular with the ladies. He was the bass player in the band, and the kind of guy who got along swell with everyone.

“Are we still going on next?” Shawn asked.

“Yeah, but I haven’t seen Joey.” Abe replied. “You guys are always on C.P.T.”

Shawn’s squinted eyes betrayed his confusion.

“Colored People’s Time,” Abe said, clarifying himself so as not to sound as if he was referring to a new acronym for a drug. Like Abe, Shawn had done his fair share of marijuana and ecstasy, but Joey, the band’s drummer and roadie, was the only one in the group that had never tried any illegal substances. Not even marijuana.

“I bet this crowd boos us off the stage once they realize we’re not going to play any Hilly-Billy stuff.”

“Yeah,” Abe said matter-of-factly, looking around in the crowded bar. “I won’t be surprised if they never call us back.”

Abe got up to survey the joint. He made his way cautiously through the smoke-filled atmosphere, walking past the leather-wearing bikers and their girls, crouched together in the foggy, dark hiding places at the back of the bar. He walked toward the front, past the rows of seated beer drinkers in the middle and along the sides of the crowded dance space towards the stage.

He felt the eyes that were following him but he did not return their stares. He was cautious because he knew this was a country music bar located far away from the safety and diversity of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. From the look on some of the staring faces, he concluded that they might never have seen a black person in their town before. Joey always booked the craziest gigs, in the craziest places, but

this time, the money was good, and Abe knew they'd be done and gone in only a few hours.

"Abe, can you grab this amp, man?" Joey motioned to him from behind the stage. He was awkwardly carrying an amplifier with one hand and holding the side entrance door with the other.

Joey was a burly young man with a loveable smile and a constant day-old beard. His kid brother Jordan had played keyboards for the band until just last month when he was killed in a drive-by shooting in the 'hood of North Minneapolis. Joey had never shown his grief, not even a tear. He continued to greet the world with his characteristic smile, always seeing the bright side of things, always a catalyst for positive thinking.

"Man, you're always late!" Abe spat out as he started to help Joey unpack the musical equipment.

"My girl was tripping, man." Joey said, still smiling, sweat pouring down his ebony dark face as he unraveled the amplifier and mixer. Excuses came as naturally to him as breathing. And that quirky smile was always there to make his excuses seem even less believable.

"She's *always* tripping," Abe retorted.

"And then I got stopped along the way for a D.W.B."

"But you always get stopped, man," Abe retorted, not buying today's version of his excuses. "Maybe you should give yourself an extra hour to get places 'cos you're always going to be *Driving While Black*."

"*Hey!* Lighten up, man, we can still set up real quick and get started on time."

"Pass me my guitar." Abe snorted impatiently. Shawn joined them as they connected their equipment behind the stage.

The bar's resident soundman was efficient, but not very friendly. Indifferently, he took their wires, and plugged them into his little Peavey mixing board backstage. He acted as if he were just doing his job, the boys simply being part of the tangle of wires and furniture around his back stage setup.

Abe's band had about five more minutes to get unpacked, set up, and start playing their set. There was not much time for chitchat.

Once the gear was connected, Joey and Shawn began their sound check. Abe hurried out of the backstage area. He avoided any direct eye contact with people as he slid by the dancing crowd. He still felt the gaze of strangers uncomfortably over his shoulder, burning into him like a

small fire. He didn't like this place. He would have to really give it to Joey this time. No more impromptu gigs in unfamiliar places.

He made his way carefully toward the back of the bar to get his bag with the guitar pick, tuner, and song lists. As if for the first time, he felt just how hot it was in the club. The atmosphere was stuffy, smoky, and humid.

The house band was finally ending their last song with an overdrawn roll. They sounded musical and tight, but Abe was not a big country music fan. However, he appreciated the music at an intellectual level. He knew his music history, and he was aware that despite the stereotypes, some of his favorite R&B groups from the 1980s, such as Lionel Richie and the Commodores, played straight-up country songs. In fact, about seven years ago, in 1993, Whitney Houston had turned Dolly Parton's country song "I will always love you" into a national pop anthem. Country music was actually quite hip if you ever gave it a chance.

"Hey *Nigger!*" came the sharp call from the human wall of biker jackets to his left. Abe ignored the slur and continued to make his way toward the back of the bar. This was not a big deal. He'd been called that before. Even though he was relatively light-skinned, it was obvious that he was mulatto, of mixed race, and therefore unambiguously regarded as black. Being called the 'N' word was commonplace for him. This was nothing to get too excited about.

He heard the call again. "I said *Nigger*, *Nigger!*"

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a leg reach out and obstruct his path, but he was too late to sidestep it. Abe found himself crashing down onto the wet, beer-stained floor. He got up quickly, brushed himself off, looked briefly into the eyes of each of the drunken bikers, and without a word, pushed his way forward as they laughed out loud, chanting obscenities at him.

He made a mental note of his assailant. The one that was closest to him, who had been laughing the loudest. He was a tall, thin, white guy with a vicious scar above his left eyebrow. His face conjured up a single word in Abe's mind. *Scarface*.

Abe didn't say a word. He was smart enough to know when to keep quiet and just keep moving. Maybe he could respond to this kind of thing in downtown Minneapolis, in the relative predictability of the city, but he

wasn't going to try to be a hero way out here in some boondocks town he had never heard of. He picked up his bag and made his way back to the stage where Shawn and Joey were now all set up, careful this time, to walk along the other side of the bar.

"What happened, man?" Shawn asked, noticing the beer stains on Abe's shirt. Abe didn't offer an answer, but the look in his face betrayed his rage. A stubborn, quiet determination had kicked in. He was up to something. Something vengeful.

Once their instruments were in tune, Abe called out a mental count and started strumming his guitar slowly in the key of C. Shawn and Joey both looked at each other with confused expressions, knowing he hadn't followed the song list. He was playing one of his own politically inspired compositions, and it wasn't on tonight's agenda. Not exactly a good idea out here in Old Lake, Minnesota. But they played along anyway.

*I know a man of South Africa,
For many years he was locked away,
Without a hope, without a prayer,
He said, "My, oh my, why do you punish me?"
He said, "Why, oh why, why do you silence me?"
"What have we so wrong, as a people done?"*

The crowd became dead quiet. The lights were dimmed and focused sharply in a circle on the stage around Abe's three-man band. When the music paused for a half-beat in anticipation of the chorus, you could have heard the swish of beer in a person's throat as the people gawked at the trio with wonder and admiration. Joey and Shawn couldn't believe Abe had led with that particular song, but it certainly seemed to be working. At this rate, maybe they'd get asked to return, and they might even come back once in a while, regardless of how remote the town was.

Four college-age girls dressed in skimpy clothes made their way up toward the stage as the band played the chorus. One of them was wearing a slightly see-through dress, tantalizingly exposing her milky white skin. They formed a little line in front of the stage, and started dancing with each other.

*He said, "I am a man,"
"I breathe and bleed, just like you,"
"I am a man,"
Singing my redemption song.*

The girls started to sway along with Joey's hypnotic drumbeat as it locked tightly with Shawn's thumping five-string bass. They were smiling at the guys in the band. The crowd instinctively made a small circle around the girls as they danced slowly with each other. These girls must have liked something about the band or the song, because they were really getting involved with the groove.

By now, the whole bar was focusing on this unknown band as they sang what was obviously some sort of political, civil rights song. Without a doubt, this was a strange occurrence in Old Lake, Minnesota, a town where over 99% of the population was white.

Everyone watched and listened as Abe sang his song of pain, hope, and redemption. A documentary on the 1960's era Civil Rights Movement of America had inspired him to write it. As police dogs and water hoses persecuted people during the riots, a lone man held a picket sign that said it all. His sign appositely screamed; 'I am a man!' It was his way of asking why people treat each other so brutally when they are all the same...despite the color of their skin.

Abe sang this song tonight because he felt the injustice more than ever. Weaving through the lyrics with his Stevie Wonder gospel voice, while strumming his guitar like Bob Marley, Abe was in his element. Anyone watching could see that nothing paralleled this passionate singer's devotion to his music. This music had no color, no boundaries. It spoke to the soul. With every stroke of his guitar and every word of his lyrics, Abe appeared as though he was slowly but surely exorcising his demons. A lone tear fell from his face, landing on the wooden fret of his acoustic Fender guitar. Obviously, a conduit had opened tonight by which he could speak his deepest thoughts.

So he just kept on singing.

He didn't really care about the consequences tonight, way out here in Old Lake. He just wanted to get this feeling of pain off his chest. He did not reject the vengeful pleasure that swept through him, knowing the crowd loved the song, and that neither Scarface nor his cronies could do

a damn thing about it. It felt good to get back at those who had just mocked him as he belted out the bridge:

*Can someone tell me how?
How could you look at another-man?
And not see your brother-man?
And not see that we all are one?*

Abe ended the song gracefully with a sustained falsetto wail that merged with a final home chord strummed in the key of C. Once concluded, there was a breathtaking silence in the entire bar. This band was good. Even the soundman was stunned. But no one moved. No one said a word. Suddenly, someone in the crowd began to clap slowly, breaking the awkward silence. It was the man in the brightly colored *danshiki*. He continued clapping by himself, increasing in speed until he worked himself into a solitary frenzy. Still, no one joined him. In complete defiance, he began to shout, as if possessed, in a strange, African Broken-English accent. Seeing that the crowd was still non-responsive, he threw himself suddenly into the air, landing on his back with a sickening thud. Finally, people broke out into a sporadic chorus of laughter at the antics of this funny, skinny-headed stranger wearing what seemed like a brightly colored bed sheet.

“My name is Ezra,” He wailed in a high pitched voice, “My people say dat de lizzard which jumped from a high *iroko* tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no-one else did!”

He stood up, and like a true cheerleader, he whipped his flowing *danshiki* into shape and made for the stage. Still clapping, he determinedly goaded the pokerfaced crowd with a bombardment of African proverbs, urging them to give in and acknowledge the beauty they had just been provided.

“Make *una* clap for dis band, I beg!”

Slowly, looking around, the girls that had been dancing near the front stage obeyed, and began to clap. Others followed. Soon almost everyone had joined in, clapping and laughing as if now by full permission. This was obviously one of the better bands they had ever seen on New Band Night. And the added African distraction was hilarious for extra measure. Newly inspired, the girl in the see-through dress jumped on stage and threw herself at Abe, kissing him profusely. The crowd clapped even

louder as she embraced him. Abe kissed her back, and found himself melting into the moment, losing himself in her grasp, forgetting the cheering crowd. For a fleeting moment, Abe felt like a hometown hero, thanks in no small part to the girl, and the man with bed sheet clothing.

At the back of the club, Scarface and his gang were not clapping. They were not enjoying the big fuss over this new band. They especially didn't appreciate all the affection the girl was showering on the lead singer.

And to make matters worse, this black guy actually had the nerve to kiss the girl back!

Scarface didn't like that. Enough was enough. *They might be good at their music, but they better leave our girls alone.* He had a huge scowl on his face as he took a long, last swig of his alcohol. His friends didn't look much better either. Alcohol and hatred are not a very good mix. They made their way menacingly toward the front of the stage. The crowd was now in full standing ovation. Scarface shoved people aside and marched resolutely toward the stage.

Shawn and Joey smiled nervously, relieved. Abe bowed his head in gratitude to the cheering crowd. The college girl continued to hang on to him, showering him with kisses and basking in the limelight of his glory.

That's when they heard the gunshots!

Joey slumped over his drums immediately. Shawn shouted something and ducked behind the stage amplifier to his left. The girl in the see-through dress screamed and fell to the stage floor. Somebody was shooting in the bar.

Scarface!

Everyone scattered! Some people made straight for the side exit while others stampeded toward the front of the bar. There was chaos everywhere! Shawn was safely out of sight behind the stage amplifier. Abe managed to duck into a janitor's closet near the stage and slammed the door shut behind him. He could still hear Scarface and his cronies screaming racist obscenities and firing shots in the bar. The sound of flying chairs and breaking glasses filled the air as people frantically made

their exit. By now the bar appeared to be empty except for Scarface, his cronies, and two bodies on the stage.

“Nigger, I know you’re in there!” He could hear Scarface shouting with all the menace of a raging bull; and the raging bull was coming closer.

“I’m a-comin’ to git you boy!” The footsteps were now closer than ever. Abe’s heart pounded so fiercely, it hurt. He didn’t want to go out like this. He scratched around in the dark closet like a hunted animal, bumping into buckets and brooms, hoping for a back door exit. None! There was no way out! No way except through the closet door, and Scarface’s heavy breathing was just outside it. Any second he would probably shoot through the door and it would be all over.

Abe wasn’t going to let that happen. He would rather die fighting. In desperation, he lunged straight at the door and broke it wide open! All of his six feet and a hundred and ninety pounds slammed straight into Scarface. Scarface was knocked clear off his feet! His gun flew several feet from his clutch. Abe wrestled with Scarface briefly as his drunken buddies approached, enjoying the scene, guns ready to shoot once they could get a clear shot at him.

Then came the sirens! The front entrance door crashed open, and the Old Lake Police Unit rushed in, shouting for everyone to raise their hands and drop all weapons.

Thank God! Someone must have called the police. Abe gladly pulled himself off of Scarface, and held his hands high in the air. He had been in tough situations before, but this one was a little too close for comfort.

The sergeants handcuffed Abe and Scarface first, and then his gang, and shoved everyone against the walls. For the first time, Abe had a chance to look around. The lights had been knocked out, so he could only see by the torches brought in by the policemen and the medics. Chairs, blood, and broken glasses were everywhere. The medics had rushed in and began their job of sizing up the carnage. Abe noticed that the man in the flowing *danshiki* had also been handcuffed just outside the open doorway, and he was protesting loudly in his strange form of broken English.

He looked up at the stage to see Shawn slowly picking himself up from behind the amplifier. With arms raised, he gratefully walked toward the officers.

Shawn had been lucky. When Abe ran into the closet, Scarface and his gang had shifted their attention away from the stage, forgetting him. Joey was still slumped over his drums, but thankfully, he was moaning and moving slightly. He must have been hit pretty badly. The medics slowly lifted him onto a stretcher and rolled him outside. The remaining body of a young girl on the stage was motionless. One by one, the police marched Abe, Shawn, Scarface, and the man with the *danshiki* into the cool night air, and into waiting vehicles, one person per car.

The back seat of the Old Lake police car reeked of sweat, alcohol, and fresh vomit. The last occupant must have had a rough time. Abe could feel the swollen lump on the back of his head, but the restraining handcuffs stopped him from touching his wounds.

It was a miracle that they survived, assuming Joey was going to be all right. Abe could still taste the blood that ran from his forehead into his mouth. His back hurt terribly and he couldn't see very well out of his left eye. His vision was blurred, and he could hardly focus in the darkness of the night, but he needed to see what was happening around him. Slowly, looking out the window to his right, he made out Scarface, Shawn, and the man in the bright *danshiki* in separate police cars. Looking out of the left window, he noticed Joey being hauled into an ambulance on a stretcher. He could see that Joey was now fully conscious, but still appeared to be badly shaken up.

As the police car pulled out of the parking lot, Abe saw the medics hauling out the last stretcher from the Old Lake 500. It carried a zipped-up body bag. The girl in the see-through dress had died instantly.

TWO

*“A man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot know where
he dried his body.”*

Failure

“Failure is a habit”. The words of his one-time law school lecturer kept echoing in his head, as the police car made its way slowly through the streets of Old Lake. His lecturer at law school had talked to him about failure being a habit time and time again. “Just like success,” he would say.

Abe knew at some level that the lecturer was right. If you make a mistake once or twice, by all means, you should pick yourself up and learn from it. But when you start forming a pattern of mistakes over and

over again, it degenerates from an opportunity for growth to a dangerous progression towards failure in life. The words never left him.

He feared that his decisions would keep drawing him into failure, like a dumb moth attracted to a flame. He knew his decision to play that song tonight had been totally unnecessary. It may have gotten him a sense of vengeful satisfaction, but it also resulted in someone's death, not to mention his current predicament, handcuffed and headed for a jail cell. He began to feel a creeping sense of guilt for the death of that innocent girl. This had turned out to be a tragic, unforgivable failure.

As the police car rumbled on, Abe's mind wandered back to the day he quit law school.

"I just don't believe in the system anymore," he said, looking squarely at Mr. Rafferty.

"But you have barely given it a chance," said Rafferty. "C'mon, you're a smart kid; a guitar will not buy you much in corporate America." Rafferty was the only African American lecturer in the law school, and had always looked out for Abe.

"But I don't stand much of a chance anyway, with my complexion."

"Blaming the 'white man' again?"

"Well, he's certainly not looking out for me. He's a capitalist, making and keeping the money for himself and his people."

"Why must you carry your blackness around you like some righteous, self-pitying badge?"

"Because for four hundred years--"

"I don't want to hear that rhetoric anymore; we've talked about this before." Rafferty looked away, sincerely concerned about Abe.

"What about individual responsibility?" Rafferty continued, whispering, his eyes moist with pain and concern. "You have so much talent. What about your future?"

"Well, I certainly stand a much better chance if I can go out there and get a record deal." Abe said, looking away with a determined scowl. "Just look at the role models we have to look up to. Not too many of them have been President yet, eh?"

"Abe, be patient. You could be the next Johnny Cochran, or Colin Powell, or--"

“Look, with all due respect, Sir, I’m not your son!” Abe cut him off sharply and walked away. Patience was not one of his virtues. “I’ve made my decision, and I’m going to go for it!”

That was two years ago. Ever since then, Abe had lived in the slums of the west bank just outside the University, playing music with Joey and Shawn at all the local Reggae and R&B bars. No job, no home, just music. No record deals in sight either.

Abe could hear the gentle rumble of the Ford V-8 engine as the police car wove through traffic, sirens blaring occasionally. They certainly built these police vehicles with good shock absorbers. The ride was so smooth and so quiet that he couldn’t feel any bumps along the way. Certainly not like the beat-up twelve-year-old heap of a car he bought for himself for a hundred bucks last year.

Imagine having the luxury ride of your life as a prisoner in the back seat of a police car. The relatively quiet ride gave him a chance to think, and it was only interrupted by the police two-way radio crackling occasionally as the 911 calls were efficiently dispatched, answered, and delegated.

The police car finally turned into the station. Abe looked through the menacing front doors of the big brick building, got a sinking feeling in his stomach, and knew he didn’t want to be here. *What on earth would they cook up just to put him away?* After all, it would just be another negative little blurb on the evening news:

“Three black men were involved in a bar fight in Old Lake, possibly responsible for the death of an innocent girl.”

A policeman gently opened the back door and politely offered to help Abe out of the car. He rejected the help. *I am a man; don’t patronize me. I’ll get out myself, with dignity.* Abe could be a stubborn fellow at times, but he particularly hated the police and the entire legal system. He felt it was all inherently unfair, and was designed to put away the poor and the wretched. That’s why he got into law school in the first place. He wanted to make a difference.

Once inside the police station, he could see Shawn across the waiting room. At the far left side of the room, in handcuffs, were Scarface, and the man with the African *danshiki*. The policeman allowed Abe to walk over and sit with his friend. Shawn was still visibly in shock. Abe whispered to him.

"I wonder why they arrested that guy with the *danshiki*?"

"Yeah, me too," Shawn said. "I didn't see him fighting with anyone."

"Did you hear anything about Joey?"

"I overheard them say he's lucky and that he's going to be alright. He's suffering from shock more than anything else."

Shawn had been lucky as well. Not even a bruise, or a cut on his handsome, chiseled face.

"I can't believe they shot at us."

"Better believe it," said Abe, carefully. "I can't get over feeling I probably caused it all."

"Don't blame yourself, dude; that guy was a fool." Shawn always liked to see the practical side of things. "Remember your song, the one about racists, bigots and fools?"

"Yeah." Abe remembered all too well. He should have known better. This was a clear case of not practicing what he preached.

"How did it go again?"

"You don't expect me to just start belting it out here do you?"

"*Naw*, man, I mean, what did it really mean?" Shawn never claimed to be a songwriter, and he never really paid much attention to lyrics. Give him a bass guitar, and tell him the key of the song, and you're fine. But ask him to tell you what a song said, and you might as well order a pizza while you wait for an answer.

"The racist, the bigot, and the fool," Abe began. This was one of the first political songs he had ever written, and he was proud of it.

"The racist' is the guy with the anger as well as the institutional power to dominate others. The extreme ones among them can turn out like Hitler, the archangel of hatred towards others, but most of them keep their feelings quiet, waiting in reserve to be used only when absolutely necessary."

Shawn was listening with a blank expression on his face, like a man deep in some obscure, therapeutic thought. It was hard to tell if he understood some of those big words. Abe was fond of slipping into his

intellectual mode, sounding like a professor, and proud of his prosaic delivery of the English language.

"They're scattered and hidden throughout society," Abe continued, "And are not limited to any one race or color. They come in all shades; black people, white people, yellow, red, or any color you could invent, and they conceal their racism intelligently. They mask it with a civilized worldview of things, making it difficult to tell when you meet one. Their main characteristic is that they are constantly aware of skin color as a differentiator of people, and are overwhelmed by racial consciousness"

"So does that classify *you* as a racist, since you keep thinking about racism and writing all those songs?" Shawn blurted out, with raised eyebrows. He had a way of sounding innocent even though he was sending out a poison arrow.

"You've got to be kidding, man." Abe looked at him defensively, knowing he had a point. Shawn wasn't Einstein, but he knew how to corner you. "You have to have institutional power to be a racist, and *that*, I certainly don't have!"

"But you hate 'the white man', don't you?"

"No, *absolutely not!* My mother was white, dude," Abe argued. "I just don't know why some of these people hate *me* so much, when all I'm trying to do is stay alive!"

"Ok, sorry for the interruption."

"Then there is the bigot," Abe continued, unruffled. "He airs his views out loud, showing the whole world his unadulterated ignorance. Not being altogether too intelligent, he's just loud about his hatred." Abe shifted nervously, and looked around the police station, as the mostly white police force went about their business as usual.

"Funny enough," He continued, "if the bigot lived next door, and you were really nice to him, he could get to like you, and he could switch from his bigot mode rather easily and become your greatest pal. He forgets easily, and there is always a thin line for him between love and bigotry."

"And the fool?" Shawn nudged him on."

"Yes. Then there is the fool, like that guy in the bar. Driven by a pure hate that is inexplicable and dumb. They know they don't like the other guy from a different race, but ask them why, and *they can't tell you!* Ask him if he's a racist, and he simply doesn't know. He doesn't have the capacity for self-awareness. He is a fool because he doesn't even know

that which he doesn't know!" Abe was particularly proud of the irony in that phrase.

"The fool is the type that caused the kind of trouble that happened tonight."

Shawn said, "I suppose that means *they* were 'the fools', and *we* had nothing to do with it." He twisted the cynical poison arrow a little deeper.

Abe didn't want to go there. Shawn always had a way of winning an argument with minimum words. This time he was right. Abe knew better than to mess with 'the fools'. Abe knew better than to have messed with Scarface.

The sergeant at the front desk stamped some files and took the routine fingerprints. When he was done, he stamped some more files, and then finally motioned to Abe and Shawn.

"Your name?" he asked Shawn.

"Shawn Watson."

"Any other names?"

"None."

"You are free to go once we go through some formalities. Please step aside."

Shawn stepped aside, relieved. Abe was next.

"Your name sir?"

"Abe."

"Full name, please?"

"Abuchi Osondu."

"If I might ask, where's that name from?"

"Nigeria." Abe said, rolling his eyes impatiently. *Here we go again.* He spun the usual scenario in his mind. They always want to know why your English is so good, and whether your African relatives still lived in trees.

"Are you a citizen?"

"Yes. I was born in the States and have lived here all my life. My father was a Nigerian, and no, I don't think they ever lived in trees."

"Oh," the sergeant said apologetically, turning a little red. "Do you know why you are here?"

"Nope"

“We found Marijuana in your vehicle. Your two friends are free to go, but we’ll have to have you stay here in detention until a hearing in a few days.”

Abe’s eyebrows curled downward, and his mouth hung open in shock. The Sergeant quickly motioned for some help, and a police orderly began leading Abe away. He struggled. Shawn protested. Abe’s eyes remained glued to Shawn as they dragged him away. He was unable to speak. He struggled and kicked until he was forcefully taken around the corner, and finally out of sight.

Yes, failure is a habit. His mind raced as the steel door was locked securely behind him with an echoing thud. This time, however, failure had gotten someone killed and landed him in this dirty, smelly, ten-by-ten foot prison cell.

Abe sat down somberly on the thick slab of cement that would now be his bed for the foreseeable future. They didn’t even have the decency to give him his guitar. He looked around him, trying not to inhale the strong stench of human waste. He studied the obvious source of the smell, a dirty toilet bowl beside his bed. Then he looked up above the bed at the scratches all along the wall, no doubt left there by years of inmates fervently and hopelessly crying out to no one in particular.

He walked over to the lone mirror in the room and looked at himself, locking his gaze on his brown eyes. Did this pattern of failure start when he quit law school? If so, where would it lead? Is this what he had become, a hopeless, common, marijuana-peddling criminal? What ever happened to the goal he told Professor Rafferty about? Whatever happened to conquering the world and getting that major label record deal? Whatever happened to becoming a famous musician?

There had to be some other way to discover oneself than to sing on street corners, get doped, and get thrown in jail every few months. There must be some way to find self-definition beyond this obsession he had about racism and the color of his skin. He didn’t want to go on living like this.

No doubt, this was certainly a long way from the sanitary halls of the University of Minnesota law School. This was certainly not that record deal he and the guys had been dreaming about over the past two years.

He turned on the faucet, making sure to avoid the grime he saw all around it. He washed his forehead with the cold water, and looked at his face, dripping with water, sweat, and caked blood.

He gazed at his strong, distinct, African features. His big nose must have come directly from his father. His dreadlocks were bold and fitted perfectly with his square jaws. His strong frame and muscular build all betrayed his African heritage. He looked at his stubby, thick hands, and wondered how on earth he had ever learned to play the guitar with those. He knew he was the spitting image of someone else. Despite his light skin, he knew he was the spitting image of a black man he had never seen before.

He sat down, devoid of hope, on the cold cement slab. Above all, he knew he wasn't destined to be in a place like this. Abe knew something in his life had to change.

THREE

“He who has people is richer than he who has money.”

Amtrak

Ezra had only three days to go before his scheduled deportation. *Big deal.* This would be the sixth time the I.N.S. would send him packing back home. He wondered if they would ever get tired of sending him back. He knew no prison or immigration booth on the planet could keep him out forever. It was just his luck to have been caught during a bar fight in a remote part of town. They could send him home, but he knew he would come back some day soon, with an even better plan to stay and prosper in this land of milk and honey. For now, he resolved to patiently await deportation at Old Lake’s Minnesota State Prison.

Ezra was a Nigerian in his mid thirties, short and skinny with determined, beady eyes. He was an Igbo from the tribes just southeast of the river Niger. He had assigned himself one mission in life over the past ten years, and that was simply to achieve permanent residency in America, through any means necessary. He always announced to everyone he knew that whenever he arrived successfully past the American immigration booth, he would celebrate by jumping on to the nearest Amtrak train he could find, and would ride triumphantly around to see the whole country.

"My plane will land at JFK, of course, where I will catch an Amtrak train to Houston." He boasted about his imaginary Amtrak voyages to any one who would listen in Nigeria. Laboriously, he proceeded to spell out a sophisticated itinerary that would take him around the United States. One would think he owned the Amtrak train line if they didn't know better.

"From Houston I will take the next Amtrak to Chicago, and then on to California in the West Coast."

"My friend Mr. Okata will pick me up in Los Angeles," he continued, "And if he doesn't show up, seeing as he might be too busy enjoying his American life, I will take the next Amtrak to Achebe's house in Orlando."

He would call out, one name at a time, an exhaustive list of his Nigerian-American contacts, city destinations, and contingency arrangements that would be waiting for him at every train stop.

His friends and family had seen him deported so many times and had heard this story so much that they began feeling sorry for him. They stopped taking him seriously, and simply bestowed upon him the mercifully befitting moniker, 'Amtrak'. Most people wished him the best of luck, but they often wondered why he didn't just give up this obsessive need to go to America, and concentrate on making his mark at home in Nigeria.

"A bird does not change its feathers because the weather is bad." He would say; "The sun cannot refuse to shine in the morning because he fought with the moon the day before."

Ezra, like many of his Igbo tribesmen, was artful and skilled in his use of proverbs.

"No matter how many times they send me back, I will be there to greet them again in the morning."

The shrill sound of the prison bell went off, signifying that it was time for lunch, and irritating the inmates to no end. The rations were always too small, and the food was bland. The inmates' grumbling could be heard all across the halls of the prison. However, Ezra always looked forward to the bell, for it signified another opportunity for him to make new friends, share some wisdom, and maybe even find someone who could sponsor his next trip to America.

"Oh yes, America, the land of the brave!" Ezra shouted gleefully, drowning out the prison bells, his skinny arms outstretched through the bars of his jail cell.

"From sea to shining sea!"

The inmates generally ignored him, assuming he was just another lunatic getting closer to his death or eventual removal on grounds of insanity. *But oh, how Ezra loved this country!* There was so much more opportunity for success here than in his native Nigeria. What wouldn't he give for a chance to someday get his "papers" and be legit? He wanted so badly to become a "been-to" like the other Nigerians he knew who had been to and returned home prosperous and successful from America.

A guard walked over to Ezra's cell.

"Be quiet, Mister," he said.

"Do you know I am?" Ezra retorted. "In my country, the likes of you would not even be allowed to speak to me!"

The guard was amused, and ignored him, moving on to organize the inmates' exodus to the mess hall.

Ezra continued shouting after him. "The only thing that differentiates us is that you have a green card today, and I will have mine someday soon!"

Ezra threw on his prison garb gleefully, and waited patiently for a guard to unlock his gate. He was the first inmate from his section to get to the mess hall, and he shoved and pushed people aside to get to the front of the line. The other inmates had perplexed looks on their faces. They were astonished to see this little guy rushing to get to the front of the line like a man who had not eaten in days. They had never seen anyone so excited over prison food.

What they did not realize was that Ezra, in his infinite wisdom, was practicing for his return to Nigeria, where ‘rushing’ is the norm. He certainly didn’t want to get too rusty before his deportation in a few days.

“Hey, watch where you’re going there, little fella!” An unhappy inmate said, as he was almost knocked down by the rushing man. The inmate was a huge mountain of a guy, so Ezra must have really shoved him hard.

“Sorry, Mr. Elephant. I hope you don’t mind, but I am a bush man, and where I come from, I must rush for my food.”

“Hey, dude,” said the big guy, not too happy to be called an elephant. “Ever heard about doing as the Romans do when in Rome?” The crowd laughed. The inmate had put up a reasonable challenge, and smiled in acknowledgement to the crowd. He was a huge, six-foot-seven, bald-headed, cross-eyed, muscular man with a hunch in his back. Even smiling, he was frightening to look at.

“First of all,” Ezra said, turning and defiantly looking up at the giant in front of him. “I’ve been deported from Rome several times as well; this ain’t no Rome, and you’re too ugly to be a Roman!” He burst into laughter, visibly pleased with himself.

The crowd murmured in low tones. Those were definitely fighting words.

“Well, I guess you can take the bushman out of the bush, but you can’t take the bush out of the man,” said the giant, with another terrible smile, this time unveiling some gold-plated, crooked teeth. He cocked his head to one side and rolled up the sleeves of his prison uniform. “I think I’ll have to knock this little bushman right back to wherever he came from!” He raised his clenched fists in preparation for war. He figured one well-targeted blow to the head was all he needed.

The inmates all laughed again. This was getting exciting. Finally there would be a little amusement today; maybe there would even be a fight. The inmates always loved a fight.

To everyone’s surprise, Ezra fearlessly rolled up his sleeves as well, and shouted for people to give him some room. In contrast to the giant, he looked like a midget. He was a small man, about five feet two inches, with an overall thin build. The only generous part of his body was his slightly protruding stomach. The odds were not in his favor.

“Whoever says ‘Let's fight’ does not know who will be victorious,” Ezra announced, quoting a proverb from his village in Africa. “I will teach this fool why the ant is more industrious than the elephant.”

Without another word, the giant swung viciously at him, barely missing. Ezra avoided the blow, prancing around like Mohammed Ali. What he lacked in size, he certainly made up for in speed. The crowd gathered around in a circle, chanting and voyeuristically enjoying the thrill of the moment. The prison guards were watching too, albeit from a distance. They would let this go on for at least a few punches. Like the inmates, they certainly enjoyed an occasional prison fight now and then.

Ezra and the giant circled around each other. With one eye squinted in concentration, the giant was trying to size him up for another punch. Ezra stuck out his tongue and kept a teasing look on his face. He continued dancing around, his only option, since his arms were too short to attempt a punch.

“Come on, Mr. Elephant. Don’t be tired. Hit me before I’m deported back to Africa!”

Infuriated beyond words, the giant swung, and missed yet again, but this time stumbled on something and swayed violently to regain his balance. At that instant, Ezra swooped in like a tiny animal, and grabbed his left leg, pushing him just enough to throw him off balance.

The giant went crashing to the ground, and Ezra jumped on his chest, strangling him to submission.

No one could believe it. David had killed Goliath! The guards immediately swooped in and took over the scene, ordering everyone back to their tables. The Old Lake prison inmates had just found a new hero, and they now understood why the ant was more industrious than the elephant.

Abe watched all this from afar with relative indifference. It had already been two days now since he got into this place, and he hated every minute of it. It was two more days to go before his hearing. He sat alone at a corner table, more concerned about getting out of prison as soon as he could.

Ezra walked over and sat down by Abe’s table, arriving like a king, and saying hello to everyone along the way.

"Most people call me 'Amtrak,' but my full name is Ezra Okiri," he announced. Then he turned to Abe. "I remember you from the Old Lake 500 bar. Your band was really good. What's your name?"

Abe decided to humor him through imitation. "Most people call me Abe, but my full name is Abuchi Osondu."

"Come again?"

"Abuchi--"

"I know what you said!" Ezra was obviously getting excited at this point. His jaw was dropped almost halfway to the ground. "I just can't believe it."

Abe wasn't quite sure what to make of this. He certainly wasn't going to be the next fight opportunity for this guy if that's what this was leading up to. He looked around him nervously, making sure no new crowds were gathering.

"You must obviously know you are a Nigerian, with a name like that. Are you related to the great Osondu family from Nigeria?"

"I don't know." Abe replied honestly.

"That's strange. Is your father in America, or back home?"

"I don't know. Like I said, I've never met him."

"But you must know something about him."

"All I know is what I've been told. His name is James Osondu. I know he was a Nigerian, and he returned to Nigeria before I was born, but that's about it. I have no real knowledge about him or his people"

Ezra shook his head slowly and gently put his food down in amazement.

"Wonders shall never cease!" He proclaimed. "When a dying man cries, it is not because of where he is going, which he knows nothing about, but because of what he wishes he would have done in the world he is leaving behind."

Abe didn't have a clue what the little guy was going on about. Ezra had a poetic mastery of the art of oration. Like his Igbo tribesmen, he was a master of proverbs, analogies and metaphors. He could eulogize and proselytize for hours with proverbs and sayings from his exhaustive collection, only to make a very simple, sometimes-anticlimactic point at the end.

Ezra spoke carefully. "I bet you are the long lost son of the great James Osondu, and you don't even know it."

Abe's interest was peaked. "How could you be so sure?"

“Well, because there is only one Osondu line in our tribe, and it’s well known that he was the last of them. They were all wiped out by a terrible *Juju*--”

“What?”

“That’s what you would call ‘voodoo’ here in America.” Ezra explained. “Osondu died a terrible death. Someone was obviously out to extinguish his entire family. It was rumored that he had a son in America, but no one knew him. I imagine the only reason you are alive is because you were not there when this all happened.”

The bell rang again. Lunch was over, and it was siesta time. The guards started rounding everyone up. Abe was disappointed. He wanted to hear this story.

“Let’s meet this afternoon at the game house, at exactly four o’clock. You are a lucky man. Death forgot about you.” Ezra was visibly excited. “When a palm-branch reaches its height, it gives way for a fresh one to grow.”

“I don’t understand--”

“Four o’clock, I say. I’ll tell you all about your people.” With that Ezra walked away, still looking back at Abe in amazement.

Abe wasn’t sure what to make of the whole thing, but it sparked his interest tremendously, and he thought about it as he walked back to his cell. He considered for a moment the idea that his father was possibly not even alive. He had always wondered about his father and his people, but had never actually gotten himself to a place where he was ready to go seek them out. This idea that his father was dead did not really affect him too much one way or another. It was like hearing that a distant relative you never knew had died.

His ‘family’ had always been the orphanage, with the other kids and the caretakers. He had never really given too much thought to the question of his roots. That is, not until now. What unfortunate fate must his father’s family have met with? Could it be that he is truly the only living Osondu? What if it was true that he would have been dead as well, if he had lived in Nigeria? If nothing else, it would be interesting to learn more about this. Who knows? Maybe learning about his roots could address his quest for identity in some strange, serendipitous way.

At exactly three forty-five, Abe was at the game house. He sat down behind the row of card players and looked around him as he waited. Everyone was so relaxed. How could any one get used to this place? He couldn't handle being here. He couldn't wait for his scheduled meeting with the judge in two days.

Soon it was four-fifteen, and there was still no sign of Ezra. At first, Abe didn't take that too seriously, after all, he didn't find it surprising that Nigerians would be on 'colored people's time' as well.

His mind wandered back to the incident at the bar, and what Shawn was trying to say. *Maybe he was in fact preoccupied with this racism thing, and maybe he should think about his identity problem a little less.* Could it be that Shawn was right, and he was a racist by his own definition? He shrugged away the thought. He knew he didn't hate other races. He was just operating in a defensive victim mode, trying to survive, and searching for the true meaning of his own self-identity. He felt much better after working that out in his mind.

He looked around in the game room, and noticed how people of all colors, blacks, whites, Asians, were playing and mixing together in harmony. They appeared to be sincerely color-blind here, at least outwardly. He recalled Ezra's fight with the giant. It wasn't about race. It was just two people who were mad at each other over behavior. They were fighting because of the content of their character, not their skin color.

This is how it should be, he concluded.

Strangely enough, if there was anything good about being here, it was sensing the irrelevance of race, and not being afraid he stood out. He felt strangely comfortable. Prison was the great equalizer. At the end of the day, every one here was some sort of criminal offender. Arguably, they had probably grouped themselves along racial lines to form gang affiliations, or social relationships and hierarchies, but their interactions with each other didn't seem dominated by racial division. For the time they spent here, they were equals, financially, and politically. Maybe the outside world could learn a thing or two from inmates who had learned to live together in relative harmony.

He looked at his watch again. It was now seven-fifteen. He had been waiting for an amazing three-and-a-half hours, and there was still no sign of Ezra. He really wanted to hear this story about the Osondus. Obviously, Nigerians were on some other time scale. He decided to go look for him out on the field in the center of the prison. It looked like this Ezra guy had just given a whole new meaning to C.P.T.

-Just don't show up at all!

FOUR

“If a man returns from a long journey and no one says “Nno”-
(welcome), he feels like one who has not arrived.”

Race of Life

“So, tell us more about the snakes!” someone shouted from the crowd. A bunch of inmates were gathered in a circle out in the field, listening to someone in the center. Overhead, Abe noticed the sun hiding behind a thick blanket of stubborn clouds. It was good to see the sky again. He got closer to the crowd to see what was going on.

“Well, first I must tell you about Guatemala.” Ezra responded, basking in the attention.

“First I was captured in Guatemala, because I had decided to try South America as my entry point.” He continued. I bought a fake Guatemalan passport from my cousin, who lived there, and the picture

on it was his. Many people in the West think that we Africans all look alike, so we figured there was little or no risk using his passport and picture since it had worked for him before. All went well until the immigration authorities informed me at the border that the picture on the passport was that of a well-known criminal. My cousin could have easily helped me avoid capture by giving me a better idea of his current resume-
-before selling me the passport!"

The inmates laughed.

"So I was thrown into jail in Guatemala, just west of the Mexican border, across from a small river," he said. "That was where I met my good friend Juan, who eventually released me."

"Why did he release you?" Someone asked.

"I simply found out what kind of 'food' Juan liked best, shared mine with him, and promised to send him some more once I got into America. You see, where I come from, to eat from the same pot with another man is to take an oath of perpetual friendship with him."

"What food was that?" someone else asked.

"The 'food' wasn't the type you eat. It is the type you inhale. I had with me a tobacco-based drug we call 'snuff' in my village. You see, Juan is not very smart, and he was kind enough to believe me when I told him that it was the latest form of crack Cocaine. I certainly didn't want to change his beliefs."

They laughed again.

"So in exchange for the 'cocaine,' he let me go. I swam across the narrow river all the way into the Mexican desert, several miles from the American border. I decided to try walking across the desert into America like the Mexicans do every day, and that was how I met the snakes."

"Did you kill them, or did they kill you?" Abe asked sarcastically, letting Ezra know he was present during this little story-telling episode.

"Yes, Great Osondu's son, I had to kill them and eat them raw in order to survive! It was like your 'Survival' reality series on TV, except there were no pretty women wearing cave-man rags."

The inmates were rolling with laughter.

"I ate so many of the damn things that my stomach started to swell from the poison. Even though I have tried sit-ups and 'Ab-rollers,' this is why my stomach is as big as you see today. Despite the inevitability of another deportation, I had to give myself up to authorities in order to survive."

The crowd murmured in unison to show they fully commiserated with him.

"And that became Deportation Number Four," Ezra concluded. His audience was fully satisfied. With that, he abruptly left the center of the ring and pulled Abe aside.

"I'm sorry I was held up. A man must look for his next meal anywhere he can find it," Ezra said. "Any of one of these people sympathizing with me could be my next good contact in America."

Abe was more serious in finding answers, and wanted to cut to the chase. "Please tell me more about the Osondus," He said politely.

"Ah, the Osondus. You mean your father, James Osondu. You see, many people in Nigeria knew that he had a long-lost son in America, but no one knew where he was. That is until now."

"So what's the point? Even if I am his son, who cares?"

"If you are his son, then trust me, *you* will care a great deal."

"Why?"

"Because you will instantly become a multi-millionaire," Ezra proclaimed, wagging his finger at Abe. "And I mean dollars, man, dollars!"

Abe was perplexed. He wasn't sure where Ezra was going. Was this one of his scams to gain a new American contact?

"Osondu was one of the richest men in Nigeria, and surprisingly, one of the most just and honest around. He was the Commissioner of Police for Abia State in Eastern Nigeria."

Abe listened intently.

"The man helped put so many people through school and in business that he became a general hero for the entire Igbo people. But the way he died was unbelievable."

"How was that?"

"Well, no one really knows for sure. Most people blame it on *Juju*. He died of what we call in Nigeria, 'Brief Illness', but here you might call it a heart attack or some other fatal ailment. Most people believe he was killed by a secret society."

"So what does this all have to do with me?"

"Well, in our tradition, if a man dies, his first son, whom we call *Opapa*, is duty-bound to inherit all of his property. That means you. Judging by your name and what you've told me, you are probably his son. Do you know what your name means?"

“No.”

“Abuchi is the short form for ‘Ibeabuchi’, a powerful name which means, *No man is God*--No one can delay your destiny except for God!”

“Wow!” Abe said.

“Dollars are in your destiny! No one can stop you from claiming your father’s wealth! This is your legacy!” Ezra was getting visibly excited again. He waved his hands in the air.

“You shouldn’t be in here! You are rich!” He was practically shouting at this point.

Abe had heard enough. He stood up and prepared to leave. He wasn’t sure whether to take this man seriously or not. For all he knew, this could just be another story made up to lure an unsuspecting ‘American contact’ into Ezra’s snare. He didn’t totally buy it, but this was definitely not a thing to blow off, on even the remote chance that it was true.

“Thanks for the story. I guess I have to think about this. Let’s talk again tomorrow.”

Joey and Shawn arrived at the visiting room in the prison at about 8 o’clock the next morning. A thick glass wall in the meeting room separated them from Abe.

“Glad to see you’re not dead.” Abe said with a weak smile, happy to see Joey was okay. Joey was back to his old cheery self, wearing a few band-aids and his characteristic broad smile.

“Next time you want to cause World War Three let me know so I can join a different band, okay?” Joey said sarcastically, with his typically sheepish grin.

“And let me know when you have some extra marijuana in your car,” Shawn quipped, “At least I can help you smoke it up before the cops show up!”

They all laughed. It was good to be together again.

“So what’s the story? When is your hearing?” Shawn asked. He liked to get straight to the point.

“Tomorrow.”

“What are you going to do? We need a lead singer in our band!” Joey added.

"I wouldn't worry about it. It was just marijuana. They'll probably let me off as a first offender. If not, then I'll just have to use my 'lawyer' skills in here."

"So you think you'll be out in a couple of days?"

"I hope so. I certainly don't want to miss any gigs. I need the money."

Joey and Shawn looked at each other, and then turned to Abe.

"We wanted to talk to you about that," Shawn said. "Joey and I talked about this whole band thing, and we think we're going nowhere fast."

Abe wasn't expecting this.

"So what are you guys proposing we do about it?"

"Let's go get a record deal, man!" Joey hissed in excitement. "We've talked about it long enough, we might as well really go for it this time."

"Record deals don't just hang on trees waiting to be plucked. You know that. We've tried to get noticed for two years now."

"Yeah, but maybe we've been trying to get noticed in all the wrong places," Shawn said. "Look, here's the deal. We met a guy yesterday at the West Bank. His name is Trip McGee. He claims he is some big music industry manager. He thinks he can get us a record deal."

"So what's the catch? There's always a catch in the music business."

"He says we should think about leaving Minnesota and moving to New York, with him being our manager."

"How much percentage of our lives does he want in exchange?" Abe asked cynically.

"We didn't go there. We wanted you to talk to him with your 'lawyer' skills," Joey offered, smiling dryly.

"Well, we certainly aren't prepared. We don't even have a demo, and we have no money to go make one in a real studio," Abe said, shrugging. "But, hey, let's go talk to this guy. See where his head is at."

The guard motioned to Abe. Their time was almost up.

"Any thing we can do to help?" Shawn joked. "Warm blankets, some reefer and a nice civil rights law book?"

"Thanks for looking out for me, guys," Abe turned serious. "Hey, Shawn; I think you were right about this whole racism thing. I probably do think about it a bit too much, and that obviously contributed to all this. But the strangest thing has happened to me in here."

"What?"

"I met a guy who says I'm probably a multi-millionaire in Africa!"

"What is he, some kind of a con artist?"

"Well, His name is Ezra, or Amtrak, or something--but he is really an amazing character. He even beat up a guy twice his size the other day."

"So do you believe him?"

"I'm not sure. But I'm curious as hell. I mean, he says if I go to Africa I'll inherit this huge fortune. Just like that! Apparently he says the Osondus were some kind of really rich family."

"How can you be sure?"

"If I could find someone who knew my dad when he was here in America--"

"Time's up, guys!" The guard motioned to end their meeting.

"Hey, we'll be at your hearing tomorrow. Good luck!"

"Thanks, guys."

Later that evening, Abe walked into the prison library. It was a secluded building at the north end of the prison. There were only a few inmates there at this time of day. He wanted to brush up on his Marijuana law. He had to get out of this prison, and like a good lawyer, he knew he needed to do his research.

He got his computer pass from the guard at the door, and walked by, thanking him. He mouthed silently to himself. *I won't be seeing you in a few days!* He logged on to the computer and opened the Internet browser application. He surfed to his favorite search engine and typed in 'marijuana law in Minnesota'. Immediately, he got back several strings of information.

--LBBL's *State Guide to Marijuana Penalties...*

--*Addiction and marijuana...*

--*Advice on staying out of trouble...*

-- *Marijuana Law, Second Edition: A Comprehensive Legal Manual...*

He clicked on the legal manual. On page two was an interesting point:

Among the general public, the law concerning consent is perhaps the most misunderstood. The general rule is that if a person consents to a warrant-less search, the search automatically becomes reasonable and therefore legal. Consequently, whatever an officer finds during such a search will be used to convict the person. Simply

put, if a person consents to a search, he has waived the primary protection offered by the Fourth Amendment.

"That's my case!" Abe blurted out loud, excited by what he read. A few heads in the library turned and stared at him. Ignoring them, he continued to read the article. He was sure he could beat this thing now. No one had asked him whether he or she could search his car. He certainly never saw a warrant. Some over-zealous police officer probably just wanted to earn some points with his or her colleagues, and decided to be a hero. Abe was excited, his confidence renewed. He would show them a thing or two...

Out of curiosity, he typed in his surname, 'Osondu,' and he got back the usual garbage. He had done this once or twice before, but never really with any seriousness. The information was always the same. A few search returns for Osondu were from online Igbo language name lists where they explained the meaning of Igbo names.

One article explained that Osondu literally means, "The Race of Life"—or "Life is a race" in Igbo. *How ironic.* Life is indeed a race, and one couldn't help but extrapolate another meaning—we are all one race—But Abe remembered his discussion with Shawn. Not everything had to be about race and racism. In this case, it was race, meant in terms of running, not people or politics. He was glad he caught himself that time.

Finally, he saw one search return that was specifically for "James Osondu." It was an excerpt from the University of Minnesota's Alumni Society, an exhaustive listing of the attendants of a class in 1972. He had never noticed this before, but then, he had never searched this long.

Philip Sterling, Paul Pedersen, James Osondu, Nancy Abrams, Cletus Okolo, Steven Cliff...

He printed out the article with the names. Maybe one of these people would know something about his father.

It was getting late, time for dinner. Abe made for the mess hall, his research printed for further study. He felt like a law student again, and wondered why he ever left it to chase after this elusive music industry dream. He couldn't wait for his chance at court.

He turned the corner and entered the mess hall, his mind full of plans. *Once I get out of here I'm going to re-evaluate my entire life. After all, Maybe I really am a millionaire!*

Abe caught himself dreaming and mentally reprimanded himself. *First things first.* Before he could even consider this fantastic issue, he

would have to actually win this marijuana case and get the hell out of prison.

FIVE

“The child that washes his hands is invited to eat with kings.”

Judgment Day

Judge Penny Jackson didn't have time for games. Dressed in her flowing black robe, she stomped into the courtroom and took her seat. She had an air of nobility about her, not unlike an English queen. She brushed her graying hair a little to the left, revealing a stern frown above her eyebrows. She wanted this case to be orderly and she wanted the day to move faster. It was just ten o'clock and there had already been three cases. Two were drunk drivers, the other was a wife beater. The

prosecution prevailed all three times, despite their lack of preparation and weak arguments. It had already been a long morning.

"Will the bailiff please bring in the next defendant?" she asked impatiently in a distinct New York accent. Judge Jackson took a sip of her now lukewarm morning coffee.

"Your Honor; Abuchi Osondu," The bailiff announced as Abe was brought into the prison courtroom. He was visibly tired from his research the night before. Wearing his red prison garb, he was led into the seat next to the judge, where he was read his rights and asked to take the oath. He swore to tell the truth.

Abe looked around him at the people in the air-conditioned courtroom. It was a large room with seats separated from the judge's high chair by a buffer zone space for arguments. To the left stood the court bailiff, and in front of him was an empty, secluded row of seats for the jury. To his right sat the legal clerk, typing away dutifully. In the center of the buffer zone was a round table with several seats for the lawyers and their assistants. There were three lawyers total, each had books and files ready to dispense of the business of the day.

The audience seats in the courtroom were empty except for three people in the back row. Abe recognized his friends Joey and Shawn. With them was a third, well-dressed, older gentleman he didn't know. Shawn had his characteristic serious face on, but Abe couldn't tell if Joey had a hint of a smile. This certainly wasn't the time for smiling or jokes. His future was at stake here.

"Please read the charges." Judge Jackson said.

"Mr. Osondu is charged with one count of possession of 2.4 grams of marijuana, which was discovered in his vehicle on September 4th of this year," The lead prosecutor said. "He is also charged with a misdemeanor involving himself and four others in a bar fight at the Old Lake 500. The fight occurred on the same night."

"I understand the defendant has waived his right to a public defender?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And may I ask why, Mr. Osondu?" Judge Jackson looked directly at Abe. She maintained the frown on her face and twisted her lips disapprovingly, as though she didn't endorse his dread-locked appearance.

"I simply wish to represent myself, your honor." Abe said.

"Has the defendant been made fully aware of the ramifications of his decision?" Judge Jackson had seen them all. This was probably just another smart aleck kid who had watched too much TV. They all want to be heroes.

"Yes, Your Honor." the Prosecutor replied.

"Very well. How do you plead, Mr. Osondu?"

Abe cleared his throat.

"Not guilty, Your Honor, to both charges."

"On what grounds?"

"For the first charge, on the grounds that the search of my vehicle on the night of September 4th was illegal, Your Honor. I absolutely, undisputedly, indubitably, gave no consent to a warranted search of my vehicle." Abe used his lawyer voice. "With regard to the second--and I might add, an obviously frivolous charge--I was simply acting in self defense. A gang of bikers attacked me for no reason during a musical performance, after assaulting me verbally with racist slurs. In the process of this onslaught, they shot and killed an innocent girl in the audience in full view of several witnesses. They also shot and wounded my partner, who is in the courtroom here today--as a witness if necessary. I was clearly afraid for my life."

The Lead Prosecutor hurriedly whispered to his assistants. Someone had missed out some very important details. They weren't prepared for this. There was a jubilant murmur from Joey and Shawn in the back row. Joey kind of liked the idea that he was an important witness in a case, and might even be called to testify.

Pleasantly surprised, Judge Jackson was actually beginning to enjoy this. "Please continue, Mr. Osondu."

Abe's outward appearance certainly didn't match his spoken presentation. The prosecution was listening nervously. Having been a public defender at the beginning of her long career, Judge Jackson liked to see prosecutors squirm a little.

"In addition, and with all due respect, Your Honor, I was shown no warrant prior to the search, and based on my Fourth Amendment right to consent and due process, I must therefore conclude that the search and subsequent discoveries were illegal."

"And your response?" Judge Jackson looked at the prosecutors. She was ready to get this case over with. It looked like a simple matter.

"There must be some error, Your Honor. We were led to believe--"

“Alright then!” she interrupted loudly, banging her gavel on the table.

“Without further ado, I am ready to make my ruling.” She turned to Abe, and took off her glasses for added effect.

“Are you denying that marijuana was found in your vehicle, young man?”

“If it pleases Your Honor, I am not arguing the merits or demerits of that question. I simply feel that a police malpractice has occurred here, and I wish to assert my rights to corrective action.” At this point, Joey was all smiles. Even Shawn had a sheepish grin on his face. Abe knew he had scored.

“Prosecution?” She asked.

“Obviously some of our information was less than accurate. No further comments, Your Honor.”

“Any closing arguments, young man?” Judge Penny Jackson couldn’t resist adding some salt and pepper to the prosecution’s disastrous situation.

“I never intended to waive the constitutional right protecting my liberty.” Abe was on a roll. “In respect for the wisdom of our founding fathers who knew well the dangers of dictatorial government, I hereby invoke my rights as guaranteed by the Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution.”

Joey and Shawn let out some excited little dog yelps in support of their friend. *You go boy!* A sharp, stern look from the judge restrained their outburst. Even the stranger was impressed.

“I did not consent to a search of my person. My belongings, my automobile, or any other item,” Abe continued, “I also do not consent now to any further detention of my person, belongings, automobile, or any other item.”

A silent thunder clap went off in the courtroom! It was a done deal! The prosecution was already packing up to go home.

“Approach the bench, young man.” Judge Jackson put her glasses back on, fully impressed. She had just had her best entertainment for the day. Too bad the day was still young. Abe walked out toward the front of the judge’s high bench.

“Are you aware that possession of more than 1.4 grams of marijuana in a motor vehicle is punishable by up to one year in prison and a \$1,000 dollar fine?”

“Yes, your honor.” Abe replied, with a lump in his throat. “Also, a thirty-day driver’s license suspension is possible.” He added.

Judge Jackson smiled. *Smart aleck!* But he certainly had done his research.

“I am going to release you on the grounds of a first-time offense, but with a warning,” she announced. “And not on the merits of your arguments. I will have it noted that you are not specifically denying the charge of possession. I will also deny your request for corrective action. If you are brought before a court again for future possession, you should expect to be severely punished under Minnesota law.”

You could cut the silence in the court with a knife. Abe was relieved. He finally breathed normally for the first time. It was as if he had been holding his breath throughout her judgment.

Judge Jackson leaned over toward him and whispered in lower tones. “I might add, young man, that you delivered an exceptionally well thought-out case.” Smiling, she added, “Ever thought of law school?”

Abe returned her smile. “No, Your Honor. I’m just a musician.”

Trip McGee offered to take everyone out to lunch to celebrate. Abe would be ready to leave in about an hour, after checking in his prison clothes and getting back his personal things. As he was led back behind the Judge’s desk, Joey, Shawn, and Trip signaled to him, letting him know that they would be waiting outside.

Abe was released and led back to the exit area where he changed back into his own clothes and got his wallet, car-keys and guitar.

“Sir, I’d like to say goodbye to a friend of mine in the prison,” Abe said to the orderly.

“I’m sorry sir, but you are now technically an outsider to the prison. You’ll have to register and request a visitation like everyone else.”

“And where do I do that?”

“At the front desk.”

Abe looked at his guitar and felt like it had been years since he played it. Certainly, he would have to write a song about this experience. There was definitely something here. Maybe he’d call it something like ‘Poor man, Jail time’, or ‘Black Prisoner’—No, maybe not ‘Black’, how about just ‘Prisoner’. He couldn’t make up his mind. He just wanted to get out

of here and go home. *That's it! 'Home!'* What a good, simple title to encapsulate how he was really feeling right now.

Abe had no clear sense of what home really felt like any more. Unlike most children, he never really experienced what it meant to have a steady home. Maybe it was where your friends are, or maybe it was wherever your loved ones are. Having never known the family structure of a father and mother, his thoughts turned to the orphanage. But this feeling of 'home' certainly wasn't at the orphanage, even though he had felt like they had been his only family.

His mind wandered back to Ezra. Maybe home is somewhere in Africa, like Ezra said, as an Osondu? He looked at himself in the changing room mirror as he buttoned his shirt. He picked up his guitar and slung his bag around his shoulder. Maybe home is just some place in time, or better yet, some place in the mind? Suddenly he knew exactly what the title of his next song would be. Abe always tried to write songs that meant something to him. A good song to Abe was like an answer to a burning question in his soul. Yes, his next song was already on its way. He would simply call it 'Home'.

Abe checked out his belongings at the front desk. Joey, Shawn and their guest arrived just in time as he was filling out his exit forms.

"One!" Shawn proclaimed in street slang, as he and Joey bear-hugged Abe. It was like old times. It was good to be free again.

Trip McGee was a short, smooth-faced, elderly African-American gentleman. Abe figured he was probably in his fifties or sixties, but the way he carried himself, one might think he wasn't a day over forty.

"I'm Trip," he said, shaking Abe's hand enthusiastically. He had an unusually firm handshake.

"Good job in there. If I didn't like your music group so much, I'd ask you to come work for me as a music entertainment lawyer in New York."

"Thanks," Abe said, looking at Joey and Shawn. "I appreciate you stopping by with the fellas."

"So what are you in the mood to eat?" Trip asked.

"Anything but prison food would be just fine right about now." Abe replied. "How about Mickey Dee's?"

"Alright, we'll be waiting in the limo," Trip replied. The three of them retreated outside to wait for him.

The Limo? The guys had better not have signed any deals without him, Abe mused. He walked over to the visitation counter and approached the blond-haired prison attendant.

"Ma'am, I was told I could schedule an appointment to see an inmate here." Abe said politely.

"Your name, please?"

"Abuchi Osondu."

"Who would you like to see?"

"His first name is Ezra." Abe said, not sure of his other names.

"Let me check on that." The attendant reached inside the filing cabinet to her left, shuffled around for a while, and then pulled out a brown manila folder.

"I'm sorry, but that inmate has apparently been deported from the United States. It looks like he was released to the I.N.S. just this morning."

Abe was taken aback. He had really wanted to find out a bit more about his father. Disappointed, he thanked her and turned to leave.

"Sir," she motioned to him as he was turning around.

"I have here a note from him to an 'Abuchi Osondu,' is that you?"

Abe turned back excitedly and grabbed the note. He unfolded it and quickly read its contents:

Dear Abuchi Osondu,

By the time you get this, I will be on my way back to Nigeria on a free plane ride. But worry not, for I'll be back someday.

It was good meeting the only son of the great James Osondu. Our people say that a person who has children does not die. Osondu lives on in you. I will certainly tell this story to my family back home.

If you are ever in Nigeria, please look me up. My address is: 26 Onitiri Road, Ajegunle, Lagos; Telephone 555-3209. Don't forget me when you claim your millions!

Cheers,

Ezra 'Amtrak' Okiri

SIX

“When a handshake goes below the elbow, you should know that it has turned into something else.”

Trip McGee

The limousine ride was surreal. Abe couldn't get over the plush, black leather interior, complete with inset TVs, VCRs, and even a bar packed full of expensive wine. It was a rich man's paradise! Joey and Shawn were eating it up. They had obviously gotten very comfortable with Trip McGee in a very short amount of time. Abe wanted badly to find out what had happened in his absence, but he opted to maintain a dignified silence. In time, he would understand the situation, and figure out if Trip McGee was the genuine article.

Trip's gold cuffs and Rolex watch sparkled delightfully as he announced for all to hear:

“I thought we'd go to the Place d' Elm. It's an International Steak house, owned by a French friend of mine. I'm sure they'll have Hamburgers.”

He was sitting a seemingly great distance from Abe, Shawn and Joey, in the furthest corner of the stretch limo, surrounded by various accoutrements of wealth. Abe studied him. He was immaculately dressed in a two-piece, five-button suit. His hair and moustache were perfectly trimmed. His gold and silver accessories shone in the dim Limousine

light. He certainly looked the music industry part, but more like an aging pimp out of a Shaft movie from the seventies.

Trip continued. "After we eat, I want to take you guys directly to a recording studio, which is also on Elm Street." Abe looked at Joey and Shawn, but they were too busy being mesmerized by Trip McGee. None of them had ever been to this rich part of downtown Minneapolis before.

The limo pulled over beside the entrance to the prestigious Place d' Elm. A valet rushed over to park it. The driver opened the back door, and everyone filed out. Trip whispered something to the driver, who smiled and walked away.

The design of the Place d' Elm's foyer was very rich and sophisticated, with large, exotic European paintings hanging on the walls. The maître d'hôtel ceremoniously led them to their table inside the equally plush and wealthy-looking restaurant.

What a place to come for a burger! They all sat down. Abe wondered if Trip was independently wealthy or something, or if he made his income purely from the music industry.

"I understand you are interested in signing our group to some kind of a managerial deal?" Abe said.

"Waiter!" Trip exclaimed, intentionally not responding to Abe's question. "Is there any MSG in the food here? I absolutely cannot have any MSG."

"No, sir, I believe we do not use MSG in any of our food."

"Believing is one thing, knowing is another. Do you believe or do you know?" Trip asked, smiling at the waiter.

"I guess I know—"

"Good, hold on to this for me," Trip slipped the waiter some brand new one dollar bills that immediately inspired a generous smile. He was a smooth operator.

"And by the way, please bring these gentlemen a bottle of your finest red wine."

"Yes, sir!" the waiter proclaimed enthusiastically as he left.

"Abe, I know you have questions," Trip continued, leaning back and lighting up a long, thick, Mexican cigar. "You probably want to know what I do, who else in the industry I represent, and what I want with you guys. Right?"

"Right."

“Well, let me assure you that I have only your best interest in mind. I ran into an old friend at the Minnesota Music Awards last week. He told me that he thought you guys had the freshest sound around. He gave me Shawn’s number and I called him up.”

Shawn nodded, acknowledging the truth of the matter.

“I met up with both Joey and Shawn and listened to some live jams you guys have done.”

“But those recordings were terrible—” Abe said.

“Yes, I know, but that is not what I listen for. When you have been in the industry as long as I have, you know talent when you hear it, regardless of the recording medium.”

He leaned over, now looking very serious.

“Do you guys remember Gang Starr?”

“Of course,” Abe replied. “They were the most successful R&B group in the seventies, and it was the first time a black R&B group ever came close to rivaling the success of white Pop groups like the Beatles.”

“I see you know your history too. Well, *F.Y.I.*’ as you young people might say, I was the manager responsible for all that success you’re talking about!”

Abe was surprised, and flashed a look at Shawn and Joey. They were busy keeping their cool about the whole thing.

“I was Vice President of A&R at KoolTown Records when we first signed them. I also managed TJ, the lead singer, when he decided to go solo.”

Now Abe was beginning to understand why Joey and Shawn were so enamored with Trip McGee. He was obviously an industry player. *What an avalanche of good fortune this could turn out to be.* One day you’re in jail, and the next, you’re in the presence of a mogul, or at least what seemed like a mogul.

“I didn’t sign those guys because they had a great sounding demo. In fact, they weren’t even as tight as you guys are. All I care about is raw talent. I’ve heard you and the guys perform your songs, Abe, and today I saw you perform in court. As far as I’m concerned, talent is a transferable skill, and I can see it a mile away.” Trip leaned back in his chair.

There was an awkward moment as the waiter brought the drinks, took their orders, and vanished again. Abe took a slow sip of the expensive wine. His mind was racing. Trip was obviously straight to the point. How could you argue with that?

“So, who do you manage now?”

“You guys.”

Confused, Abe turned around sharply and faced Joey and Shawn.

“Did you guys sign--?”

“No, no, Abe, I was just kidding. Lighten up and take your lawyer hat off for a second,” Trip said. “We haven’t signed anything yet. I want you guys to record a demo first. Maybe even the whole album. Things are different in the music business nowadays. All the executives now want to hear finished product. But don’t worry; it’ll be paid for. When you’re done, I want you to come to New York and meet my associates. We’ll sign a standard management deal. I get a small percentage of your career. You keep the rest. If all goes well, I’ll have you guys at the top of the Billboard charts in six months.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

Abe looked at Shawn and Joey again, for support.

“I think we should do it,” Joey spoke up for the first time, smiling as usual, and rolling his eyes for effect. “I can’t wait to get hooked up and roll with the N.Y. posse, bay-bee!”

“Me too, man.” Shawn joined in. “I’m done with this Minneapolis music scene. None of the producers here are going to help us out. They’re too busy trying to get hooked up to work with established artists. We’re better off going to New York where the real action is.”

Trip carefully observed their exchange. He could sense Abe was the leader here, but Joey and Shawn had a strong say as well. Good stuff to know if you are in the business of managing relationships.

The waiter brought in the food and placed large, hot plates in front of everyone.

“Let’s eat, gentlemen. After this, we’ll go to the studio. No strings attached. I’ll keep the masters, but if you guys don’t want to do this, you can always buy them from me and pull out any time you want to.” Trip McGee appeared very sincere.

“For now, let’s just eat,” Trip said, waving his hands at the food before them.

It turned out to be a great meal. Joey had a huge steak, almost the size of his head, and Shawn had lobster and fish. Abe stuck to his simple hamburger order, which tasted like heaven after his prison experience,

while Trip had something fancy without MSG. When they were done, Trip handed the waiter a check.

"I'm sorry sir, but we do not accept out-of-state checks," The waiter politely informed him.

"Why not?" Trip argued.

"We've had a lot of checks bounce lately, sir. But we do accept cash or credit."

Trip had an amazed expression on his face. "Get me the manager." He said, shaking his head in wonderment. "I'm known throughout the United States at the finest restaurants, and I've never heard of this kind of situation. I'll never come here again if you're not careful."

The manager appeared immediately. He was a middle-aged Frenchman with a stately look about him. Trip pulled him aside to a far corner of the restaurant and spoke to him in low tones. Abe couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could see the manager begin to laugh, and Trip was shaking his hand and tapping his shoulder. *It was amazing!* Trip had turned the situation around, and was chatting with the manager as though he was one of his best friends. *Now that's talent.*

The manager accepted the check and wished them the best.

Trip took Abe, Shawn and Joey to Elm Street Studio -- the most prestigious music-recording studio in the Minneapolis area. Located in the plush suburb of Edina, Artists, Producers and Musicians from all over the world regularly traveled to the Twin Cities to record their albums, movie soundtracks, or remix projects there. Elm Street easily rivaled any existing studio in the world with their state-of-the art analog and digital recording equipment, Professional grade audio rooms, excellent customer service, and of course, exorbitant prices.

They had several studios in the complex named after the alphabet, starting from the main studio A to the pre-production room, Studio E. Musicians paid rates ranging from \$50 in studio E, to \$300 dollars an hour for an opportunity to just breathe inside studio A, the largest and most expensive room. Rumor had it that a guy called Tyrone Williams discovered Prince jamming in studio E in 1979. The rest, as they say, is history.

Trip McGee was lounging in the lobby next to the foyer outside studio A, chatting up the receptionist. At his age, he was still quite a

charmer. Abe and Shawn were in the rehearsal room, tuning their instruments, and waiting to be called in to the studio to record.

“What song do you have in mind, Abe?” Joey asked.

“It’s a new one I’m writing. I’ve got the concept and the beginning, but I still have to finish up the second verse and some of the choruses.”

“Let me guess, it’s called ‘Kill Whitey!’ Shawn offered jokingly.

“C’mon, man. Be serious.” Abe retorted. “Believe it or not, this one is not about racism. It’s simply called ‘Home,’ and I’ll let you hear it once we’re plugged in.”

The sound engineer came out of the studio and introduced himself to the band. He was a slim, athletic rock and roll type, with long hair and numerous tattoos on his arms.

“I’m John Avery.” He said. “What’s the name of your band?”

“*Danshiki*,” Shawn responded.

“What kind of music do you do?”

“I guess you’d call it ‘Message R&B/Pop/Reggae’ or something,” Abe added. They had never really tried to categorize their music. John wrote down the band’s name and song style on his studio track sheet.

“Cool. C’mon in. Just set up your gear over there, and we’ll do a dry run. We are going to set you guys up to jam each song straight to multi-track tape.” The guys started dragging in the musical gear. Abe pulled the engineer aside.

“Hey, John,” Abe said. “How are we paying for this?”

“It’s on credit. Trip McGee has promised to pay when you guys get a record deal. It’s called a spec’ deal.”

“So you mean he’s not actually paying any money today or in the near future?”

“Nope.”

“Is that normal?”

“Well, you can’t just get a speculation deal off the street, if that’s what you mean. The studio manager has to know you and trust that you can deliver.”

“Thanks.” Abe said. *Well that’s cleared up*, he surmised privately. At least Trip McGee was really in the music business and had some clout. But Abe still felt it was strange how he had a habit of never actually paying for anything or answering direct questions. His suspicious mind raced again, but he checked himself and decided to focus on taking

advantage of the situation. At least for the first time they'd get a good quality demo done.

The Studio A hallway was packed with equipment. They seemed to have everything from old analog keyboards, amplifiers, and speakers, to new, state-of-the-art digital equipment hanging from the walls, ready to be used as needed. Once inside, they could see that the studio consisted of two large rooms. The first was the control room, with a large Neve analog-digital mixing board with thousands of buttons and colored lights. Computers were littered around the room, connected to several different digital recording sound modules with exotic knobs and monitors. The second room was the audio room, separated from the control room by a large, soundproofed glass wall and a thick door. John Avery, while in the control room, had a full view of Abe, Joey and Shawn in the audio room, but there was no sound leaking between the rooms. He communicated with them using only a small microphone built into his audio mixing board.

"Ready for a dry run, guys?"

"Ready."

"Ok. Five, four, three—" He counted the rest down with his fingers. Abe started to strum his guitar as Shawn and Joey looked on. As with most of Abe's ballads, they knew they would join him as soon as he had established the key and the groove. Trip walked in and sat down next to John Avery, as Abe began to sing:

*"Here I am, lonely without a place,
Empty without the people, who shared my history,
Back home, simple and young we were,
Happy although we were hungry,
'Cos we had each other,
But now, somewhere so far away
How do I find that something to believe in,
Just like,
Home,
How do I get back home?
How do I find my yesterday, where my dreams started?
I am young and yet so old,
Looking for love in history,*

Where's this place called home?"

Trip and John listened from the sound room, bobbing their heads to the groove as the guys jammed along.

"I think you've got something here, Trip."

"You bet I do, John. You bet I do."

Abe, Joey and Shawn finished the recording and decided to call it a day. They thanked Trip and promised to meet him again the next day to lay some more tracks and talk further about a venture together.

Later the group hooked up for beers at their usual hang out in the West Bank, at the 5th Street Corner bar. They each ordered a round of Samuel Adams lager.

"So what do you think, Abe?" Joey asked, excited.

"Don't you feel like you just won the lottery?" Shawn chipped in.

"I think he's a con artist." Abe responded calmly, sipping his beer. "I can smell his type a mile away."

"So are you saying you don't want to do it?"

"No, in fact, I say let's go for it because the industry is full of guys like that anyway, and this is better than nothing. Obviously, we have to go with the flow. I'm just a little concerned about him, that's all."

"What is it with you, man?" Shawn burst out impatiently. "Why can't you just trust someone for once?"

"I don't know. I guess it's just the way I am."

"Well, I hope we don't blow this chance. I'm tired of playing in these stupid, run-down bars."

"Same here," Joey said, looking up at the rotting ceiling of the bar and downing his beer. "I could really use being rich right about now."

"I think he's just trying to use us like anybody else in the industry would," Abe continued, "But we better have our own Plan B to use *him*. Everybody's crooked in this business. He might look rich, but I can tell he's broke."

"So you think all that money and the limo were just a front?"

"Why not? Isn't this the music business? Notice how he never actually paid for anything, and how he never told us whom he's working with right now? I bet you he's a 'has-been,' trying to revive his glory days from the seventies, and we're his ticket to get back into the game."

“So what’s your Plan B?” Shawn asked, not wanting to argue. “I’m definitely not trying to end up on V-H-One’s ‘Where are they now?’ program for has-been musicians!”

Joey laughed, almost spitting out his beer.

“And how do you propose we avoid that, Abe?”

“By never signing any stupid record deals with managers or record companies. Do you realize that after they are done taking all their various percentages, we’ll be left with practically nothing?”

“Yeah, but we’d be famous.” said Joey.

“And broke. Just like MC-Hammer,” Abe said. “You see, money is what really makes the music industry tick. If we had our own money, we wouldn’t need Prince, or Jam & Lewis, or even Trip McGee.” Abe spat out passionately. “We could use the big record companies as ordinary distribution channels. They’d fund everything and we’d keep 100% of our profits and royalties.”

“And I suppose this money will just fall out of the sky?” Shawn quipped cynically.

“Why not? The more I think about it, the more I think it might be waiting for us in some remote village in Africa,” Abe replied, with a distant look in his eyes. “Remember that Ezra guy I told you about?”

“The crazy African guy you met in jail?”

“Yep. He got deported this morning, but he left me a note with his address in Nigeria.” Abe replied, pulling out the note from his pocket.

“See, it says right here. He really thinks I might be the heir to millions, and all I’ve got to do is show up and collect.”

They all looked at each other, saying not a word. It was all too amazing and far-fetched to argue, or even to speculate. They finished their beers quietly, paid the tab, and left the 5th Street Corner bar. A cold evening wind outside howled noisily, interrupting their silence.

SEVEN

“A debt may get moldy, but it never rots.”

The West Bank

Abe parted quietly with Shawn and Joey and walked home from the 5th Street Corner bar. Burdened with the weight of his thoughts, he proceeded slowly along the 5th Street Bridge that separated the West Bank from the rest of the University of Minnesota. This bridge had taken him every morning from his apartment to his part-time job at Charlie’s Kitchen in neighboring Dinky-town. The evening sky above him was cloudy, with a strange mix of red and purple. It was a gloomy sky, just like the feeling in his heart. He watched the new cars drive past him, carrying people going home to their homes, no doubt, with creature comforts he had never known.

How great it would be to have enough money to buy a new car and a comfortable home for a change?

Abe stopped at the Amoco gas station across from his apartment on 19th and University Ave. He said hello to the attendant and walked over to the phone booth—the one he often used because he couldn’t afford a phone. He pulled out the Internet printout he made while he was at the state prison. He looked at the long list of names from James Osondu’s

university class list. *'Philip Sterling, Paul Pedersen, James Osondu, Nancy Abrams, Cletus Okolo, Steven Cliff...'*

He picked up the telephone, and dialed '411'. He waited for the computer recording on the other end to complete its useless introduction. Finally, a real person answered on the other line.

"Directory Assistance. Can I help you?"

"Yes, could you please connect me to Philip Sterling?"

"One moment, sir." Abe could hear the phone ringing.

"Hello—"

"May I speak to Philip Sterling, please?"

"Speaking."

"Sir, I am looking for someone who may know James Osondu. He graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1965. Can you help me?"

"I'm sorry, I can't quite place the name—"

"Thanks for your time." Abe hung up.

He looked at the next name on his list, and called 411 again.

"May I speak with Paul Pederson, please?"

"There is no one by that name here," A lady on the other end answered. "You must have the wrong number."

He hung up and tried another number.

"May I speak to Nancy Abrams, please?" Abe asked.

"This is Nancy." a soft voice answered.

"I am looking for someone who may remember James Osondu from the University of Minnesota class of 1965. Would you happen to know of him?"

"I'm sorry, the University had a lot of people back then, and I really didn't mingle much," She answered. "Sorry I can't help."

"No problem. Thanks for your time." Abe responded.

He tried several more numbers, but either they were wrong, or no one had heard of James Osondu. *This might be impossible.* For all he knew, he could do this all day and not find anyone who knew his father. Then he noticed an African-looking name on the list, 'Cletus Okolo.' He called Directory Assistance again. They found a number for Cletus Okolo and put him through. He noticed it was a University of Minnesota area number.

"Hello?" a deep, raspy voice answered.

"Sir, I wondered if you might know a gentleman named James Osondu?"

“And who are you?”

“I think I am his son.”

“You are what?”

“His son.”

“If this is a joke, I don’t appreciate it. Please don’t call here again.”

The line went dead.

Surprised, Abe made a note against his number. That was either a crabby old man, or he just didn’t like the name ‘James Osondu’ for some reason. He called a few more numbers on his list. No one had ever heard of James Osondu.

Abe left the phone booth, and walked across the street toward his apartment. Once he got inside, he searched for a phone directory. His apartment was in a mess as usual. He never really tried too hard to clean it up. It was a dump anyway. At one hundred and ninety-nine dollars a month, this was probably the lowest form of housing allowable by Minnesota law. He had a small, windowless, closet-sized room in an old beat-up house just behind the University. He shared the dirty bathroom and kitchen utilities with nine other tenants in different rooms down the hall. His room was so small and stuffy, he would joke with friends about how it barely even had enough space for a door to open.

He found the phone directory under a stack of guitar accessories. Thumbing through the personal and residential sections, he finally came across ‘C. Okolo,’ and noticed that his address was 653 5th Street, Minneapolis. *Right in the West Bank!* Whoever this person was, he lived very close by. Determined, Abe picked up his jacket and guitar, and headed out again, back to the West Bank.

Abe knocked on the door of 653 5th street, an apartment above the Nile restaurant. A name plate on the mailbox identified the resident as Mr. Cletus Okolo. The door opened, and a short, elderly African man appeared.

“Whatever you are selling, I am not buying.” The man announced in a thick Nigerian accent, a determined scowl on his face.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but I am the one who just called you. I’m looking for anyone who might know James Osondu.”

The man quietly studied Abe through foggy spectacles. He looked at Abe standing there, dreadlocks and guitar in hand, looking wretched and forlorn like any regular diehard West Bank street musician. He rubbed his

beard methodically, and after what seemed like an eternity of silence, he slowly spoke.

"Come in," he said, waving for Abe to take a chair. "You say you are James Osondu's son?"

"Yes, sir." Abe said, stepping inside the small, beaten-down apartment and sitting down in the closest chair. The apartment, albeit sparsely furnished, was neat and cozy.

The man looked Abe up and down again, studying him like a lab specimen.

"My name is Abe. Abuchi Osondu."

There was an awkward silence, as the man continued to stare at him.

"I can't believe it," He began, with a raspy voice, "Cletus Okolo did not think he would ever live to see this day," referring to himself in the third person. He sat down and cupped his chin with his two hands, looking at Abe with wonder.

"Now that I look at you, I can see the resemblance," He continued, his eyes becoming moist. "Cletus Okolo did not believe he would live to see the day Osondu would return." With that, he put his white-haired head in his hands and began sobbing quietly. Abe instinctively put his hand on the old man's shoulder, comforting him.

"Of course, you are Abuchi Osondu," he continued, gently pushing Abe aside and standing up. "Your mother must have given you your father's middle name. His full name was James Abuchi Osondu. I looked all over for you after your father left for Nigeria and we heard your mother died." Abe sat down again, listening respectfully.

"Would you like something to drink?" Cletus Okolo asked, wiping his tears on his sweater. Abe declined politely.

"I found your name on a old alumni list for a class that my father attended. I was hoping you could help me explain something," Abe said. "I need to trace my roots back to Africa. Apparently my father left me something in his will."

"Of course, he must have. He is an Igbo man, and you are his first son. I may not be able to help you find your roots, for it has been so long now, but I can definitely tell you about your father."

Cletus Okolo walked over to the kitchen drawer and pulled out a small bottle of alcohol. "Excuse, me, but I must drink to the gods." After taking a few hurried sips straight from the bottle, he sat down and began speaking, slowly and methodically.

“Your father was like a mentor to me in the sixties. I was very poor and knew no one in America until he took me in. I am an educated man today because of James Osondu. He was finishing his master’s degree when I got my first degree. We took a few classes together, which is how you probably found my name in a class list. Your father took me in like a brother. I couldn’t afford an education, but he encouraged me to take the university entrance examination anyway. You should have seen the party he threw in my honor when I finally passed the entrance examination.”

Tears once again flowed freely from Cletus Okolo’s face. Except on television, Abe had never seen a grown man cry. He turned his eyes away respectfully.

“Your father told me the age-old proverb of our people: ‘When a child washes his hands, he can eat with kings.’ Can you imagine? He paid for my entire undergraduate education simply because I passed the entrance examination, and I wasn’t even his blood brother. He helped me because, unlike others, I studied hard against all odds and passed the examination. He said by doing that, I was showing a good example about our people, and I had washed my hands.”

Cletus Okolo blew his nose into a soiled handkerchief.

“I promised I would repay him someday.”

Abe listened quietly, imagining what kind of man James Osondu must have been.

“I knew him when he first met your mother, Melanie.” Cletus Okolo continued. “They were planning to get married, but never quite got around to it. Right when she became pregnant, he was called to manage his father’s oil estate and serve in the Biafran war, so he had to go back to Nigeria. He promised to come back for both of you, but I never saw him again. I heard he died several years later as a chief of police.”

“Why didn’t he come back for me and Melanie?” Abe asked.

“Probably immigration problems. Maybe it was also the fact that our people back home didn’t approve of marrying any one outside of the immediate tribe. Its called tribalism, but if you ask me, it’s just pure racism. Generally, it was hard to come back in those days. That’s why I never left.” Cletus Okolo took another swig of his alcohol. It healed him of his pain, and calmed him down.

“I looked for you and Melanie after you were born, only to find that she had died and you had been sent to some orphanage here in town. The authorities refused to give me any information. For so many years I

tried to find you--" Cletus Okolo wiped his tears again. "But all is not lost, since you are here now. I thank our God, *Chukwu*. His_time is the best."

"Thank you, sir," Abe said sincerely, standing up to leave. "If you don't mind, I have one more question."

"Ask me anything, Osondu's son."

"Is it true that my father was a millionaire?"

"Conservatively speaking, if money were sand, the ocean couldn't contain the wealth your father had."

"So does that mean I would inherit it?"

"In Igbo custom, as the first son, or *Opara*, it is yours already. You must go home and claim your birthright."

Abe thanked him again, and walked to the door. As he opened the door to leave, Cletus Okolo called him back.

"Will you be going to search for your family?"

"At this point, I think I have to. I certainly have nothing to lose. It would be irresponsible not to."

"Yes, you are right. You must go immediately," Cletus Okolo said, walking toward him. "How will you get there?" He took Abe's arm, looked him up and down again, and deduced that he could probably use a clean shave and a few dollars. "Do you have any money?"

The obvious answer was no. "I'll be alright," Abe said, then turned again to leave. "Thanks."

"Wait!" Cletus Okolo exclaimed abruptly. "I have something for you." Abe paused. Cletus Okolo disappeared quickly into his bedroom. After a short moment, he reappeared with an envelope.

"This is for you. It is yours. Please stay in touch, you hear?"

"I will. Thanks again." Abe took the envelope and left.

Abe decided to take the long way home through the West Bank's main streets. He stopped over at his sidewalk hangout on the corner of 3rd and 6th Streets, and sat down in his usual spot to play his guitar. The sun had completely disappeared behind the other side of the world, and was slowly being replaced by the moon. The wind maintained its chilly howl, crying in the distance behind the din of the approaching West Bank nightlife. As people passed by, Abe drifted into a little dream-state, and started plucking at his guitar.

What could all this mean? Was his destiny somehow intertwined with that of his father's somewhere in Africa? He had to find out, and he had to find out immediately.

He thought about the logistics of making a move to travel to Africa. He would have to come up with a plan to raise his ticket money, and present it to Joey and Shawn. He knew he could convince them about this. Their musical careers would be practically guaranteed if he truly had the kind of money that might be waiting for him. They wouldn't have to work a day in their lives. *Danshiki* would be known all over the world as a top new R&B band. With a small investment into homes and creature comforts, they could focus on doing music for the right reason--purely for the love of it, and not for the money.

He started to play the song he wrote earlier, which he called 'Home'. He began it with a minor chord, in the key of 'A' flat, to maintain a haunting sadness. He mouthed the chorus to himself.

*"How do I get back home?
How do I find my yesterday, where my dreams started?
I am young and yet so old,
Looking for love in history,
Where's this place called home?"*

Yes! His mind was made up! He would complete the recording for Trip McGee and buy a ticket bound for Africa as soon as he could afford it. He would go and find his roots, and claim his legacy. If he came back a rich man, then all his dreams would have come true. If not, then maybe Trip McGee will deliver on the promise of a record deal. Either way, there was nothing to lose.

He got up and started walking home. He crossed the 5th Street Bridge with a determined gait in his step this time, and began humming a Simon and Garfunkel song to himself.

*"So we bought a pack of cigarettes,
And Mrs. Wagner's pies,
And walked off to look for America"*

How ironic. *I'm off to look for Africa!* A rush of excitement made him quicken his step. He knew he would probably have to work for months

just to afford a ticket to Africa, but he was prepared to do that. Maybe he could get a loan from someone. Maybe Joey and Shawn could throw in whatever they had. Maybe Trip McGee could con someone into parting with a couple grand. He didn't care about the means to this end. He just knew he had to make it happen somehow.

He walked into his apartment and closed the door behind him. It had been a long day. He lay down almost instantly and began to nod off to sleep in his clothes, guitar in hand. He felt something crinkle in his pocket, and pulled out the envelope he received from Cletus Okolo. He opened it carefully, not wanting to tear its contents. Inside was a personal check for three thousand dollars, made out from Cletus Okolo to James Abuchi Osondu.

In the lower left section of the check was a hurriedly inscribed note: "A gift to a son, is a repayment to the father."

PART 2

A Journey to Self

EIGHT

"A man who means to buy palm wine does not hang about at home until all the palm wine in the market is sold."

Homeward Bound

The Boeing 747 jet cruised comfortably at an altitude of thirty-five thousand feet, bound steadily for Amsterdam. The Northwest/KLM pilot had just announced that he would be turning off the "Fasten Seat Belt" lights, but advised everyone to remain fastened at all times while they were in their seats. This was all such an incredible experience for Abe. He had never been on a plane before, not to mention flying halfway around the world to Africa.

He was in a state of awe and innocent acceptance for this fantastic technology that mankind had created over years of innovation, allowing this plane to float effortlessly above the world with its cargo of people. He thought about all the money, sweat, and hard work that must have gone into evolving this technology to its current state. *So many millions must have been spent to get here.* Like any capitalist, free market society, so many millionaires were probably made along the way.

Suddenly he wondered how on earth his father could have become so rich. Could he have invented something of great technical significance in Africa? Or was he a successful businessman, or politician? Abe had heard a little about the political corruption that had been rampant in

post-colonial Africa. How exactly had his father made his fortune? He felt a gnawing fear. His fear was almost palpable, not only because he found himself precariously suspended, thousands of miles above God's earth, but also for the unknown adventure that lay ahead of him, somewhere deep in the heart of Africa.

He looked outside his window, trying to get his mind away from his own thoughts. He could see the beautiful white clouds below, and a haunting blue sky above him, stretching out until forever across the arc-shaped horizon. *This must be God's view of the world.* God's view of humans was probably like looking down on a line of ants. It didn't matter who was black or white, because from up here, everyone was the same. The clouds below looked fluffy and velvety, and he could imagine them as the hills and valleys of a heavenly world that went about its daily business, unseen, unheard, and unknown to the arrogant humans, as they struggled for racial identity below.

He tried to sleep, but couldn't make it happen. His mind wandered back to Minneapolis, where he had lived all his life, now somewhere hundreds of miles behind and below him. Now he was amazingly journeying to seek his fortune in Nigeria. *Just like that.*

The flight attendant pulled a cart beside him and placed the standard in-flight meal on his tray. It was a hearty serving of chicken with vegetables. He felt like a king, and proceeded to eat, wondering occasionally how amazing it was that he was having a perfectly fantastic meal, thousands of miles above the earth. Once he finished his meal, he reclined his chair and lay back to rest. He felt much more relaxed now.

He couldn't help but fondly remember Cletus Okolo. The poor old man must have been saving up the three thousand dollars for almost thirty years! Thanks to the kindness and understanding of a bank cashier, Abe was able to quickly cash the check in full, and begin making his travel preparations.

Abe had also been able to get an original copy of his birth certificate from the Minnesota State Birth and Death Records Department, which, sure enough, had his name registered as James Abuchi Osondu. *Cletus Okolo had kept his promise to James Osondu after all these years!* He was able to get an international passport almost effortlessly, once he had his birth certificate. Buying his airline ticket and getting his entry visa to Nigeria was easy once he had cashed the check. What was not so easy was convincing Trip McGee and the guys that this was a good idea.

Abe slowly wandered off to sleep as his mind traveled back to America, recalling his last encounter with Trip McGee.

“It’s a wrap!” Trip McGee proclaimed, with the authority of someone who knew what he was talking about. “I’m willing to guarantee that you guys have made a hit record. I’ll call my contacts and get you a deal at one of the major labels if you agree to sign on with me!”

They had finished recording twelve songs, jammed ‘live,’ straight to 2-inch analog tape with minimal overdubs, and then backed up to digital ProTools. They had also eventually mixed and mastered to CD, and were ready to shop for a record deal. It was truly a solid record production, showcasing well thought-out messages, lyrics, songwriting, and good musicianship--something that was rare in the current hip-hop driven music industry.

Trip and the guys were standing in the shade of some nearby trees outside the Elm Street Studio complex, going over their potential managerial relationship. It was the last day of recording, and everyone was anxious about next steps.

“I’m ready to go for it.” Shawn said.

“So am I.” Joey echoed.

“So, Abe, what do *you* want to do?” Trip asked, gesturing with both hands raised.

Abe kept them all waiting in an awkward silence, while he remained in deep thought. Finally, he answered, carefully.

“I’m not willing to sign anything until you actually get the deal.”

Trip knew he was dealing with a tough one here. There was not much he could do. Abe was the guy who wrote the songs. Abe also composed and sang them. So basically, he *was* the group. Trip knew he couldn’t argue with that. He could sense from the beginning that his relationship with Abe would be a rough one. It was obviously a clash of opinionated “Alpha” types. But he was used to that. He went through the same kind of thing with TJ in Gang Starr. *They’re all the same. The ones who think they’re talented lose their heads in their egos, but eventually, everybody’s got a price.* He liked this group, and he was going to stay away from conflict and find a way to make this work.

“Look, at a minimum, will you sign a letter of intent with me as your manager?”

“Certainly. I’ll sign one right now,” Abe said, “As long as we write it together, no lawyer’s drafts. I want it to say that it does not by itself constitute any kind of a binding deal. I am prepared to sign in a binding manner with you if, and only if you secure us a record deal.”

“Abe, I want you to be a part of this, but you are free to walk if you are not interested. I’ll stick with the guys with or without you. You’re either in or out,” Trip bluffed, working on loyalty with the other two at the same time. “You can’t have it both ways.”

“Hey, Abe, aren’t you being a little too hard-nosed about this?” Shawn stepped in, ready to fight this one out. He didn’t want to lose this chance. “Trip has been good to us. At least give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Yeah, what he said,” echoed Joey, referring to Shawn, and smiling sheepishly.

“Ok, I’ll tell you guys the truth, and Trip, I’m sorry if I’ve come off a little abrasive.” Abe said. “Its just that I don’t have much time all of a sudden.”

“No problem,” Trip said, pretending to be humble and thinking, *I’ve been here before, but this time, I will be the one left standing. Just watch. I won’t repeat the TJ disaster.*

“I’m not mad at you, Abe, but please let us know this ‘truth’ you’re talking about.”

“The truth is that I’m not going to be around for a while. I’ll be gone for probably a few weeks, but I really can’t be sure. I’m going to Africa to search for my family.”

Trip couldn’t hold back the surprised look on his face. *Why now?* He laughed out loud, as if to show he was utterly confused, but nobody else was, so he stopped.

“Is that why you won’t sign a simple managerial agreement?”

“Well, not really, but that’s the main part of it. What if something happened to me while I’m gone? I just don’t have enough time left to do this stuff right. You see, I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“What?” Shawn and Joey shouted almost in unison. Trip was also surprised, but was even more fascinated by the fact that Abe had left the other guys out of the loop. *Maybe there’s a “betrayal” angle to exploit here later.* He schemed for a way to win his battle of control with Abe.

“Yes. I am leaving tomorrow. But I want you guys to go ahead to New York with Trip and our demo CD. Go and try to get a record deal.

When I get back, we can sign on the dotted line with Trip and go on tour, or do whatever it is that signed groups do.”

“Ok, you guys obviously need to talk about all this,” Trip began. “I’ll be in that Starbucks across the street. If you guys want to sign something, come in there and lets do this. Otherwise, lets call this whole thing off.” With that, he walked away, noticeably perturbed.

Shawn motioned to Abe and Joey, “Can we talk about this for a second?” They agreed, and all three huddled together on the sidewalk.

“We’ll join you in a minute, Trip,” Shawn said. Trip waved at them without turning back, signaling it was okay. Inside, he was raging with anger, but didn’t want them to see it. Like any good manager, he needed to keep his composure at all times, even when he was not in control of the situation.

“Are you really going to go look for that money, man?” Joey asked, once Trip was out of sight.

“Yep. And I hope to come back as soon as possible and finance this whole thing. I’m not trying to get all caught up in some stupid percentage deal with industry types like Trip. If we end up liking him, we can keep him on as a personal manager or something, but at least it’ll be on our terms.”

Abe grabbed both of them by the shoulders.

“Look, we’ve always been there for each other, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, there’s nothing different about this. Its just another weird challenge we have to face on our journey to stardom. The music industry is like swimming in an ocean full of sharks. It’s tough, but if we’re going to make it we’re going to have to stick together. You guys do your part, which is to play along with Trip McGee until I get back with the money. Once I’m back, we’ll have the option to dump him or keep him if we stay away from signing contracts. If we have our own money, we can finance this thing ourselves, ‘cause its all about control in the music business.”

“What if this is all some kind of hoax and you don’t have any money when you get back?” Joey asked, now serious.

“Then we’ll see what Trip can do. At least we’ll still have the option,” Abe pleaded.

“Either way, we have nothing to lose. Just yesterday, an old friend of my father gave me money for a trip to Africa. This thing looks like it’s for real. I have nothing to lose by trying.”

Joey and Shawn nodded their heads in agreement.

“So when are you leaving?”

“First thing tomorrow morning. But I’ll call you guys once I get to Nigeria, and we’ll keep in touch on the phone throughout this thing.”

They sat down with Trip a little later over coffee at the Starbuck’s on Elm Street. Tempers had cooled by now, and Trip eventually agreed to sign on Abe’s terms. They wrote out a brief but succinct letter of intent and signed it. They said their goodbyes and wished Abe good luck. He thanked them. He knew he would need it.

“We have started our gradual descent into Schipol International Airport,” Blared the voice of the captain, “Flight Attendants, please prepare for landing.”

Abe woke up abruptly from his slumber and shifted in his seat. He couldn’t believe the eight-hour flight to Amsterdam was already almost over. The meal had been better than he was used to, like that of a fine restaurant. Flying wasn’t that bad after all. He pulled out his travel itinerary and studied it. After arriving in Amsterdam, he was scheduled to board another plane directly to Lagos, Nigeria.

For the first time, he began to comprehend the full scale reality of what he was doing. He was on his way to a completely foreign land where he knew no one, and had no idea where to begin looking for his family. According to Ezra, he was the last of the Osondu’s, so it would probably be a challenge to find his roots. He knew he had to find Ezra and see if he could get help from him. Maybe he could offer him some kind of assurance of help getting back into America. Knowing Ezra, any promise of getting into the United States would be more than enough motivation for him to help.

Abe grabbed his bag and guitar, and deplaned with all the other passengers. They walked in an orderly fashion through immigration at Amsterdam’s Schipol International Airport.

Abe needed to find gate ‘E-21’, where his ticket indicated that his connecting plane to Lagos would be. As he boarded the motorized walkway, he noticed an African gentleman wearing an African traditional robe, walking toward him on the other aisle. The man had his eyes trained on Abe as he approached. When they were within a few feet of each other, the man raised his head once, nodding in greeting, and passed

by. Abe returned the nod and thought about the universal brotherhood that compelled both of them to greet each other. He knew the 'head-nod' was common in the States among African American people, and he wondered if this was sort of an international version of it. It occurred to him that he could write a song about this. After all, he *did* have his guitar with him. Maybe he'd call this one 'The International Head-Nod'. He pondered the concept for a moment;

The Head-nod might represent some unspoken human bond that I share with that man, which transcends time and space. But is this 'human' bond limited to African people who share a collective history of slavery and colonial oppression? If it continues to be limited to Africans and African-Americans, then in trying to move on, in trying to be less 'race-conscious', in fairness to all, one must regard it as an exclusionary act towards people of other races. Wouldn't it be really big of humankind if the 'head-nod' could be shared amongst everyone the world over? It could even become some kind of sign for goodwill to humankind, between all people, of all races...(as long as it didn't turn into a nuisance...imagine nodding to every single person we meet everyday...)

He quickened his pace along the walkway, enjoying his theory, and feeling very much in harmony with the universe out here in this foreign land. Anxious to try out his newfound epiphany, Abe looked squarely at the next man he saw approaching on the walkway. He was a kind-looking, middle-aged white man carrying a heavy bag on his shoulder. Abe tried to focus on his eyes, and nodded to him.

The gentleman ignored him.

Abe finally found gate E-21, and noticed that his connecting flight to Lagos would leave in about half an hour. Thankfully, he was just on time. He joined a growing queue of what seemed to be mostly Nigerian people gathering in front of the gate E-21 entrance. There were only one or two Europeans, no doubt traveling to Nigeria on business or holiday. People shifted about in anticipation, as though they were waiting for the crack of a gun, signaling the start of an Olympic race.

"Flight 419 to Lagos will be boarding momentarily," The voice blared overhead. Suddenly the line came to life and people started

rushing forward from all corners of the waiting area to get a favorable position near the entrance. Abe couldn't help but think of Ezra.

"This is why our people are a disgrace," someone said behind him in a thick Nigerian accent. "Don't they realize that the seats are assigned? It's not as though they can fight for the best seats as if this was a *gwongworo* bus. Our people can be stark raving mad sometimes!"

Abe looked at the gentleman speaking behind him. He was an immaculately dressed, smooth-shaven older man, probably in his early sixties. Abe smiled to himself and tried to hold his position amidst the raging crowd. It looked like Ezra was right; one needed practice to deal with rushing in Nigerian queues, even here in Amsterdam.

A fight broke out near the top of the line. A woman began untying her waist wrapper in preparation for war, as the insolent youngster that pushed her rushed ahead. The flight attendants broke up the fight before it started. Other Nigerians at the back of the line complained in disgust for both the time that was wasted, and the insubordination of the fighters.

They finally boarded the plane and began their journey. The well-dressed gentleman who had been standing behind Abe in the queue ended up sitting next to him on the plane. There was a copy of *USA-Today* tucked away in the seat pouch in front of him. The headline read:

Nigerian, Akin Obilo wins international Nobel prize for Physics.'

Abe asked the gentleman if he could borrow the magazine. The man obliged him. Abe read the article and was very impressed with the accomplishments and sophistication of this Akin Obilo and his colleagues at the University of Lagos. Akin was credited for some important new discoveries that literally redefined the way the world thinks about Physics in the new century.

First impressions are important. He certainly hadn't wanted to believe that Nigerians were all like Ezra and the fighters at gate 'E-21'. The article described in further detail the accomplishments of the great Akin Obilo, and named several other educational heroes of Nigeria, like mathematician Chike Obi, scientist Awojobi, and Literature gurus Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, placing them among the smartest and most acclaimed academics in the world. Abe thanked him for the paper and introduced himself.

"My name is Abuchi Osondu. What's your name, sir?"

"I'm Akin. Akin Obilo."

Abe felt a little silly, and smiled, looking at the picture in the article. What a coincidence! The man in the picture was indeed the same as the one who sat next to him!

"Wow, I'm sorry!" Abe said. "Congratulations on the Nobel prize—I had no idea you were the famous Mr. Akin Obilo."

"Oh, it's nothing, thank you," the man replied cordially. "You must know you are famous yourself, with a name like Osondu. Are you related to James Osondu?"

"I'm his son."

"Amazing." Akin Obilo shook his head. "I knew your father quite well. Wonders shall never cease."

Abe remembered the last time he heard that phrase—'*wonders shall never cease*'. It was from Ezra in the Minnesota state prison. He concluded it must be some conventional way of showing shock in this culture. He settled in to enjoy the rest of his journey, brimming with pride, feeling a bit like a celebrity. An overwhelming sense of pride came over him as he pondered the nature of this diverse, complex, and talented people who were now his people. From Ezra, to Cletus Okolo, to Akin Obilo—there was always something new to discover. He couldn't wait to get to Lagos and meet Ezra again. He couldn't wait to arrive in a country where, by virtue of his father, he was by no means a 'nobody', as he had always felt he was in America.

Abe drew a long sigh of relief once the plane was in the air. He looked outside his window again as the city of Amsterdam became progressively smaller and smaller below him. His eyes began to close, anxiety giving way to precious sleep. *Goodbye, western world! Hello, Nigeria, here I come!*

NINE

“A traveler to distant places should make no enemies.”

Lagos

Abe awoke from a much-needed slumber as the 747 jet approached the Lagos runway on its final descent pattern. He contrasted in his mind, the dense palm tree-topped land that lay beneath him with the structured city grids he had seen leaving Minneapolis and arriving in Amsterdam. Initially, there was a jungle landscape of trees and greenery, but as the plane passed over the central business district, he noticed a great density of modern buildings, with snaking and intertwining roads, albeit not in any clearly organized grid pattern. He was glad to see the modern buildings. They were probably the result of an organic city growth, and at least proof-positive that Africans didn't live in trees. Why couldn't they show this fantastic aerial view of Africa on the Discovery channel? His excitement was at a fever pitch.

Once the plane landed, the passengers all began to clap. No doubt, in appreciation to the pilots for getting them safely home, despite the constant turbulence. Abe looked around. Realizing he was the only one not clapping, he decided to join them. Do as the Romans do, right? It felt good to be part of this culture of appreciation. At the end of the ritual,

Abe deplaned with everyone else. This time, it was an orderly and well-paced movement off the plane. There was probably not much to rush for at this point. Everyone was home.

As he stepped down onto the Muritala Mohammed Airport tarmac, the hot, tropical air hit him like a blast from a furnace! Soon, he got used to the humidity and a dusty, earthy smell he had never known before. He proceeded to make the journey with everyone else, up the steps, into the airport building, and down the long walkway towards the immigration checkpoint. The airport appeared rather modern inside. Despite the humming fans and air-conditioners, it was almost as hot inside as it had been outside. *Maybe they like it hot here*, Abe wondered. Long-robed Nigerians scurried about, heading towards various gates and completely ignoring the heat.

"Your Passport?" the customs agent asked as the passengers gathered in a line at the immigration checkpoint. The customs officer was an intensely dark-skinned fellow wearing a soiled dark-brown uniform. Once it was his turn, Abe presented his United States passport promptly. The agent studied it with great interest.

"What is the purpose of your visit to Nigeria?"

"I am here to find my roots among my late father's family." Abe replied.

"When did you plant these roots?"

"No, no," Abe smiled, realizing they were not quite on the same page. "My father is the late James Osondu, and I am here to visit his people, my people."

"What is your nationality?"

"I'm a United States citizen." Abe replied, satisfied that he had communicated clearly. Suddenly the customs officer's face turned into a scowl. He barked impatiently.

"I said, what nationality, mister-man?" He looked Abe up and down distrustfully. Abe was confused. He thought he had just told him this. Apparently the customs officer hadn't understood Abe speaking in his American accent, so he tried internationalizing his words a bit.

"Ah-me-ri-cah, U-ni-ted States." he said, trying to be explicit. The man hissed loudly, turned away in apparent disgust, and motioned to another customs officer nearby. Abe watched their hushed exchange. He was totally confused, as they discussed his passport. The original customs officer returned, and asked him to step out from the line and wait in a

booth to his right. Abe didn't know how to respond to this, so he obliged. As he was about to leave the line, someone held his arm.

"Here, give them this. All they want is some money." It was Akin Obilo, handing him a large wad of dirty money. Abe accepted the wad of bills, still confused, and stepped into the booth. The second customs officer arrived, his face contorted with anger.

"My friend, we are not children here," He started, occasionally hitting his left hand with the *koboko* cane he had in his right hand. He acted in a rather threatening manner. "You have a Nigerian name, but you are showing me an American passport. Where is your Nigerian passport?"

"I don't have one," Abe responded humbly, trying to be as helpful as possible. Whatever the mistake here, it could be resolved with humility and clear thinking. After all, he felt he had rights like anyone else. "I already told the other man, I am an American citizen. Here is my visa, and my birth certificate."

"You *'been-to'* people! You all think we are stupid!" The senior customs officer shouted, almost spitting in Abe's face. "Did I say I wanted a visa? If you don't show me your Nigerian passport, I will lock you up under my immigration law!"

Abe was perplexed. This made absolutely no sense. How could he have a Nigerian passport when he had never been to Nigeria before? *What kind of laws were these?*

"I've never been to Nigeria. This is my first time. What's your problem? I have never heard of such a law, and I know a little bit about law!" He began to raise his voice in frustration. He crossed his arms instinctively, preparing for whatever was coming next. With a lightning move, both officers grabbed Abe and handcuffed him as he protested. Together they pushed him into a little temporary immigration room and closed the door behind them.

Not again! I didn't travel this far to get thrown into prison for some frivolous charge.

A few minutes passed, and the customs officers opened the door and entered the room. The original officer took off his handcuffs.

"Mister-man, look, no problem, nothing spoil," the first customs officer offered in a lower, kinder voice. This was probably their sick version of 'good cop, bad cop'. Abe was furious. They appalled him. He couldn't find words to respond to this situation. He remained silent. He was going to look for some responsible legal authority to report this

atrocities as soon as he could. He looked for name badges on their shirts, but didn't see any.

"Just give us *'something small'*, so we can buy chop-chop." The customs officer pleaded, appearing to restrain his angry partner.

Akin was right. This was just a front. 'Something small' must be another word for 'bribe'.

As he was about to respond, he noticed Akin just outside the door. Akin motioned to him, pointing to the fingers of his right hand, referring to the wad of money he had just given him. Abe nodded, and pulled the dirty notes from his pocket. He offered it to the customs officer, as though offering a bone to an insufferably stubborn dog.

"Thank you, sir." The Customs officer said, happily accepting the money in plain view of everyone. He smiled, exposing dirty teeth, and stamped Abe's passport, waving him away to freedom.

"Have a good stay in Nigeria, sir. Next passport!"

Abe picked up his bag and guitar, and left the small room disgusted and shaken up, but grateful to be free. He passed the customs gate, and careful to avoid the crowds, he found a small, sparsely populated area against a wall where he could see everyone. He needed to think for a minute. This should not have been a surprise to him. Bribery was probably the *modus operandi* in situations like this, he figured, considering the fact that everyone expected it, including an intellectual like Akin Obilo. He decided to wait for Akin to clear customs and thank him. He wanted to at least offer to repay him.

He contrasted this experience to his recent time spent in the Minnesota State Prison. In America, he had been able to argue his rights and legally wrangle his way out of a crime which in fact he had been guilty of, simply by doing research and being on the right side of his legal rights. Here, based on what he had just seen, he wondered if there was any such thing as a legal right. While the law had saved him from a real situation in Minnesota, he had just faced the most frivolous charge imaginable, and only money had saved him here. These people were obviously playing by a different set of rules, and Abe knew he would have to learn very quickly how to survive in this place, or else, he would never make it far enough to finding his father's people.

The conveyer belt with the baggage started to turn slowly, and the first bags came out. Abe had traveled very light, so he didn't check any bags in. He only brought with him a few clothes, his guitar and toiletries, all in two carry-ons. He hoped he would change some money and buy whatever he would need once he got to a hotel. He looked around inside the arrival and baggage-claim area, and could make out several people who were helping the travelers. They assisted the passengers by carrying their bags, calling taxis, or some other services he couldn't quite make out. He declined all the offers to help him, intent on waiting for Akin Obilo.

Abe finally got a glimpse of Akin Obilo coming out of the immigration checkpoint. He noticed a hoard of helpers rush toward him, and someone shooing them all away. Akin Obilo was obviously an important man. Abe walked over to where he was standing.

"Akin, I wanted to thank you so much for the help back there."

"No problem," Akin replied. "You really have to be careful with our people. Just give them what they want and go about your business."

"I'd like to repay you."

"Don't worry about it. Where are you headed?"

"I have to look for a contact of mine named Ezra Okiri."

"Is someone here to pick you up at the airport?"

"No."

"Ah-hah, that's your first mistake. With a name like Osondu, you must never come to Lagos without someone waiting for you at the airport. It is too dangerous. Wait with me at the Presidential lounge upstairs while they clear my luggage. I'll have my driver drop you off at your friend's place."

Abe followed him through the final customs checkpoint, and upstairs to the presidential lounge. The customs officers at the final checkpoint greeted Akin Obilo with the kind of respect reserved for VIPs (very important people). They opened doors for him anxiously. Expecting the worst, Abe was surprised at their positive attitude. Once they got to the lounge, Akin Obilo ordered some Heineken beer.

"I really appreciate your help, sir." Abe said, as he drank from the cold bottle.

“Don’t mention it. Now tell me what brings you to Nigeria.” Abe proceeded to tell him about his mission to find and claim the legacy of James Abuchi Osondu.

Ezra ‘Amtrak’ Okiri wore his new white robes and strode briskly through the marketplace toward the Ajegunle roundabout near his home. Ezra lived in the poorest slums of Lagos, but his church was located in Victoria Island, the richest part of the city, way on the other side of town. He figured there was no point having a church in his own neighborhood where poverty flourished. So he had to hurry to catch a Danfo bus, which would transport him to the other side of town. God forbid that he would be late on his first day. How would his flock perceive their new messenger of God arriving late? He could not imagine it. He arrived at the roundabout, knowing that eyes were following him, some even pitying him.

“Ezra, Is it true that you have now started a church?” someone shouted, mocking him. “Or did you get infected with a case of Mad Cow Disease during your travels?” Some bystanders who knew him were now laughing.

“God has a special punishment for those who mock his chosen prophet!” Ezra shouted back passionately, addressing a gathering crowd. “The Kingdom of God is at hand! You better come and join us for God’s peace, and pray for forgiveness!”

Ezra was proud of his new church and its name--a simple acronym that doubled for his central message. His church was called P.E.A.C.E, which stood for ‘Prophet Ezra’s Apostolic Church of Evangelism’, and he advertised it as the only place to get peace from the poverty and stress of living in Lagos.

Ezra had figured that he would make a go at starting some kind of business in Nigeria, and from experience, he felt he had two choices, a bank or a church. Walking through the streets of Lagos, he had been overwhelmed by the multitude of signs for businesses, a majority of them being churches and banks. On each side of any given street he would see a church, then a bank, another church, and then another bank...And the signs were very descriptive of the owners’ business intent; ‘God’s Merchant bank’, ‘Jesus and Mary’s Evangelist Church’, ‘Jeremiah’s Money-for-Hand Bank of Africa’, ‘The Get Rich Ministry of God’. Ezra

knew it was all just quick-money business, but if he was ever going to get back to America, he needed to join the trends and make some money fast.

Not having any money to start a bank, he settled upon the idea of a church. Once you got people's attention, he concluded, the money would follow. He had seen and heard of so many new millionaires who got their wealth by starting churches. So he decided to start his own, raise money and eventually expand his holy mission to the United States. The American immigration people could never turn back a missionary of God! Why, that would be high blasphemy, and he would appeal directly to the Pope if he had to.

He continued walking briskly, holding his white robes in his left hand, so they wouldn't get soiled on the dusty pathway. With his right hand, he tried waving down a *Danfo* bus, but they were all full. He cursed under his breath. *God will punish these bus drivers if they make me late getting to church.* He reviewed his choices. There was always the small *keke-marwa*, the dangerous and rickety Indian-made motorized tricycles that were named after the one-time governor who had commissioned them. He also could see the *okada*, the motorcycle taxis that carried only one passenger each. He felt that was a bit too demeaning for an individual of his status. After all, he was a 'been-to' from America, several times over, and he had a right to at least a decent seat on a real bus.

No one seemed to care about his feelings in the slums of Ajegunle. They continued laughing and pointing at him. Reluctantly, needing to escape the mockery, he finally gave up being picky, waved down an Okada motorcycle, gave the driver a dirty one Naira bill, and hopped on.

The first ever P.E.A.C.E church service went smoothly. Out of the forty seats Ezra had made available, two members were kind enough to show up. He was thankful to God for helping him start his new church. *Rome was not built in a day.* He closed his sermon with a special message for the day.

"Please don't forget to put your money donation in the basket before you leave," he admonished. "Remember, the man who remembers others, remembers also his Creator. God will provide double when you get home." The two faithful sheep thanked him and left.

Ezra sat down on his bench, alone in the little office space he had rented for his church service, wondering what God had in store for him next. He looked around him, knowing that the odds were against him,

but he shrugged away his fears resolutely. Like the stubborn Igbo man he was, he maintained his hope, knowing that in time, he would be back in America, getting on an Amtrak train to Chicago.

Suddenly, his Global Satellite mobile, or GSM phone rang. He turned it on, wondering whom he might have given his number to lately.

"Ezra! It's me, Abel!" came the anxious voice on the other side.

Ezra dropped the phone on the floor in shock! Looking up at the ceiling, he bowed his head in prayer, and with his right hand, quickly made the sign of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. He picked up the telephone, and calmed himself down enough to speak. He told Abe how to get to his home in Ajegunle and promised to meet him there in an hour. He dropped the phone, made the sign of the Hail Mary, and thanked God for hearing his prayers. He thanked God for bringing him in contact with his most important American immigration opportunity ever.

Back at Muritala Mohammed Airport, a lone customs officer slipped behind a wall in a remote section of the gating area. He brought out his GSM phone and dialed a secret number.

"I have something to report," he whispered.

A stern male voice came through on the other side.

"You are not to call here unless it is something important!"

"I think this might be important, sir."

"Well, if it's not, I will have your head! What is it?"

"I just cleared an American whose name is Abuchi Osondu!"

"Are you serious?"

"Yes, sir!"

"What is he here for?"

"He says he wants to find his family."

"Was he accompanied by anyone?"

"No."

"Wonders shall never cease! Well done! Keep him in your sights! I will convey your message immediately."

TEN

"It is only when you are close to a man that you can begin to smell his breath."

Go-Slow

"That is such a fantastic story!" Akin Obilo said, as he sat in the 'owner's corner', the right-hand-side back seat of his new Mercedes S-600, and stared at Abe in wonderment. Abe sat in the left back seat. The driver was trying to find the quickest route to Ezra's home in Ajegunle, which would avoid the heavy traffic 'go-slow' that always piled up around the airport and extended all the way through the city. The driver was not having much luck, and the car stood in the heavy traffic at a virtual standstill. Abe couldn't help but admire the Mercedes S-600's interior, as he had never been in one before. It was a beautiful beast of a car, and was number one in Akin Obilo's fleet of six vehicles, which rarely left the islands of Victoria, Ikoyi, Victoria Garden City, and the other higher-class suburbs of Lagos. But today, Akin Obilo was making an exception to help get Abe safely to his destination.

"So let me get this straight. Out of the blue, you have discovered you could be heir to the Osondu millions, and that is why you are here?"

"Yes," Abe said.

"I must tell you," he started, concern in his voice. "I know first hand about the Osondu story. I knew the man well. Nigeria is like a small town--all the rich people know each other. I even did a transaction or

two with him, and indeed, he was regarded as a great man, truly respected by all. But you have to be careful. You may be in great danger. I am sure some distant relatives of yours have already put their dibs on your father's money. They won't let go of it easily."

"Yeah, I thought of that," Abe said, uncomfortable discussing the idea of possible danger ahead. He looked out of the window at the long lanes of waiting cars, stuck in a standstill on both sides of the street. The 'go-slow' stretched for miles in either direction. Some drivers, mostly in the yellow and black taxis, cursed each other as they tried to inch their way forward. Others were less aggressive, and just waited limply, resigned to their fate as the hot sun and exhaust fumes took a toll on their nervous systems. The cars were almost all old and battered. From the condition they were in, Abe put their average age at about fifteen years each, and noticed that the drivers didn't care much about getting fender-benders as they navigated dangerously close to each other. Abe felt lucky to be protected from the heat, sun, fumes, and dangerous driving inside the air-conditioned luxury of the new Mercedes S-600.

"Are the roads always this congested?" Abe asked, anxious to change the subject from the unknown adventure ahead of him.

Akin laughed. "This is just a typical day in Lagos traffic!" He said. "This is what we call 'go-slow', and it's actually pretty good compared to what you might call 'no-go-at-all'." He laughed at his own joke. "That is when the stupid taxi and *Danfo* drivers have inched their way so tightly together that they can't even move because there is simply no room left. You would eventually need caterpillar trucks to plow them free like garbage. It's hilarious! And it's such a frequent occurrence that someone even referred to it in a popular song called '*Oyinbo Rekepete*'." Akin laughed again, and broke out into song. The driver joined him, recognizing the tune, and enjoying the discussion.

*Oyinbo Rekepete,
You don hit my car!
Oyinbo Rekepete*

"It's kind of like mating dogs who get stuck to each other during copulation," Akin Obilo continued, "And they get more and more stuck the more they try to wriggle free. You'd think the dogs would be smart

enough to avoid a repeat performance, but once they are in the same vicinity, they'll do it all over again."

Abe laughed with him. Akin Obilo had an infectious sense of humor. He also appeared to be a very bright person who didn't take himself too seriously, even though he was a huge success.

"So tell me about your career," Abe said. "I was really impressed to find myself in the presence of a Nigerian Nobel laureate."

"Oh, it's been a nightmare trying to achieve credibility in Nigeria," Akin said, shaking his head from side to side. "I had to go overseas to be recognized back home. Our people just don't realize potential until outsiders do, then they swoop in and claim the credit for everything. In my opinion, the low respect given to 'Made-in-Nigeria' products and services is one of the most destructive manifestations of our colonial mentality."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, take me for example. I was a professor at the University of Lagos, and had all kinds of inventions and theories under my belt, but couldn't get the attention of the government. I had to bribe all the way up to Government House in Abuja, just to be turned back because no one would see me. One of my colleagues even died from heart failure during the ordeal. And what were we trying to do? We simply wanted to get the government's blessing to begin producing our own cars and multi-purpose vehicles locally."

"Why wouldn't they endorse that?"

"Because there was no room for bribery and kickbacks in my proposal, since I refused to structure things illegally. It's called the 'three-to-one' rule. If a contract is really worth 30 million, you need to illegally inflate the contractual price on paper to at least 40 million, so you can give away 10 million in kickbacks along the way. Everyone wants to 'chop', as they say, from the lowly paper-pushing secretaries all the way up to the people in higher office. No one would help me unless I guaranteed them kickback money from the contracts." Akin shifted in his seat.

"You see, unfortunately, I think we are predominantly a nation of consumers, not producers. We only think in terms of how much we can spend or eat, and how much money we can make illegally from contract kickbacks. Instead of creating brand equity in our own 'made-in-Nigeria' products like the Asians do, we are too busy importing what others have

made as part of our get-rich-quick schemes. Since no one stood to benefit through bribery from my inventions or proposals, I couldn't get it past the standard plutocracy."

"That's terrible," Abe said. "So how did you eventually get your work noticed?"

"I checked out! Fled the country!" he screamed, laughing in celebration. "They even had a government-sponsored advertising campaign back then called '*Andrew, don't check out!*' As the slogan implies, it was designed to persuade people like myself to stay home and develop the country. But like so many others, I left out of frustration, and proposed my ideas to the British and American corporations and governments. That was ten years ago. My patents are now part of some of the best civil engineering technologies, ranging from oil exploration to vehicle manufacturing. I even have a patent used in this Mercedes, which I got for free from Germany in recognition of my work."

Abe could see that this was one of Akin's favorite subjects. He was visibly proud that he had achieved greatness, despite the corruption all around him.

"We are really a self-defeating nation of people. We are so talented; yet, the machine of our corrupt society consistently brings us down. It's like a stampede. Once the cows are going full speed, it's impossible for a single cow to turn around without getting killed, so everyone is pulled along with the corruption." Akin looked at Abe for extra effect. "They should be happy some of us 'Andrews' have decided to return!"

The 'Go-Slow' got a little better, and the driver was able to squeeze his way out of the main road and onto some back streets. It was the long way in miles, but given the traffic situation, it would end up being the shorter route in terms of time.

"One more thing. Driver, stop somewhere so we can buy a GSM phone," Akin said. Turning to Abe, he said, "I want you to keep in constant touch with me via mobile phone as you make your way to your father's people."

Abe was very grateful. They stopped at a local shop and picked up a GSM mobile telephone by Nokia.

"This is what we call 'Nokia-to-Nokia'. People love this phone so much because of all the nifty features, but the really good thing about it is

that it is wireless, and does not rely on the traditional underground telephone wire infrastructure, which practically no longer exists. That way, you can call anyone anywhere in the country, or even abroad, without dealing with the traditional, government controlled agencies. It's the perfect communication tool for developing countries."

They continued on their journey, and before long, they were in Ajegunle, pulling up beside Ezra's family home at Number 26 Onitiri Road. Abe got out of the Mercedes, and thanked Akin sincerely, promising to keep in touch.

"Make sure you are careful. Remember, as a foreigner, you are an easy target, so always be on the alert." Akin said. "Here's my cell phone number. Call me if you need anything."

"How do I pay for this phone and the service on it?" Abe asked, grateful beyond words.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of the bill. You just stay safe."

"Thank you so much, Akin--"

"No problem. Just stay safe!"

With that, the Mercedes pulled away, leaving Abe standing in front of Ezra's house in the middle of a dusty Ajegunle roadway, wondering how on earth he had been so lucky to meet Mr. Akin Obilo.

Ezra had hurried back from his church in Victoria Island, in order to meet Abe at his home in Ajegunle. He waited patiently in his living room, unable to contain his joy at the thought of seeing Abe. Finally he peaked out of his window and saw Abe outside, waiting at his gate. Ezra sprang up, robes and all, and dashed to meet him. He ran toward Abe like a small animal, scurrying and yelping until finally leaping into his arms, surprising Abe to no end. Abe was happy to see Ezra as well. There is something to be said for seeing a familiar face in a strange land after all he had been through so far. After the initial excitement, Ezra invited him into his home, to introduce him to his family.

Ezra's home was a gated house like practically all the other homes in Lagos. Abe asked why the gates were so high, and Ezra told him a proverb. "When a man washes his face with shit, he should expect flies to visit him daily." He later explained to Abe that armed robbers are a way of life around here, and they will visit you regularly if you don't build a high enough fence around your property.

Ezra's house was a small, cement, bungalow construction, which was unfinished in terms of paint and plaster, so that you could still see the patterns of the staggered cement blocks that were used to construct the walls. The roof of his house was made with equally unfinished and unpainted zinc. But Ezra was very proud of his home, which he called 'face me, I face you', because of the architectural plan of the building. There were six rooms total, all on one level, placed in such a way that they all had doors opening out into a central corridor that ran the length of the building. When you opened one door and walked into the shared corridor, you would find yourself facing another tenant's door, hence the name, 'face me, I face you'. He built it himself over the years with his own money and was the landlord, renting out some of the rooms to others. He kept the largest room in the back corner to himself.

Abe had to bend down slightly to get all six feet of him through the front door and into the dark corridor. Once inside, he walked behind Ezra to his corner room. People looked at him from their open doors as he walked by, studying his light-skinned complexion and American features. If they didn't before, now they truly believed in Ezra's greatness, for here was a real live American contact walking into his living room. Maybe his stories of Amtrak and America were in fact true after all. Ezra invited Abe into his room, opened the wooden window to let in some light, and asked Abe to sit down on the bed, which doubled up as his living room sofa.

"Share this with me." Ezra announced to Abe, passing him a small plate with a kola nut and a knife. "Our people say, 'He who brings kola, brings life, but in this case, you are the one who has brought *me* new life. So, please, eat this with me in celebration of your safe arrival."

"Thank you, Ezra." Abe said, anxious to get right to business. "Now, I have come to Nigeria on the strength of your story, so I am hoping you will help me. I am willing to pay—"

"C'mon, Abe. Don't treat me like a stranger." Ezra said, pronouncing 'stranger' with an overdrawn 'R' in his best American accent. "I know you will take care of me when we locate your people. You don't have to ask, for I am at your service in finding your roots."

Abe was relieved to hear that. "So where do we begin?" He asked.

"First things first," Ezra said. "Let me introduce you to my family, clear out a room for you to stay in, and then we will discuss."

"I was hoping to stay at a hotel—"

“And get robbed?” Ezra coughed out. You stand a better chance ‘lying low’, as Snoop Doggy Dog would say, here, in my humble, poor neighborhood, than showing your smooth American face near an expensive hotel. Please, consider my Ajegunle home yours while you are in Nigeria.”

Abe saw the twisted logic in that, and decided to take him up on the offer.

“Ngozi!” Ezra shouted, “Bring in the children.”

A chubby woman entered the room dressed in traditional native wrappers, followed by seven children ranging in age from sixteen to two. Ezra had certainly kept her busy over the years. Abe met the children and shook their hands one by one.

“You have just seen the reason why I am always trying to go to America,” Ezra said. “I want to provide a better future for them than the one I have been dealt in this Lagos. Imagine a man of my University education, and I cannot even buy bread sometimes. It is a disgrace, and America is my only chance.”

They all filed out of the room, except for his first son, who stayed and helped cut the Kola. Once he finished, he gave the plate back to his father and left the room.

Ezra took a bite of the Kola nut. “Kola nut is an offering that signifies friendship in our culture, like offering someone coffee when they visit you, but to us, it is more of a revered ceremony. So let us eat, Abe, and when we are done, I will take you to see your people. I heard they are having an Azuala election convention near here.”

“Azuala?”

“Yes, your father was an Azuala man. Most people who live and work in the slums of Lagos are actually migrants from other areas. When they come here, they form little clubs, and raise money for their villages back home. This is election period, so most clubs, including Azuala, will be meeting to raise election money.”

“Thanks, Ezra, for all your help,” Abe said. “I’ll also help you in whatever way I can to get back into the United States if you help guide me through this thing.”

“You are more than welcome,” Ezra said, taking off his church robe, revealing his normal clothes underneath. They chatted for a while, and caught up on stories since they last saw each other at the Minnesota State Prison. Ezra told Abe about how he got deported this last time, and Abe

told Ezra about his legal wrangling and how he eventually won the marijuana court case. Abe joked about how he wonders now why he didn't just finish his law degree.

"Goals are such a fly-by-night thing, the way they change, and your life can come totally full circle." Abe said. "I used to dream of being a lawyer, but I guess now I'm off in search of my next dream!" They were now laughing together like old friends. Ezra wasn't as crazy as he came off at first.

"I've been meaning to ask you, what were the white robes for?" Abe asked, out of curiosity. His robes had looked way too plain to be a traditional Nigerian outfit.

"Oh, I used to dream of owning a church, but not anymore. I'm off with you in search of my next dream!"

They laughed, and finished eating their kola nut.

Abe accompanied Ezra to the Azuala club's Ajegunle branch office, only a few miles away. The Azuala Local Government Area Meeting, or (ALGA), as it was formally called, was usually held every Saturday, but this week was the second to the last week of campaigning before the final Local Government Chairmanship Elections, so meetings were now held nightly. All the candidates had their Lagos representatives come together to raise money from relatives and friends in order to fund the various activities that would happen at home around the elections.

It was a festive time, and Azuala Igbos genuinely enjoyed festivals and speech making occasions. No other occasion rivaled elections for both. The former chairman of the ALGA, Simeon Ugada, stood up to address the gathering.

"Azuala kwe'nu!" he shouted in greeting, beginning the traditional introductory liturgy between an Igbo speaker and his audience.

"Azuala kwe'nu!" He shouted again, looking to the left of him with one arm raised as though he wanted to give someone a backhand slap.

"Hey!" The group responded in unison.

"Azuala kwe'nu!" he shouted again, this time, looking to his right, with his other arm raised.

"Hey!" They responded again, enthusiastically.

"Igbo kwe'nu!"

"Hey!"

“Azuala kwezuo’nu-oooh!”

“Heeeey!” The group responded.

There was silence and anticipation for what he would say or do next. Simeon Ugada was a master of the power of oration. In a much lower tone and with a mischievous smile, he continued. “We are here because our villages back home are having an election.”

“Yes, it is true,” someone offered from the crowd.

“We, who are in Lagos, apparently making money, have been asked to stand up and help to sponsor this election so that it will not be a disgrace to us all.”

“It is true.”

“Then why have some of us behaved like the tortoise and refused to pay our monthly election dues?”

The crowd laughed. Ugada was always good for a laugh in his opening comments. Several people raised their hands to speak. The place started to get out of control, with different people trying to speak at once. Finally someone’s voice was loudest, and others kept quiet to hear him out. It was Egbendu, the physically the largest man in all of Azuala. No one liked to mess with him.

“Please, someone tell me, what is wrong with our people?” he begged, pain covering his face like a scar. “Why must we shout over each other? Have you not heard of civilized discussion? I will be the chief whip today, and if anyone speaks out of line, I will fine him ten Naira on the spot!”

“It is true!” said the crowd, almost in unison. No one wanted to be fined. Now different people raised their hands, and Ugada pointed to an elderly man in the back.

“Ogbuefi Udu, please talk to us.” Ugada said.

“Umunna,” the old man began. “, My clansmen, I am a poor man, and the dues are a bit too expensive for me to afford. What is even worse is that we pay all this money, and it becomes mismanaged or embezzled in Azuala. They always rig the elections, which are supposed to be ‘free and fair’. Please, can we look at hiring an emissary of law to review the constitution of our organization?”

It was obvious that this man had raised a legitimate concern, but no one wanted to second his motion. Hiring a lawyer could expose all kinds of malpractices that people were profiting from. Ugada decided to let people know the motion would be squashed since no one supported it.

“Any one seconding the motion?” No one responded.

“According to our by-laws, if no-one supports a motion, it must be killed. Any supporters?” Again, no one responded. Ugada stood up, about to make his final comment, closing the motion. Finally, one hand was raised in the back. It was Ezra.

Abe didn’t like the look of this. They had been relatively anonymous until now, and he didn’t want to be exposed prematurely.

“I am not an Azuala man, but I want to introduce you to your long lost brother, who also happens to know a little about law!”

Everyone looked at him. Someone asked. “What does this have to do with payment of dues?”

“He is a lawyer by education, and can second Ogbuefi’s motion for an audit into the constitution”

“Does the man not have his own tongue, or are you his official press secretary?” someone said.

The people laughed. Abe had now become the center of attention, through no fault of his. He had no choice but to make a statement now, and Ezra was nudging him on.

“My name is Abuchi Osondu, and I am the first and only son of James Abuchi Osondu, your brother.”

A murmur broke out in the crowd. *Osondu’s son? The one rumored to be in America? Here?*

“It’s true that I studied law for a while, and I guess I do agree with Mr. Udu. Elections should be free and fair. I will help in any way I can.”

The people clapped.

“It is true. The young man has spoken a true word.”

“And he even looks like Osondu!” Ogbuefi Udu said.

“Then the motion is passed!” Ugada said. “When a child washes his hands, he can eat with kings. This is a great day! Greet him. He deserves our every respect for visiting his homeland. Let him be our emissary of law for the Azuala elections. Greet the son of Osondu!”

The meeting had changed from a discussion of the election, to a celebration of the miracle of Abe’s arrival. Everyone came over to greet Abe, the new emissary of law. Everyone stopped over to greet him, instantly accepting that he was indeed the long lost son of Osondu.

One of the men in the gathering slipped away unnoticed, and went into the back room. He looked around shiftily, and then dialed an important number on his cell phone. He needed all the privacy he could get.

“I swear, it is true!”

“Osondu’s son is really here?”

“Yes!”

“Okay, we have authorization to take action. He must not be allowed to cause trouble. Keep watching him, and stand by for instructions.”

ELEVEN

"The lizard that jumped from a high Iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did."

New York

"I can't really say how long this is going to take," Trip admitted, facing Joey and Shawn as they sat in his tenth-floor, Lower Manhattan office. Worldwide Artist Management, or 'W.A.M!' as he preferred to call it, was housed in a small office space divided into three cubicles and a central foyer.

Joey and Shawn had never visited New York City before. They left Minnesota for the Big Apple a day after Abe traveled to Nigeria. In an effort to win their trust and loyalty, Trip McGee had paid for their flight into La Guardia. He also put them up in a small apartment in neighboring New Jersey, where the rents were cheaper. However, he made them aware that he would not be able to pay for more than a couple weeks of accommodation. He advised that they get part-time jobs in the short term if they needed to, while they did the record company rounds.

In the little foyer sat Shaniqua, the office secretary, doing her nails, chewing her gum loudly, and answering phones all at once. She preferred to be called the 'administrative assistant', and she didn't take it lightly if someone made the mistake of referring to her as a secretary.

“Our administrative assistant was kind enough to send out all the packages last week. Right?” Trip turned to Shaniqua.

“Yup.” She said, between bites of her chewing gum, never quite looking up. “Ah already got rejection letters back from two o’ dem record labels, Trip.”

“See how efficient she is?” Trip smiled, ignoring the bad news. “Please send the letters into my office, Shaniqua. I’ll review them in there.”

Trip turned to Joey and Shawn. “The other two W.A.M! assistants, LaQuisha and Sharonda, are at the record companies right now, trying to push your group. We should hear something back pretty soon.”

“So what do we do between now and when we hear something back?” Shawn asked, anxious to get the ball rolling. They didn’t travel all the way to New York just for sightseeing.

“Don’t turn into Abe on me, Shawn,” Trip joked. Nobody laughed, so he continued. He hadn’t done well with jokes on this crowd ever since he’d met them. “Alright. I had planned that we go and visit some of these labels in person. I think we should go see some of my old pals in the industry, just to see what they say.”

“Can we go today?”

“Sure, but not until we get some lunch. I’m starved!”

They left for a deli in Greenwich Village, just three blocks away. Trip walked in front, leading the way. For his age, he certainly moved quickly. Shawn and Joey would have happily slowed down so they could stare at the endless tall buildings that disappeared into the distance. In Minneapolis, you could get to the end of the downtown area by walking just ten blocks in any direction. Here, it seemed like you needed a taxi or subway just to get from one side of the city to the other. The huge scale of the city and the buildings, the length of the streets, and the sheer number of people walking busily around New York’s concrete jungle, was simply overwhelming. All of a sudden, Minneapolis seemed like small-town USA. Once they settled into the deli, they ordered a light lunch, and Trip offered to pay.

“So what if no one likes our record, Trip?” Joey asked, between bites of his sandwich.

“I doubt that will happen. You guys are actually different, which is rare. The industry needs different stuff right now. Everybody and their dog sounds like a rapper nowadays, even Rock & Roll groups. If I see

another manufactured, teenage pop group, I swear, I'll puke! Everybody in R&B is either doing the new soul thing, or the street slang hip-hop thing. It's time for a fresh, poetic sound. It's time for the *Danshiki* sound."

"And you think we are different enough?"

"Yep. In fact, I've been meaning to ask you—Do you guys have any songs that *the two of you* wrote and sang on your own?"

"You mean without Abe?"

"Yeah. I mean, he's not exactly here, and I want to know what other potential avenues we can explore if we have to."

Joey and Shawn looked at each other, both recognizing a red flag. All of a sudden, the imaginary horns Abe must have seen on Trip's head stood up. Abe had warned them about this.

"Well, we have always just added music or embellishment to whatever Abe wrote." Shawn answered truthfully.

"Fine. But if I put you in a studio by yourselves, could you guys come up with something from scratch without him?"

"I guess we could, but why would we want to do that?"

"Because the music industry is unpredictable," Trip said, looking at them from the corner of his eyes as he stuffed his face with his ham and cheese sandwich. "Shit happens, y'know, and you've got to be prepared. I'm just looking out for you guys."

Shawn and Joey weren't prepared for this. They missed Abe, who would probably have been all over this with his no-nonsense 'lawyer' responses.

"I could get you guys a separate publishing deal, or—"

"We won't do anything without Abe." Joey interrupted, not smiling, not even a little. "Without him, there's no group. We all go home."

Shawn nodded in agreement, surprised at Joey's resolve. Even though he was usually jovial and easy-going, he could be feisty when he needed to be. Abe was right. These music industry guys were all sharks.

"O.K." Trip said, a little deflated. "We'll see what we can do with what we've got." He certainly had gotten the message. His only surprise was that it came from Joey.

The unforgiving New York autumn wind began to howl. The Time-Warner building stood on Fifth Avenue, facing Times Square. It housed

all the Warner Music Group labels, such as Elektra, Atlantic, London Sire, Warner Brothers and Rhino. Trip thought it would be a good idea to see his old A&R friends in several companies, all in person, and without ever leaving the building. He had asked Shaniqua to send *Danshiki* CDs and bios to all the regular A&R contacts in these companies, while he targeted the top executives himself. He also had his assistants, LaQuisha and Sharonda, scoping out the possibilities at Sony Music and the other big labels.

"Well, here we are!" Trip announced. "The corporate seat of music industry power!" Shawn and Joey looked up at the massive fifty-five story building, feeling very small, and realizing that they were ever so insignificant in the scheme of things. Minneapolis only had a few buildings this tall, let alone one that was devoted entirely to the music industry. If they were going to make a go for this music industry thing, they were certainly in the right place to do it. They steeled up their nerves and marched dutifully behind Trip McGee as he walked into the Time-Warner towers.

"We are here to see Jim Ryder." Trip said to the security guard. The guard called the Elektra Records front desk upstairs, and asked for Jim's assistant. The assistant announced that Jim was in, so he let them into the elevator towers, past the foyer. They took the elevators to the twenty-third floor, and into the offices of Elektra Records.

Once inside, Shawn and Joey saw scores of cubicles with signed artist posters on their walls, as well as gold and platinum records and paraphernalia of successful artist marketing campaigns over the years. Young executives bustled about on cell phones through the halls, while even younger secretaries and interns hustled to meet deadlines and schedules. *So this was ground zero of the music industry!* It was hard to connect this nerve center of creative marketing and king-making with the finished products at the record stores, on the radios, and on video channels like MTV and BET. A wave of confidence and hope came upon them. Even if nothing ever came of this, visiting New York would always remain an important landmark for the rest of their lives.

"Trip, ol' boy, how are ya?" Jim Ryder barked. He stood six feet, seven inches tall, a massive mound of a man, with an infectious smile.

"Doing just fine, and your family?" Trip responded.

"Couldn't be better. C'mon in."

The guys followed Trip into Jim Ryder's office. From the sign on his door they could tell he was the Vice President of Urban A&R for Elektra. Once inside, Trip and Jim proceeded to talk about golf, girls, vacationing in Hawaii, and the mysterious cause of all the recent merger and acquisition activity going on among the major record companies. They carried on for about ten minutes, laughing and catching up on old times. Shawn and Joey felt completely shut out, wondering if and when Trip would commandeer the discussion into the waters of *Danshiki*. They watched and remained respectfully quiet, but not a word was spoken about them or their group. Trip finally got up to leave. In between their final bouts of laughter, he placed one hand each on Shawn and Joey's shoulders.

"By the way, this is my new group, *Danshiki*."

"Oh, what kind of style are they?"

"Can't tell you, or else I'd have to kill you" Trip and Jim both rolled over, resuming their laughter.

"But just this once," Trip continued, trying to catch his breath. "I'll let you check out the CD. Everybody wants these guys. There're too hot to handle right now, and I'm being really careful who checks 'em out."

"Hmmm!" Jim said, genuinely interested.

"All I can tell you is this; these guys are different, and I'm going to have them signed within a month."

With that, almost as an after-thought, he handed Jim Ryder the *Danshiki* promotional CD, shared a few last pleasantries, and said goodbye. Astounded, Shawn and Joey followed him out of Elektra and into the elevator.

"What was that all about?" Shawn barked, as the elevator made its way down twenty-three stories. "I thought he was expecting us! He hadn't even heard our music!"

"That's why this is my job, and that is your job." Trip said, pointing to the *Danshiki* music CD. "Music Industry Lesson Number One; I'm the man. Lesson Number Two; getting a record deal isn't all about the music you guys make. It's about the relationships I build."

"But you didn't even ask for a follow-up or anything." Shawn continued.

"Didn't need to. If he needs me, he'll call. That's what you call leverage. You don't beg. You see, it's like trying to land a high-paying job. You can't just send in a resume. That's how you get rejection letters like

the ones I've got Shaniqua piling up in my office. You have to walk up to people and build relationships."

The elevator opened, and they were back in the foyer, ready to go to another Major Record Label.

"When this is over," he continued, "I'm going to ask for thousands, or even millions of dollars for you guys, and executives would rather give that money to someone they play golf with, than to some over-talented idiot who thinks he's got a hit record."

They visited four more labels--Atlantic, Warner Brothers, and London Sire--using the same uninvited, unsolicited style, but peaking the interest of the record executives, and delivering the *Danshiki* CD firsthand to top people amidst an air of fun and friendship. Trip was a master of his game.

They headed back up the block and stopped at a small pizza joint on the way, still in the Village. Once inside, they ran into a music industry artist that Trip knew. Trip stopped and made small talk for a while as Shawn and Joey looked on. The artist, who went by the name of 'Ed the Schmoozer', told Trip that he had just landed a two hundred thousand dollar signing bonus with Sony music in Japan. Trip congratulated him and introduced him to Joey and Shawn, telling Ed the Schmoozer that this was his new group, *Danshiki*. He then told Ed that they had just left the office of Elektra's Vice President of A&R, and were mulling over whether or not to accept the two million dollar deal that was on the table. Shawn and Joey were shocked, but swallowed any sign of emotion over this. Once they had finished exchanging lies, Ed left, and the guys sat down to get a snack.

"That was a straight up lie in there," Shawn said.

"I was just making him feel comfortable," Trip said.

"But what if the word gets out? What if Elektra finds out?"

"Nah, its not even deep like that. He lied, so I lied. Plus, the extra promo won't hurt."

"But we didn't come up here to lie—" Joey started.

"It depends on what you define as a lie." Trip countered, leaning over. "Let me explain something to you guys. In the music business, there are always three truths in every situation. There's your truth, my

truth, and the real truth in the middle. Nobody lies around here, there are just all kinds of different truths floating around.”

Trip never seized to amaze them.

Once they got back to the office, Shawn’s cell phone rang. It was Abe.

“Hey, New Yorker!”

“Hey, you African!”

“Yeah, right. What’s new? Got the record deal yet?”

“Not yet. Got your damn legacy yet?”

“No, but I’m pretty sure its for real now. I still haven’t figured out who can help me exercise my legal rights to my inheritance, so wish me luck--”

The phone began crackling with static, and his voice faded in and out. Shawn tried increasing the volume on his cell phone. Finally Abe’s voice came back.

“Hey, before we lose you, give us your number over there.” Shawn said, motioning to Shaniqua for a pen, which she gave him. He wrote down the number.

“Call us at least once a day, ok? So we’ll know you’re alright, and we’ll give you updates here as well.”

“Sounds good.” Abe said.

“Killed any elephants yet?” Joey asked, taking the phone from Shawn, and lightening up the conversation.

“Hell yeah! I even rescued an African from his tree house!”

They laughed.

“Hey, seriously, how’s the record deal search?”

“Ask Trip.” Joey said, raising both hands in a gesture that showed his complete bewilderment, handing the phone to Trip McGee.

“What’s up, Tarzan?”

“I’m fine,” said Abe. “Any good news?”

“Abe,” Trip replied, calmly and confidently, “I want you to relax and enjoy your trip. I’ll have you guys signed in a matter of days.”

Abe wanted to be thrilled, but the skeptic in him overruled. On any continent, this certainly sounded like good news. But was it true? Something about Mr. Trip McGee was just too good to be true.

TWELVE

"A man who lives on the banks of the river Niger should not have to wash his hands in spittle."

Ajgunle

Abe woke up abruptly to the sound of African crickets. They chirped all around him like a grand orchestra performing in surround-sound, gracefully piercing the still of the Ajgunle night outside Ezra's house. He was uncomfortable and sweaty in the tropical heat. He eyes squinted as he tried to see beyond the dirty but efficient mosquito net that Ezra had kindly provided him.

Ajgunle was one of the most celebrated Nigerian slums of Lagos, notorious for its poverty and backwardness. Since arriving the day before at Ezra's house, there had been no tap water or electrical power. He wasn't able to bathe or benefit from the dusty ceiling fan above him that hung limp and lifeless like an unkempt ornament.

He could barely make out the humble slum apartment in the dark, with its single wooden window, raffia chair, and cracked wall mirror. The walls were made of unpainted, unfinished cement blocks like the rest of the house. A picture of Jesus, superimposed over an almanac calendar, hung above the door. The room was stuffy, and smelled of dirty linen, but he was glad that he had a place to stay where he felt safe.

He squinted as he looked at his watch in the dark, barely making out that the time was four o'clock in the morning. All of a sudden, there was a whirring sound, and then the lights came on in the room, along with the ceiling fan that had been dormant above him.

Abe heard women's voices outside, praising 'N.E.P.A.'-- the 'Nigerian Electric Power Authority'--for finally providing electric power after so many days. They referred to this government-sponsored power supply company as though it were a person, complete with emotions and attitudes. Some people, however, referred to it less affectionately as "*Never Expect Power Again*". But for now, the entire neighborhood seemed to come to life with praise and thanks to this life form called N.E.P.A., and stayed that way for a few minutes.

Abe listened as the praise for N.E.P.A. subsided outside, and people began to attend to whatever it was they needed the electricity for. He was trying to figure this all out, when in a flash, just as suddenly as it started, everything went dead again. The lights went off, the fan stopped, and the African crickets were again the loudest sound in the Ajegunle darkness. The voices outside resumed their chatter, which had now turned to incendiary vilification. They rained curses on N.E.P.A. for teasing them and treating them like animals.

A little while later, roosters crowed in the distance and Abe got up, unable to sleep any longer. He reached for his bag in the dark, under the bed, and opened it. Once he freed himself from the tangle of the mosquito net, he slipped on his shoes, and turned on his flashlight. He was certainly glad for the miracle of light this little gadget provided, especially since 'N.E.P.A.' was so unpredictable.

Sitting on the bed, with his flashlight shining on the wall, he began to consider what his next move must be. Abe had to find someone who could give him legal access to his father's possessions.

But is money all I'm after?

Abe considered for a moment, that he was possibly being a bit single-minded. What if through this journey he could learn and benefit from the greatness of his father? After all, everyone seemed to think his father was such a great man. In fact, he wondered why no one had ever said anything negative about James Osondu. Obviously, everyone has their faults, but so far, it seemed that most people he had met, from Ezra, to Cletus Okolo, to Akin Obilo, all thought James Osondu was a spotless hero. His mind continued to roam, exploring the possibilities.

There is no smoke without fire. James Osondu must really have been a great man.

What if this greatness, and the knowledge associated with it, could somehow transfer to him in such a life-altering way as to finally fill the burning void in his own quest for identity? What if meeting his father's people, *his* people, could somehow be more powerful of a possession than money?

Well, maybe not more than money.

But maybe it could at least be a significant factor in his life going forward. After all, he would certainly be one of an almost infinitesimal number of African-Americans who could actually say they knew and had visited their roots in mother Africa. He could hold his head up against all races, and say to anyone that challenged him; *I am not black. I am not white. I am not a slave. I am an African!*

"Come in." Abe said, shining his flashlight in the direction of the door. It was Ezra and a guest, both cloaked in the shadows of the early morning.

"Abe," Ezra said. "I have brought Ogbuefi Udu. He wants to speak with you."

Abe was silent, as Ezra moved across the room and opened the wooden window to let in the cool morning air and the early dawn light. Then Ezra sat down on the floor, and Ogbuefi sat in the lone raffia chair. Abe could finally see them a little better in the morning light. Ezra was already dressed and ready for the day. Ogbuefi was an old man, with a leathery face filled with the wisdom of years of toil and hardship. His eyes, though beady and dark, were intense, and didn't seem to miss anything in their gaze.

"Good morning, Mr. Udu." Abe said politely.

"Abuchi Osondu," Ogbuefi replied, referring to his complete Igbo name. "I am here this early in the morning because this is the time when our people usually choose for discussing important matters."

Abe looked across at Ezra, who nodded back at him, signifying that all was well.

"I am the oldest Azuala man in Lagos," Ogbuefi continued. "I was born before your father, and I knew him well. I also knew your grandfather. Your ancestors must be smiling in their graves, and they are happy that you have come to fulfill your destiny."

"Thank you," Abe said, still not sure why he was being visited by the old man. *What does he mean by fulfilling my destiny?* Maybe this man could help point him in the right direction. Abe listened attentively.

"Ogbuefi, please continue." Ezra said, respectfully.

Ogbuefi shifted his white cloth and wrapper, which was balanced on his right shoulder, over to his left, for some reason not content with where it had been.

"Our people say that a traveler to distant places should make no enemies." Ogbuefi looked over at Ezra, as if to verify the truth of his proverb. "Am I wrong?"

"No." said Ezra.

"Our people also say that he who asks questions during a journey will never be lost." Ogbuefi looked at Ezra again. "Is it not true?"

"It is true, Ogbuefi."

"I have come to ask you to be careful," He continued, no longer looking to Ezra for agreement. "People are talking. I have been hearing things."

"What have you heard?" Abe asked, frowning.

"Some people were not happy yesterday after we voted you in as Legal Emissary for the Azuala elections."

"Who are they?" Ezra asked, standing up as though ready to go to war for Abe. Abe was surprised. Everyone had seemed so happy to see him, and the whole 'Emissary' thing, though he didn't let it get to his head, had been rather flattering.

"Sit down, Ezra, for you do not know our Azuala people. They can be very wicked, especially those you never see, like Mrs. Osondu."

"Mrs. Osondu?" Abe asked, his interest peaked. He thought Ezra had told him there were no more Osondu's alive. Besides, what did this have to do with the elections?

"Yes, Mrs. Osondu." Ogbuefi said, bringing out a round tin container from his pocket. He opened it, tapped it, excavated a thin layer of brown tobacco snuff with his thumb, and inserted it deep into his nose. "I suspected you did not know of her, otherwise, you would have been more careful in announcing yourself yesterday." He inhaled deeply, and then wiped his hands clean on his wrapper. Abe looked at Ezra, who shifted his eyes away, apparently accepting the guilt for making such an abrupt and unplanned introduction at the election meeting.

"She was your father's wife," Ogbuefi continued, now barely whispering as though fearful that someone would barge into the room and arrest him. "And she is very rich."

Abe glanced at Ezra again, as though searching for confirmation. Ezra shrugged. Abe moved closer to Ogbuefi Udu, who was barely audible at this point.

"So, this woman, my father's wife, is she part of the election in some way?"

"No one knows. She is very mysterious. She lives far away from everyone, and carries out her affairs in secret. All we know is that she is a very powerful and influential 'cash-madam'."

He whispered. "Many people fear and respect her at the same time, but then, with her vast wealth, who wouldn't? Our people seem to worship anyone with money."

Ogbuefi Udu stood up to leave. "When you see her, ask her what happened to your father, Abuchi."

At this point, Ogbuefi Udu had tears in the withered sac of his lower eyelids, clearly betraying his emotions. He wiped his eyes carefully, along with his nose, as though the snuff in his nostrils had gone to his head, and was fully responsible for the tears.

"Just ask her what happened to your father." He said, turning to leave.

"Mr. Udu, what exactly do you mean?" Abe asked, completely confused, looking at Ezra, then Ogbuefi, who stopped short of the door on his way out.

"Are you saying Mrs. Osondu had something to do with my father's death?"

"No, I am saying no such thing, and you never heard such words from my mouth. But remember this--a man who is trampled to death by an elephant is a man who is blind and deaf." He moved closer to the open door. "A man's destiny is to maintain the good name of his father. Your father was a rich man, loved by all, but his money was a vessel for the evil that brought him down. Our people say, 'that which killed the father must not also kill the son.'" He turned to leave, opening the door in front of him.

"Goodbye, Osondu's son."

Ogbuefi Udu was gone as quickly as he appeared, leaving a visibly perplexed Abe looking at Ezra with questioning eyes.

"I guess he basically came here to tell me to beware of Mrs. Osondu. Who knows? She probably controls my father's money or something," Abe rubbed his hands all over his dread-locked head in confusion. "But what's with all the gloomy proverbs about destiny and getting killed?"

Ezra sat in silence with his arms crossed, shaking his head in confusion.

"I'd say this is actually good information," Abe continued, sticking to positive thinking rather than fear. "Thanks to him, at least now we know who we're looking for. Right?"

"I wouldn't worry about it," Ezra said firmly, and finally brightening up. "Ogbuefi is just an old man, and old men love to exaggerate events and situations. He just wants you to be careful. It just means we have to smile and give this Mrs. Osondu *'something small'* when we ask for your money." Ezra smiled, and left the room.

Abe walked out into the yard, and surveyed the new world he was in, staring into the distance as the bungalow-style slum rooftops greeted the morning sun. He could see the rugged terrain of garbage and potholes littering the Ajegunle Street ahead of him, with the 'face-me-I-face-you' buildings hugging both sides of the road. Palm trees, scattered along the landscape, looked as hungry and thin as the occasional beggar who was curled up beneath them.

Huge, filthy gutters ran on both sides of the streets, separating the houses from the dirt road, accessible only via wooden plank bridges. The gutters were filled with a putrid black liquid, which provided an ecosystem for unimaginable garbage that carried a pungent promise of disease. Occasionally there was a structure built entirely of corrugated zinc roofing materials, without doors or windows. The corrugated zinc shacks were located in front of the cement buildings, and probably housed those who couldn't afford to pay rent.

Ezra came outside holding a bucket of cold water. "Here is your bath water, Abe. The toilet and bath area are behind the building over there." Ezra pointed to a roofless, wooden structure on the left side of his building.

"Thanks. Are we still on track to travel to Azuala this morning?"

"Yes," Ezra replied. "But first, remember we need to change your American dollars to *Naira*. The money-changers are in Yaba, which is

also where the buses are for our trip. It takes a full day to travel from Lagos to Eastern Nigeria, so the sooner we leave, the better.”

“Hey, Ezra, thanks again for all your help, man.”

“Don’t worry. You can thank me in dollars on an Amtrak train in America.” Abe smiled at him, took the pail of water, and headed toward the wooden structure.

He had never bathed from water in a bucket, nor in a smellier, dirtier, or smaller place in his entire life. He stood barefoot on a slippery piece of wood that separated him from the bare ground. A plastic container with a lump of green soap hung from a wooden ledge in front of him, and it seemed like a good way to start. He picked up the soap, scraped off the sand and other unknown materials that adorned it, and began to lather his body carefully. What an experience! He made sure not to touch any of the grime around him.

So this is what poverty in Africa is really like. How could anyone amass so much wealth in a country such as this, where people didn’t have common amenities like running water and electricity, and where the streets were full of potholes, beggars, and garbage? But then he thought of the prevalence of bribery and corruption, and how educated people like Akin Obilo had become so frustrated with the system. Suddenly, he felt a sense of sadness for the poor people of Ajegunle, who didn’t have much of a choice for escaping this poverty. He realized how lucky he was in America, where at least he had choices.

How did Akin Obilo live? No doubt, with all his wealth and success, N.E.P.A. probably never deprived him of electricity, and his home was probably as good as anything in the United States. He longed to speak with Akin again. He decided he would make sure to call him before they left.

He washed down his body with the remaining water left in the bucket, dried himself off, and went back into his room. The water had felt cool on his skin, and was refreshing in contrast to the sweaty tropical heat he had experienced during the night. It gave him a renewed sense of mission, and strengthened his determination to go and claim his birthright. Life was by no means comfortable here, but Africa seemed to hold a certain closeness to the earth, a certain simple veracity, and a promise of liberation that was exhilarating for him. *So far, so good.*

Later in the morning, Ezra led Abe down the street toward the nearest bus stop. They had agreed to change some of Abe's Dollars to Naira before embarking on their trip. Abe had grabbed all his things, and was ready for the journey to Azuala.

Abe looked at his watch, and saw that it was now six-thirty in the morning. The few people that were out at this time were setting up their roadside shops for another day of business. As they walked, Abe noticed that the streets were turning slowly into a marketplace, everyone setting up roadside stalls and preparing to sell everything from food items to clothes and assorted living accessories. People looked at Abe and Ezra as they walked by. They spoke in hushed tones about whether this American was part of a new gimmick from Ezra. Or maybe this light-skinned man with dreadlocks was a new pastor for his P.E.A.C.E. church.

A child stepped in front of them and chanted what children sang whenever they saw, *Oyinbo*, the Yoruba name for white people:

*"Oyinbo pepper,
If he eat pepper,
He go yellow more, more
African Oyinbo!"*

The boy continued, staying a few paces away from them, dancing and shouting his chant until his mother caught up with him and pulled him away by his ear. Finally they arrived at the bus stop, and Ezra pointed out that they would have to wait until a bus headed for Yaba came by.

"It's early, so we shouldn't have to wait too long. The money-changers will be eager to get a customer this early." Ezra said.

"Are these money-changers part of a bank system or something?"

"No. This is the black market. The rates are better."

"Aren't there laws against that?"

"Laws like that don't mean much here." Ezra said. Pointing to the street corner ahead of them, he continued, "It's like those traffic lights over there. Back when they were first built, it was like a joke watching people beat the red lights as though they meant nothing. The police

didn't care either. Now, since they don't work anyway, N.E.P.A. has saved us from having to watch the useless lights change."

"Its like bribery," Ezra continued, "Everyone knows its wrong at some level, but it makes perfect sense, so if you want to get something done, you have to be prepared to give *'something small'*."

"Wow." Abe said, looking around him as they waited for the bus. He noticed a well-dressed man in a dark suit and midnight sunshades standing a few feet from them. The man seemed out of place in this poverty-stricken Ajegunle slum.

"By the way," Ezra continued, "Don't be surprised if more people call you *'Oyinbo Pepper'*. That is what we call the white man in these parts, and that kid was actually singing praises to you."

"Can't they tell I'm mixed, not quite white?"

"Trust me," Ezra said. "Around here, you're white. Unlike in America, where you might feel like you are kind of lost in the middle, neither white nor black, here you are respected, and considered white. People might not admit this out right, but here you are seen as a superior race."

"Wow. *Superior race!* Who would-a thunk it!" Abe joked, as he continued taking in the dusty streets of Ajegunle. Now self-conscious, he watched as the people set up their shops for another day's work. A minivan pulled over next to them, with the bus conductor hanging from the open sliding door, shouting "Yaba, Yaba!"

"Here's our bus," Ezra said. He hopped on and motioned for Abe to do the same. The bus had no upholstery whatsoever, no seatbelts or door handles, and extra wooden seats had been added between the normal rows of seats to accommodate more passengers. Abe felt like he was riding in a dirty, rusty, wood-and-steel skeleton.

The ride was bumpy, but quick, as they navigated the dirt roads of Ajegunle in light traffic. After about twenty minutes they stopped, and the conductor announced that they had arrived at Yaba Market. Ezra paid him, got down, and Abe followed.

Abe noticed a taxi pulling up a few yards away on the other side of the street. The passenger who stepped out was wearing a black suit and dark shades, and was glued to a mobile phone. As they walked through the busy parking lot, the man seemed to be walking in their direction, maintaining a steady pace.

"Ezra, I think we're being followed."

“Why would you think that?”

“I noticed a well-dressed man back in Ajegunle who seemed out of place, and now he’s here walking behind us.”

“I wouldn’t worry, even though we live in poverty, some ‘oppressors’ among us do dress very well.”

“No, it’s not his appearance,” Abe said, rising concern in his voice. “I think he’s actually looking at us now, and talking to someone on his phone.”

Ezra looked back and noticed the man as well, but the man had stopped and faced another direction.

“You Americans!” He said with a smile, shaking his head. “Everything is like a James Bond movie to you, isn’t it? That man is just going about his business like we are. Besides, we don’t do that kind of high-tech stuff down here. If we want to kill someone, we use *juju*. Simple! We put curses on people and they die in their sleep. None of this men-in-black stuff!”

Abe looked back in the man’s direction, but he was gone. He shrugged, still suspicious, and continued weaving through the growing crowd behind Ezra. Ezra didn’t seem concerned, and pointed out that the moneychangers were on the next block. As they turned the corner, several little children rushed up to them carrying little cellophane bags of cold water.

“Water, five Naira!” They shouted.

“Water, five-five Naira!”

Abe looked at Ezra. “Why don’t we get some? It’s going to get pretty hot soon.”

“No,” Ezra said, smiling. “I don’t think your system can handle that yet. We have a special name for that water. We call it *Typhoid*.”

Abe stopped and looked at the children all around him, their big eyes wide open, surrounding him like baby birds waiting for their mother to feed them. *This is the African poverty people see on American TV*, only he was right next to it. He could see that the children were all malnourished, toiling around barefoot, flies buzzing in their faces, as they looked for little scraps of money, selling repackaged, disease infested ‘typhoid water’ to make a living. Abe was overwhelmed with an emotion of grief. He put his hands in his pocket and brought out a crumpled twenty-dollar bill, and handed it to one of the children, pointing to all of them as an

indication that he wanted them to share it. The children seized the money and ran away.

“Dollar! Dollar! *Oyinbo pepper!*” They shouted, as they ran.

“Abe, do you know how much money you just gave them?” Ezra asked, a worried look on his face.

“How much?”

“They asked for five Naira. You just gave them Three Thousand Naira at the current exchange rate! That’s how much the average Ajegunle man makes in a month!”

“That’s fine,” Abe replied. “Everybody deserves a break sometimes.”

“Americans!” Ezra muttered incredulously under his breath, as he led the way to the Yaba money-changers.

THIRTEEN

"A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving."

Victoria Island

"Traffic is only a problem," Ezra complained, "if you have to board these crazy buses and motorcycles." He shook his head in frustration. "A rat should not play in the rain with a lizard," he continued, "Your friend Akin Obilo is a fat lizard who lives in Victoria Island, and they are all very rich over there. Only poor rats like me who have no cars have traffic problems."

Abe had already tuned him out once he started with the proverb. He had figured out by now, having listened to Ezra, Cletus Okolo, and even Ogbuefi Udu, that these Igbo proverbs were a way of speech introduction, and since he didn't understand most of them, he would just tune them out and focus on whatever point was to follow. However, this time, he found himself listening instead to the hypnotic rhythms of the highlife music coming from the Yaba record shops nearby.

Every city has its unique pulse and character. While Ajegunle was more of a residential slum, Yaba seemed to be more of a commercial district, a slum nonetheless, but characterized predominantly by shops and stalls scattered between the buildings and along the roads. It was similar to Ajegunle in terms of the dusty, potholed streets and the filthy

gutters, but it was much busier in terms of people, buses, and the general market atmosphere.

Everyone was buying and selling everywhere, in no compartmentalized arrangement or order, even on the roads themselves, leaving very little space for the automobiles to get by. Beggars sat on the street corners, and in little nooks between the buildings, with their hands outstretched, thanking God for the occasional passerby who was kind enough to drop them a coin.

Abe followed Ezra as they navigated through the crowded market. There were men in flowing *agbadas* and *danshikis*, and women carrying their market wares on their heads and their little infants on their backs. Men wore their merchandise on their sleeves, and approached each car in the long lines of the 'go-slow' traffic to try to make a sale. They sold everything from watches, shirts, radios, and food. Someone had even tried to sell Abe something that seemed like used underwear.

Loud speakers in front of record shops blared Nigerian music. The music, strange and beautiful to Abe, was laden with acoustic and electric guitars, gliding in and out of an intricate web of African talking drums. Abe loved the sound of this music, especially the percussive drums as they went;

'boom-kiti, boom kiti, boom-boom'

He marveled at the extent of instrumental mastery in the songs. It seemed like every song was performed in a major key, giving the music a happy, bouncy feel, with a staccato rhythmical guitar style that reminded him of a cross between Bluegrass Country and the Blues.

Suddenly Abe's GSM phone rang. He scrambled to get it out of his pocket.

"Hello?" He asked.

"Abe, Its me, Akin!"

"Akin Obilol!"

"Yes, How are you?"

"I'm fine. I was just about to call you!"

"How's your quest coming along?"

"Fine. Ezra and I are actually about to change some money and travel to my father's village."

"Ah. In fact, I was calling to invite you over for breakfast tomorrow. I can send my driver to pick you up. Can you make it?"

Abe looked at Ezra and posed the question to him. Ezra nodded. They would have just enough time to stop over for breakfast before heading out on their journey.

"We'll be there!" said Abe.

Ezra led Abe into the moneychangers' compound. It was a two-story building wrapped around a central courtyard, shielded from the busy Yaba roadside market by a huge gate, with several armed guards walking about with scowls on their faces. Abe couldn't help but smile at the extensive security precautions taken by people who were openly breaking the law.

Hausa 'Alhaji' men wearing long *Danshiki* robes walked about, negotiating with each other over black market prices. The building was divided into individual offices where the Alhajis did their business. As they entered the gates, several Alhajis crowded them, trying to get their money-exchange business, but Ezra kept moving determinedly through them, motioning for Abe to ignore them as well. Ezra had his own favorite Alhaji moneychanger on the second floor, and was headed there.

Ezra had agreed to handle the black market transactions, so once they got into the lounge of the moneychanger's office, Abe handed Ezra his last eight hundred dollars. They had agreed that Ezra should act as though it were his money so that the moneychangers wouldn't get greedy and try to take advantage of a naïve American.

"*Sanu*," The Alhaji said in Hausa, greeting them, and displaying a rusty array of brown teeth. Ezra greeted him back fluently in Hausa language, which he had been forced to learn during his many attempts to defraud the U.S. Immigration authorities. They proceeded into a bout of small talk, covering everything from the hot weather, to the craziness of Lagos drivers.

There he was again! Abe saw the man with the dark suit and shades! He was standing just a few feet away! This had to be more than a coincidence. The adventurer in him took over, and Abe decided to confirm his suspicions. He left Ezra behind and started to weave through the market crowd, making his way toward the standing man. Sure enough, the man began to move away in the opposite direction, looking

back occasionally. Abe quickened his pace, and started walking fast through the crowd, gradually increasing his speed to a jogging pace. At that point, the man in the dark suit broke out into a sprint, dashed behind a market stall, jumped over some beggars in the street, and hopped onto a passenger bus.

Abe stopped, and watched as the bus drove away with the man in the dark suit safely inside. Now he was truly convinced. He stood there for a moment, suddenly feeling unsafe in this very public place. This was no longer a walk in the park. The danger was now palpable. Abe turned around, breathing heavily, and started heading back to the moneychangers, where Ezra was waiting for him at the gate.

"I was looking all over for you. Why are you out of breath?" Ezra asked, surprised.

"I ran after that man we saw this morning."

"American James Bond!" Ezra praised in jest, "Did you catch him?"

"Look, I'm serious!" Abe wasn't joking. Ezra had never seen the angry side of Abe. "That guy was following us, or he wouldn't have run away. We obviously have to be careful from now on."

"Ok, boss." Ezra said, still wondering why anyone would want to follow them.

They waited for a few minutes, until Akin Obilo's driver pulled up in a shiny black Toyota Land Cruiser. They climbed into the large, luxurious SUV, and settled in for what turned out to be a rather comfortable drive to Victoria Island.

Victoria Island was at the other end of Eko Bridge, a long and beautiful structure that would rival any of the largest bridges in the western world. Eko Bridge crossed over the various lagoons and river tributaries that made their way through Lagos and into the Gulf of Guinea, separating the islands from the Lagos mainland. As they drove further and further from Yaba market, Abe noticed the sharp difference between the mainland slums he had been in, and the modern beauty and luxury that lay ahead on the Victoria Island side.

On the mainland side, the riverbanks were populated with small boats featuring half-naked fishermen, while on the Victoria Island side he could see yachts and sailboats with white tourists out for a day of leisure in the tropical sun. Looking to his right, following the direction of the

meandering rivers, Abe could see where they reached their end, joining the endless horizon of the Atlantic Ocean.

Abe was amazed at the immediate change as they crossed the bridge. Victoria Island was a modern city by any standards, seemingly isolated and protected from the poverty on the other side of Eko Bridge. There were streetlights, which actually worked, and the mostly white tourists walking in the streets were dressed in their tropical vacation outfits, probably looking for recreational activities near the surrounding 'Bar' beach area.

The houses were beautiful, with large gates bejeweled with impressive African sculptures. The cars on the road were all brand new and luxurious. Abe was amazed at how most cars were Lexus, Mercedes, or BMW. The contrast between this Victoria Island environment and Ezra's Ajegunle was drastic. It was hard to believe he was in the same Lagos state, and it seemed as if he had crossed over into an entirely different world.

They arrived at Akin Obilo's mansion, on the east side of Victoria Island. He had an incredible view of the Atlantic Ocean, and one could literally walk out onto his private beach and be next to the water. Akin's house must have cost millions of dollars, Abe thought. He had never been in a nicer, richer home, even by American standards.

The driver showed them to a circular, sky-lit foyer, where a neatly dressed butler greeted them.

"Welcome, Mr. Osondu," The butler stated, in a very European accent, ignoring Ezra. "Mr. Akin Obilo is by the swimming pool, where breakfast will be served." Abe was wordless, and began to follow the butler. Albeit miffed by the butler, Ezra's amazement at the sheer wealth of the house got the better of him. He was so busy looking around him that he tripped and fell. Abe turned around and stretched out a hand to help him back up. The butler did not look back. Embarrassed, Ezra declined Abe's help, picked himself off the floor, and marched behind the butler, determined to restore his dignity.

"My dear Abe!" Akin Obilo announced. "How are you enjoying Lagos?"

Akin was dressed in a silk morning robe, and offered them a seat beside him that overlooked the large pool. They sat down and the butler left the area to attend to breakfast.

"Well, so far so good," Abe said, "But I'm beginning to get a little worried."

"How so?"

"I'm convinced someone is following me, and I've been getting advice from strangers to be careful."

"I'm not surprised," Akin said, laughing gleefully. "You are obviously a man who will soon be rich. The flies are just buzzing around you in anticipation."

Akin had looked squarely at Ezra as he spoke about flies. Ezra didn't like the look in his eye or the sound of what he said. He knew Akin saw him as one of the buzzing flies.

"Other than that," Abe continued, "I have found out that my father had a second wife, and she is probably the person who can help me connect the dots to my inheritance."

Akin leaned over nearer to Abe, a serious look on his face. He put his drink down on the marble side table next to him.

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Osondu." He said, nodding his head solemnly. "She's the reclusive one."

"You know of her?" Abe asked innocently.

"Certainly. Everybody does. At least everybody in the money circles." Akin once again looked straight at Ezra as he spoke. Another little arrow entered Ezra's spine. He obviously wasn't in the money circles because he certainly had never heard of Mrs. Osondu before.

"Yes, Mrs. Osondu--that is something I want to talk to you about." Akin said. "Do you know the actual size of your father's wealth, or the business he was in?"

"No, not exactly."

"Ah-hah! Well, you should really know these things. Your father was worth about fifty million American dollars. He was a Police Commissioner by day, and a member of the Agwo Secret Society by night."

Abe shifted in his seat. The butler stopped by again with a large tray containing a light continental breakfast and tea. He placed the plates on the marble table in front of all of them. Ezra was relieved that he had been included.

“Secret Society?” Abe asked.

“Yes. I know you’ve probably only heard of all the great things your father did, and in all fairness, Nigeria has seen no greater caliber of man, but he was also a member of the Agwo Secret society.”

Ezra took a sip of his tea, and discovered it was too hot, so he put it back down. “I’m confused,” he said. “We all know that Agwo is a very evil operation where Juju is used rampantly to eliminate enemies, but why would someone like Osondu be a member when he was the most public advocate against it?”

“Ah-hah!” Akin Obilo blared. “That is the mystery. It is common knowledge that he died a mysterious, horrible death. A healthy man doesn’t just keel over and die in one day with no symptoms.”

“Ok guys. Let’s bring this back to my inheritance.” Abe cut in, sticking to business, not yet ready to go into the details of his father’s death. “What does this all have to do with me?”

“Good point,” Akin said. “I was going there next. You see; I’d like you to consider becoming a business partner with me once you claim your money. Its not going to be easy getting your money, trust me, but I have the resources to make it relatively painless.”

An instant alarm went off in Abe’s head. *Sounds like ‘something small’.* His suspicious mind started to kick in fast.

“How could we be business partners considering I just met you?”

“Simple. Over time, we will grow to trust each other as a team. You can make your decision after you’ve done some due diligence. When we start, you will pledge a small portion of your millions to my holding company, and we will use it to seek further contracts and investments in the Nigerian business community, where I am very well connected.”

This was all way over Abe’s head. Suddenly Mr. Akin Obilo seemed to know a lot about his family and his finances. He wondered why.

“What’s in this for you?” Abe said, waving his hand in the air as though he were pointing to Akin’s vast wealth. He certainly didn’t need more money.

“All I want is your safety, young man. I took a good look at you at the airport and realized you needed looking after, and that is what I want to do. You will not have an easy road of this, trust me. But if you work with me, I can use my influence to make it easier.”

Abe stood up to leave. He had had enough. All of his alarm bells were ringing, and he wasn’t sure what his next move would be. He

certainly didn't want to give him an answer at this point, but he didn't want to break the deal either. Like a good lawyer, he decided to postpone a response until he had a chance to deliberate.

"Let me sleep on this, sir. I think we can all find a 'quid pro quo' somewhere here."

Ezra also got up.

Akin motioned for the butler to clear the plates. "In the meantime, I have asked one of my contacts in the nearby city of Umuahia to expect your call. Here is his number. Try to make up your mind as soon as you can, because I can guarantee you that the Agwo Secret Society knows you're here."

Abe and Ezra walked toward the foyer. Abe thanked Akin Obilo for breakfast, and he reminded them to make sure to call periodically. They left the foyer and entered the waiting Toyota Land Cruiser. The driver took them back to the Yaba bus stop. Throughout the ride they said not a word. Even after they got off the SUV, and were waiting for the buses to eastern Nigeria, they remained in silence.

Abe was in the deepest thought imaginable. He was in such deep reflection that he didn't see the man in the black suit and dark shades, standing across the street, making a quick, coded call on his mobile GSM phone.

"Yes, the Eagle is landing." The man said.

FOURTEEN

"When a new saying gets to the land of empty men, they lose their heads over it."

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

Shaniqua walked into the New York office of W.A.M! Entertainment just as the telephone rang. She quickly hung up her coat and dashed to her desk. She straightened up her hair and adjusted her seating posture before calmly picking up the phone.

"W.A.M! Entertainment," she said, in the best professional voice she could muster this early in the morning. "May I help you?"

"I need to speak with Trip. This is Lance Trudeau."

Shaniqua nearly fell out of her seat. This was better than coffee for an early morning buzz.

"Mr. Trudeau—"

"Please; call me Lance," He interrupted.

"Mr. Lance," She continued nervously, "Trip is not yet in. Can I take a message or have him call you back?"

"Tell Trip I want to sign his guys, and I want to do it this week."

"Yes, Mr. Trudeau—Sorry, I mean, Mr. Lance--" She was so nervous, for this was Mr. Lance Trudeau, a legend in the R&B music industry. One way or the other, he was responsible for all the really great

artists that had been successful in the last decade. A call from Lance Trudeau could only mean one thing. Success was nearby.

“Mr. Trudeau?”

Click. The phone went dead in Shaniqua’s hands. She held the phone and stared at it. She considered herself a strong black woman, and had sworn from very early on that she would never let men, (whom she fondly called ‘the enemy’), beat her to dropping the phone. It was a protective little measure she had lived by for many years. But this was not the usual flirtatious conversation with the enemy. This was Lance Trudeau, and with good news like that, he could drop the phone on her all day.

She scuffled in her bag for Trip McGee’s new cell phone number. Why couldn’t that darn old man just keep a single phone number for more than a month for once? It was probably a scam of his to keep his expenses down. *Well, no more scams needed.* If this turned out to be the ‘real-deal-Holyfield’, she could imagine herself with a new title, something like *Administrative Manager!* She kind of liked the ring of that. She cherished the thought of being part of a new music industry success story, a real giant, not unlike Motown, or laFace, or Bad Boy.

She shook herself out of her dream state. Then she opened up the wrinkled piece of paper that had his latest phone number, and frantically called Trip McGee.

“Trip!”

“Yeah?”

“Lance Trudeau wants to sign the guys!”

Silence.

“I said—”

“I heard you. Don’t do anything, and don’t tell anyone about this. I’ll be in the office in thirty minutes.”

Click. *What a morning!* Another man had just hung up the phone on her. *Twice in two minutes.* Well, that’s okay, she concluded, looking at the dead telephone in her hand again. She calmly replaced the receiver. *At least I’ll be rich.* She hung up the phone, and settled into a sweet little daydream about managerial titles, limousine rides, and music industry press conferences.

Joey and Shawn caught the early morning 'B' Train from New Jersey to New York, and then took the Manhattan subway up to Trip's office. Along the way they stopped and bought Bagels, and got back onto the subway train, talking about their chances of ever making it in the music business.

"I don't really see much coming out of all this, but its been fun anyway." Shawn said, staying true to his pattern of cautious pessimism.

"How could you say that?" Joey argued. "I don't see how we can lose. Either Trip will get a record deal, or Abe will get his money. One way or the other, its easy street for me real soon, baby!" Joey had a smile on his face that brightened up the entire lower Manhattan subway system.

Shawn took out his phone and turned it on. "We should call Abe and see how he's doing," He said. Once the phone came on, he noticed that there was a message waiting for them, and he listened to it.

"Looks like Abe already called us." He said, as he started dialing Abe's GSM phone. It rang for a few minutes, and Abe picked it up from halfway across the world, amidst a lot of background market noise. It was almost noon in Nigeria.

"Guys!" Abe shouted from the other side. "What's new?"

"Nothing here. No deal yet. How are you?"

"Not too good. Somebody's been following me, and it's starting to get a little creepy here. Everybody seems to be warning me to be careful."

"What about that guy, Ezra?" Shawn asked, worried for Abe.

"He's cool. In fact, he's about to escort me to my father's village. We're waiting for the last afternoon bus right now."

"Careful, man! We need ya!"

"Thanks, gotta go! Our bus is here."

"Call us once you get there, okay?"

"Okay!"

Shawn and Joey got back into their conversation about the possibilities of success. Shawn maintained the careful pessimism, while Joey dreamed about easy street. At the end of their journey, they got out from the subway system and walked the two and a half blocks to Trip McGee's W.A.M! Entertainment office.

Trip was standing in his office, studying some papers when they walked in. Shaniqua took their coats and asked them if they wanted some coffee. Shawn and Joey thanked her, wondering how she had suddenly become so nice.

"Trip wants to see you right away." She said, smiling, with a twinkle in her eyes. The guys walked over to Trip's side of the office and knocked on his door.

"C'mon in, guys."

Trip was dressed in a professional suit and tie, looking like he was ready to take on the world.

"Please sit down guys, and take a look at this contract." He pushed a piece of paper across his desk at them, and folded his arms as he sat down in his seat. Joey got the paper first, scanned it quickly, and looked up in a perplexed manner at Trip McGee.

"I thought we agreed not to sign any deals until Abe got back and until you got us a record deal?"

"Well, I guess I lied."

Shawn and Joey were stunned. All they could do was stare at Trip McGee. He stared right back at them in a stalemate that seemed to last for minutes. It was like a rattlesnake engaging in a death stare with its next two rodent victims.

Trip broke the stalemate. "Listen guys, that letter of intent we signed is not legally binding, and everybody knew it. Bottom line is, I don't do this work for charity, and I need to be protected. I need you guys to sign on the dotted line, or we have no deal."

Shawn stood up. He didn't have time for this, and he didn't want to respond without talking to Abe first. He took a good last look at Trip McGee, and stormed out of his office.

"I guess Abe was right about the music industry," He muttered to himself. Joey also stood up, and scurried behind Shawn. Trip McGee went after them.

"I wouldn't go away so fast, guys. I have something that will greatly interest you."

"And what is that?" Joey asked, pausing, one hand on the door knob. Shawn was already standing outside.

"I have a record deal for you guys worth five million dollars, and it's sitting on my desk right now."

Shawn and Joey froze! Trip walked over to Joey, and gingerly pried his hands away from the door. Joey offered little resistance.

"Make yourselves comfortable, guys. Our ride to fame has just begun!"

Shawn and Joey sat down on the chairs in the lounge. Shaniqua smiled sheepishly, doing her nails in pace with chewing her gum. Trip disappeared into his office and came out with his contracts. He gave them each a copy and a pen to sign on the dotted line.

"Look guys, I don't mean to be harsh, but this deal is not going to fly unless I have something in writing from you." He looked at them, as they both sat there, still not sure how to respond.

"We gotta talk to Abe." Joey said.

"I know, and you will, but you've got to understand, I'm doing *you* a favor. Believe me, it's not easy getting a record deal, and by doing this, I am offering you guys the chance of a lifetime."

"Which record company is it?" Shawn asked.

"I'd have to kill you if I told you." Trip joked, smiling, as he took a seat beside them.

"Look; have you guys ever heard the joke about how hard it is to get a record deal?" Trip was obviously trying to lighten the general mood up a little. Yes, he was definitely a smooth operator.

"Well, I'll tell you then," Trip said. "A man went to God and asked him to custom-build a highway straight from his apartment, over the pacific, and all the way to Hawaii. He asked God to do this so he could get on the highway and drive to Hawaii anytime he wanted for a vacation." Shaniqua was bent over, listening intently. Trip continued.

"God said to him, 'You selfish man! Why don't you ask me for something easier to achieve, or at least something that will benefit others, like peace in the Middle East, or eradicating world hunger?' Well, of course, the man was ashamed of himself, and after thinking about it for a while, he decided to ask for something else. What do you think he asked for, Joey?"

Joey shrugged, but remained silent and stone-faced.

"The man asked God to show him how to get a record deal," Trip said somberly, "And God said to him; 'How many lanes did you want on that highway again?'"

Trip rolled over with laughter. “Don’t you get it?” Trip asked, in between his bout of mirth, “God didn’t want to mess with shopping for record deals either, because they’re too damn hard to get!”

Shaniqua laughed out loud along with Trip, even though she had heard his ‘Hawaii’ joke a million times before. Shawn and Joey, however, didn’t find it very funny.

FIFTEEN

"When suffering knocks on your door and you say there is no seat for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool."

Something Small

Abe and Ezra had waited all morning, but missed the earlier buses because they had been pre-booked. Ezra felt that they would be fine if they caught the last afternoon bus, which would still get them to Eastern Nigeria the same day, albeit arriving much later at night. The last bus destined for eastern Nigeria finally pulled up beside Abe and Ezra, and began the process of boarding its passengers. The afternoon sun had long since made its way into the middle of the sky, and the tropical Lagos heat had become unbearable. Abe was anxious to get going.

Like other buses in the Yaba motor park, this one had its name boldly painted on its front and sides. The name, bestowed upon the bus by the owner, was '*Chi di mma*', which stood for 'God is Good'.

The *Chi di mma* line of buses was one of the most luxurious in Nigeria, serving the travel needs of people going from Lagos, to and from the other major cities in the country. One of the best things about the *Chi di mma* line was that they were the first to implement air-conditioning, video monitors, and leather seats in their buses. Also, and probably most significantly, they were the first to have armed guards on every single bus, to increase their customers' confidence in travel, and to

ward off the very real and persistent threat of armed robbers along the way.

Abe and Ezra boarded the *Chi di mma* bus, and paid their fare. Abe insisted that his guitar and belongings be stowed inside the bus along with him, and the bus driver reluctantly agreed after receiving 'something small' from him. Abe now considered himself a pro at this bribery game.

The bus was full, with about fifty passengers, including the conductor, the driver, and the armed guard, who brandished his menacing machine gun for all to see. Once they were all safely boarded, the armed guard inspected the bus, confirmed that all was safe, and gave the driver his permission to begin the journey.

The *Chi di mma* bus pulled slowly out of the Yaba motor park, pregnant with its payload of people and their belongings, all headed for eastern Nigeria. The driver had decided to take the back roads in order to avoid Lagos traffic, but still came across a 'go-slow' once he got onto Ikorodu, the last Lagos road before the expressway that would take them to eastern Nigeria.

The driver turned on the video service, which began playing a popular Igbo drama, 'Zebrudaya'. This was Abe's first glimpse at a television since he arrived in Nigeria. He focused on the gestures of the actors, since he couldn't easily follow the Pidgin English they were speaking. The video was fuzzy, and the overall production was poor, but the passengers appeared to be thoroughly enjoying watching 'Zebrudaya' to pass the time.

Abe hadn't spoken much to Ezra ever since the incident at Akin Obilo's. Now that they were safely on their way, he decided to break the morning impasse.

"Why is there such a rift between the rich and the poor in this country?" Abe asked. Ezra was really getting into 'Zebrudaya', laughing along with others in the bus, and didn't hear him. Abe looked out of his window, deciding to let him enjoy his show.

On the other side of the street, he noticed a very unusual sight, which he assumed was the cause of the mid-afternoon 'go-slow'. Armed policemen, holding money-collection baskets, were stopping vehicles on both sides of the street, and asking the drivers to pay them bribes in broad daylight! After collecting the money from the buses, they also asked the reluctant passengers to remit a 'donation' into the basket. Once a bus and all its people had paid up, the policemen waved for them to go.

Still surprised by this blatant daylight robbery, Abe looked up to see the bus conductor holding out his hand and making his way down the aisle, obviously trying to collect ‘something small’ from the passengers for ultimate donation to the waiting policemen. Ezra took a break from ‘Zebrudaya’ and paid the conductor for both himself and Abe, and nonchalantly returned to watching his program. The conductor finished his collection, got out of the bus, and paid the policemen on the other side of the street. Their bus was waved free, and they were released from the ‘go-slow’.

Finally they were on their way, heading eastward toward the village of Azuala.

Abe couldn’t take it anymore. His curiosity was at a peak. His emotions raced as the bus gathered speed. The air from his open window blew relentlessly on his face, colliding with his thoughts. *What kind of society allowed themselves to be abused so publicly by the authorities?*

“Ezra, what’s the real deal with all these bribes?”

“It’s the way we do things,” Ezra said. “If the people don’t pay them *something small*, they won’t be traveling anywhere today.” Abe decided not to even venture asking about whether or not there were laws against this. He already knew the answer.

“Ezra, tell me about how Nigeria got to be this way. How did they get from colonial rule in the sixties to this shameless state?”

Ezra took a break from his video, sensing Abe’s concern. “And why on earth,” Abe continued, “Are the likes of Akin Obilo so rich when people are starving just across the river?”

“You ask very important questions, Abe,” Ezra said sincerely. “I don’t know if I can give you a good answer. Our people say that a man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body.”

Abe didn’t quite get that proverb, but then he didn’t expect to. He was waiting for the point to follow.

“We are so lost, that our problem is no longer definable. Even Zebrudaya used to say that the problem with Nigeria is problem definition itself.” He chuckled to himself, enjoying his own joke.

“But is this the legacy that the white colonial masters left behind?” Abe asked.

“Well, some people blame it on the colonial masters, but personally, I blame it on our own greedy people. Its just like blacks in America. At

some point they have to stop blaming the white man and start looking at themselves.”

“But at least, in America, there is some attempt at civilized behavior. This bribery stuff is outrageous!”

“Is selling drugs in broad daylight civilized behavior?” Ezra asked.

Abe shook his head. He did have a point. Every society had their evils.

“Our people say that when a new thing gets to the land of empty men, they lose their heads over it.” Ezra continued. “The white man gave us our freedom when he left in the sixties, but our empty rulers lost their heads over it. We are reaping the benefits of their greed, and we are also guilty of that greed. Now, it’s time for ‘chop-chop’, every man for himself. If you have connections, you become rich like Akin Obilo, if you don’t, you stay poor like me, living in Ajegunle, and trying to run off to America.” Ezra shook his head in disgust.

Abe could feel Ezra’s pain as he reflected. *What a tragedy for the black man, the world over.* He remembered Akin’s shocking revelation about Osondu’s shady involvement in a Secret Society. How did his father really make his millions, and who controlled it now? *The Secret Society? Mrs. Osondu?* Abe couldn’t help but wonder what kind of legacy his father had truly left for him, and if he was in fact going to become the benefactor of a very corrupt man who had turned a deaf ear to the sufferings of people around him as he amassed his wealth. This would make a big difference for him. If he were to find out that his father was secretly corrupt, it would change everything. He didn’t even want to speculate. These were all questions he was determined to find answers for.

The *Chi di mma* bus traveled steadily for miles and miles, going over hills and valleys, through a myriad of endless twists and turns. *Bump! Bumpety Bump! Bump!* Numerous small potholes were everywhere on the tarred road. Now and then, a pothole was so large and deep, that it claimed the entire road, and the bus had to veer off into the jungle brush in order to get by.

They had left the chaos of the Lagos State slums and cities behind, and were now driving through pure jungle. Tall tropical trees and bushes whizzed by them on both sides of the road. Red dust and dirt covered

the bushes immediately flanking the road, and once in a while, the jungle gave way to open fields with mud huts scattered along the way. There were also the occasional people standing, holding up smoked bush meat, hoping for a hungry traveler to stop and buy.

The hot afternoon sun was disappearing slowly into the western horizon behind them, giving way to a cooler evening. As the bus sped along, Abe perceived what seemed to him like a distinct, chalk-like smell of fresh jungle foliage mixed with earthy red dust. It felt strangely relaxing to his senses.

Ezra was by now sleeping peacefully, as were most people. The conductor was enjoying a chat with the armed guard at the front of the bus. Abe liked the cool evening air from his open window blowing against his face like a steady fan. The bumpy ride became one with the blowing wind, and together, they slowly put him to sleep as well.

Abe must have been asleep for what seemed like a few hours, when suddenly he woke up to a rude jolt. The bump felt much too strong to be caused by the usual potholes. The bus abruptly slowed down to a halt. Those people who were asleep were suddenly rocked out of their slumber. Finally the bus came to a stop. It was now very dark outside. Abe looked at his watch, noticing it was just after eight o'clock at night.

It must be another bribery roadblock. Abe guessed that they would probably have to go through the whole communal bribery thing again before they would be allowed on their way. But then he considered how deep in the jungle they were. *Why a roadblock out here so far from any city?* Abe couldn't help but think, 'wonders shall never cease!'- Just like Ezra would have said. At least now he was a bit more prepared. At least now he understood the game.

Just give them a little 'something small', and they will leave you alone.

SLAM! Suddenly, the front door banged open! *Ratatat! Ratatat-tat!* Machine gun shots were being fired into the bus.

People screamed. *No! Help! Stop!*

The armed *Chi di mma* guard slumped over instantly! His head--blown to bloody bits against the windshield. His gun was thrown several feet from his body, landing in the aisle with a sickening thud. The driver screamed for God's mercy, and jumped out of his window. The bus

conductor threw himself toward the back of the bus with a terrible look of fear on his face.

Four armed men jumped into the bus, shouting, "Everybody, hands up! Get down!"

Terrified, the people kept screaming.

The men quickly took over the bus! They slapped people and terrorized them, pushing and shoving them off the bus. Abe and Ezra had their hands held up high, scared and shocked into silence, as they were pushed violently toward the front of the bus, with guns aimed at them from different directions.

Armed Robbers!

Abe's fear was immeasurable. His body was quivering with terror. There was no escape! Suddenly, a mercilessly vicious knock on his head turned the mad, chaotic evening into a flash of bright light, and then back again to a serene and total darkness.

This was no ordinary bribery roadblock. This was now a matter of extreme desperation, of life and death, all occurring deep inside the belly of a silent and indifferent jungle.

SIXTEEN

"A Bush rat should never play in the rain with a lizard."

The Jungle

Omm! Such pain! Excruciating! Abe regained consciousness with a relentless pounding in his head, like the onslaught of a sledgehammer on a defenseless road. He realized quickly that his hands were tied behind his back, and that the salty wetness on his lips was the result of blood emanating from his nostrils.

He opened his eyes to discover that he was looking up between the brushwood of forest trees, at a starless, pitch-black night sky above him. He felt mercifully swallowed by the darkness all around him. Unable to move, he was nonetheless now fully alert, reeling from the various mosquitoes that were feasting on his skin. He could hear the sound of crickets singing in the distance, sounding not unlike the crickets of faraway Ajegunle.

But this was not a city slum. This was a forest deep in the middle of nowhere. The cool wind howled harshly above and in between the trees around him, carrying the cricket choir through the forest leaves, and mingling them with the other sounds of the jungle night.

"Oyinbo dey wake up," a voice in the distance announced, in Pidgin English. Other voices joined the first, and together they began to approach him. The voices got louder, and closer, until he could feel their

breath and smell their stench above him. It was real. He was a prisoner in a dark and scary forest, far away from anywhere.

"Oyinbo," the voice said. "Where are your dollars?"

Abe looked up at the source of the voice, as the mists cleared in front of him. The man staring down at him was middle-aged, wearing what looked to Abe like a police uniform. He carried a kerosene lamp, which illuminated his rough facial features. Two identical scars on each side of his face gave him a terrible countenance, but his eyes were blank, yet piercing, like the eyes of a snake before it bites its prey.

A lone voice pierced through the darkness.

"Please, leave him. He is an innocent American."

SLAP!

"Keep quiet!" was the swift reply, accompanying the obvious stinging of a rough hand against the face of the offender who had spoken out of line. All was silent again. Abe looked behind the man with the lamp, and could barely make out Ezra in the distance. He was slumped over after the rude slap to his face. *Thank goodness he is alive!* The assailant still hovered above Ezra, waiting for the next remark that would justify further punishment.

"You are lucky we didn't kill you." The man spat down at Ezra, who remained crouched down.

The man turned his attention to Abe.

"Oyinbo, where is your money?" he asked. Abe refused to speak. Either out of fear, or bravery, or a combination of both, he decided that he would not say a word, unless it was on his own terms.

"Don't worry," the man continued, pushing Abe away in a show of disgust. "You go talk when Oga comes. After that, you will die like the rest."

There were five assailants in all. The man who held the lamp returned to the others, who were crouched around a small fire a few feet away. They laughed among themselves, drank profusely from gourds of palm wine, told jokes, and even sang little war tunes in a strange language, as they performed a ritual of money sharing above the fire.

The man with the lamp spoke up first, pointing skyward and swearing to a god more terrible than thunder.

"May *Amadioha* kill me if I am lying!"

He evoked all the terrible spirits of the forest to descend upon him if the money he was tendering was not the complete amount he had

collected from the dead people. He spat to his left, poured some of his palm wine into the fire, and threw his money in a growing pile in the middle of their gathering.

The next man got up. He was short and fat, with a vulture's feather on his cap, and three folds of skin competing for attention under his chin. His balding head shone from the light of the fire in front of him. He scooped up some dirt from the ground, and in one move, he put his sand-endowed forefinger on his tongue, licked it, and raised it high above him, pointing at the sky.

"May *Mmong-obong* destroy me if I am lying!"

He swore in a guttural voice to all the gods of good and evil, pledging that he was sincere, and that the money he was tendering was truly all he had stolen. Grunting, he put three coins on the ground in front of him.

The others laughed. The man with the lamp escaped from his own drunken bout of laughter and warned him: "If Oga catches you with only fifty *kobo*, he will have your head."

"Then let him have my head. I don't really care."

"They say human head tastes like goat meat." Someone said.

"No, they say it tastes more like dog."

"I heard it is better than all of that. My cousin has eaten it, and told me I will never go back to animal meat after I taste my first human head."

All of this got to be too much for the fat man. Beads of sweat poured down his face. The rings of his neck bounced as he stood and pulled out a large wad of money from his pocket, throwing it violently on the ground.

"I was just joking! Ah!" he shouted, eyes enlarged, looking guiltily at the ground. They all laughed again.

In this manner, they went round the fire, each one tendering possessions and articles of jewelry or money that had been taking from the passengers on the bus, and they continued until they had built up a sizable heap of riches for their leader to see.

A muffled ringing sound came from the pile of stolen riches. It was a cell phone. The fat man plunged his grubby hands into the pile and pulled out the GSM cell phone. He held it high in the air, celebrating and dancing in the light of the fire as it rang.

“Answer it now!” Shouted the man with the lamp sternly. The fat man obeyed, and finally put the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Abe?” It was Shawn, calling from America.

“My name is ‘armed robber’”. He announced cleverly, resuming his drunken dance, grunting and singing to himself along the way. Shawn could tell it wasn’t Abe at this point. He asked politely if he could speak with Abe. The armed robber smiled an evil smile and gleefully responded.

“E don die! All of them don die!”

“What?”

“Abe, e don die! No call here again!” The man subsequently threw the phone in the fire, and watched it as it melted and burned into a lump of plastic, sparking occasionally.

“Umana, you are truly an evil man!” someone said in admiration.

“Thank you.” The fat man replied, as he continued his drunken dance.

Abe suddenly heard a vehicle’s rumble in the distance, and it increased in volume until it was very close. A slam confirmed that the passenger of the vehicle had stepped out, and the shuffling of bushes became louder as he approached them.

The man entered the clearing and looked at the armed robbers, who stopped their games in respect for his arrival. He was probably in his sixties, yet thin and strong from years of rough living. He had a wooden leg attached to his left hip, but he moved quickly and effortlessly due to years of practice.

“Oga!” They proclaimed in unison. The tall, aging man came nearer, and circled around the fire. His face was stern, commanding the respect of a general. He inspected the loot that had been collected and his displeasure was obvious.

“Is this all you collected?”

“Yes Oga,” said the man with the lamp. “But we kept the Oyinbo and his servant.”

Oga looked at Abe, and then at Ezra.

“Shine the lamp at his face,” Oga said. The man with the lamp approached Abe again.

“This man was beaten. Why?”

“He resisted, Oga,” someone answered.

Swiftly and violently, Oga lunged at the man who answered, and slapped him across the face.

"I told you to treat the Oyinbo well!"

"Oga, sorry!"

"Don't be sorry! Next time, you will die for disobeying my orders!"

He turned back to Abe, and examined his wounds.

"Clean him up, and feed him. Tomorrow I will speak with him."

After giving his order, Oga left the clearing, and returned into the darkness.

The atmosphere was terribly grim in the New York office of Trip McGee's W.A.M! Entertainment. Shawn was shaking after the phone call. He dialed Abe several times after that, but got no response. Shocked and in disbelief, he was still holding the lifeless phone against his ear, as though suspended in that posture.

Joey couldn't believe it, his mouth hanging open, frozen as well. Trip and Shaniqua were both speechless. Dead? How could Abe be dead?

"Impossible." Trip said. "Call the American Embassy. There must be some mistake."

Shaniqua scrambled to call Directory Assistance, and asked for the American Embassy in Nigeria. She tried several times and finally got through to a lady who knew nothing about Abe, Ezra, or any such trip to a village. The best help she could give was to advise them to call again for any news that may come up. Shawn asked the lady to kindly take down their number as well, and report anything that might come up about Abe. She took down his number.

They sat together in silence.

"No!" Joey punctured the thickness in the air with his words. "We have to go find him."

"Not so fast, guys." Trip cut in. "For one thing, we don't know for sure that he's dead. It's probably just a misunderstanding. On the other hand, you guys need to sign a record deal this week, or else it's off."

The hate Shawn felt for Trip McGee was so strong, he could taste it! Blinded by rage, he lunged at Trip, knocking him clear across the room.

"You bastard!" he shouted. Both Shaniqua and Joey pulled him off of Trip.

"I didn't mean it that way." Trip said, "I'm just trying to make sure we get this thing done right." Trip stood up and brushed himself off. "Personally, I don't believe anything has happened to Abe. Remember, he went to a third world country, and there's bound to be communication problems along the way. Let's be patient and keep trying to make contact. It'll all work out. Trust me."

Shawn backed off.

Joey grabbed the phone, and with a sense of mission in his eyes, he tried Abe's phone number several more times, but got no answer. He kept dialing furiously, crouched almost in a fetal position on the floor. He was drunk with a fever of certainty that the phone would be answered on the next attempt.

Trip, Shaniqua, and Shawn watched, not knowing what to do. Out of control, Joey continued to battle with the phone, but he got no answer.

Finally, Shaniqua tried to reach out to him. She asked him to stop trying for a while, but Shawn motioned her away, shaking his head. Sometimes certain emotions have to come out naturally. Finally Joey gave up and threw the phone on the couch. He sat down in heap of despair. Giving up, he sobbed openly, and tears flowed freely from his eyes like a fountain.

"No. No. No!" he cried.

He appeared to be crying for Abe, but Shawn knew deep inside, that finally, he was crying for his deceased brother. Joey was crying for Jordan.

SEVENTEEN

"You cannot plant greatness as you plant yams or maize. The greatest Iroko tree chooses where to grow and we discover it there...so it is with greatness in men."

The Legacy

The morning sun shone into the forest clearance, illuminating the world with the promise of another day. Abe hadn't slept all night, overwhelmed with fear, trying feverishly to assess his situation. Throughout the night, he had refused to speak or eat when the robbers offered. When the fire had finally burned out, and his captors drifted off to sleep, he had kept his eyes open, staring solemnly into the darkness.

For the first time, he could see around him. He realized he was in a camp, a clearance in the middle of a thick jungle. He could feel the wetness of the morning dew on the undergrowth beneath and around him. A moth circled around his head, landing on his ear, and then flying away, only to return a moment later to his dreadlocks. There was a strange and evil tranquility as the armed robbers slept. The jungle cried with him in a grave silence as he considered his dire predicament. He noticed his guitar in the distance, lying among a heap of treasure. The moth flew away again.

Ezra crawled over to Abe. His hands tied behind his back, he leaned over, supporting himself against a loose stump.

"What shall we do?" he whispered.

"We will negotiate." Abe answered, with the assuredness of a leader. He was not going to let the situation end favorably for the armed robbers. He could taste the adrenalin simmering in his saliva, spurring him on to action, as he silently swore to stay alive. He prayed silently to a nameless God. He prayed that they would not perish out here,

somewhere in the jungles of Africa, at the hands of some two-bit thieves. At least, not if he could help it.

“But first,” he whispered, “We must gain their trust.”

The fat man woke up, and then roused the others. They rubbed their eyes, and got up, preparing for another day of drunken celebration with their spoils from the night before.

“Hey,” Abe said, breaking the morning silence. “You with the feather. Please. Can you help me?”

The fat man turned around, curious to see what the Oyinbo was saying. They had given him up for deaf since he refused to speak all through the night.

“Please give me my guitar.” Abe pleaded. “I want to play something for you.”

Amused, the fat man pulled out his gun, and approached Abe. He untied him, and kept the gun trained to his head.

“So, Oyinbo talks.” He said. “Ndu, bring the white man his guitar.”

One of the armed robbers brought the guitar over. He was the youngest of them, quietly disarming and handsome in a strange way, not befitting of the images of evil Abe had seen the night before. He handed Abe the guitar, and sat down.

With the gun still trained to his head, Abe rubbed his hands, thankful to be free. He picked up the guitar, and began to strum it, hoping his ploy would work. The armed robbers gathered around him, amused and electrified as they prepared to consume their morning’s entertainment. Whatever feelings compelled this man to play the guitar on the day of his death was certainly worth listening to. Abe did not disappoint them, as he began, singing slowly and painfully:

Why do we come to these places?

What are we looking for?

Somebody show me a reason

We don't say what we want

Who's that man with the bottle?

What are his hopes and dreams?

Does he remember his sorrow?

Is there love in that bottle?

Amazingly, the armed robbers were moved. The man who held the gun relaxed and sat down next to the other thieves. Listening, they nodded their heads in acknowledgement, feeling the sorrow in his voice. It was a magical moment in the forest, a brief respite from all the fear and hopelessness. The music escaped the clearing and soared high above them, joining the still morning air, filling the forest with questions and sorrow. The moth returned, settling this time, on the fat man's balding head.

*Maybe someday, when I find you
I will tell you what I've learned
Maybe someday, if we're still here
We will find love
But until then,
We'll just be...
Leaving it to chance...
Leaving it to chance...*

The armed robbers clapped when Abe was done. The song had reached out to them in a way that formed a bond between good and evil, between musician and thieves, softening their hearts and minds, making them happy. Ezra wanted to clap as well, but he didn't, remembering where he was. He felt a surge of hope swell in his heart for the first time.

"Not bad." Said a voice from behind the bushes. It was Oga, leader of the armed robbers. Oga hobbled into the clearing and joined them.

"Oyinbo, where did you learn to play like that?" He asked in a gentle, but gruff voice, looking at Abe with uncharacteristically caring eyes. Abe was surprised at his perfect English, very different from the Pidgin variation spoken by the rest of his gang. He sounded like a man of extensive education.

"America," Abe said.

The old thief looked at the ground, and then at Abe. His face bore a kindness that was not commensurate with his armed robber's demeanor. After a brief silence, he spoke in low tones.

"Do you know why you are here?" He asked.

"No."

"It is because of your father, Osondu."

Abe was stunned. He could not respond. He dared not respond. With a quick eye movement, he glanced at Ezra, who was equally in shock. The world spun around him in a flash of questions. *He knows who I am?*

“Oyinbo, why did you come to Africa?”

Abe did not answer. Somehow, silence seemed to be his best defense.

“I know you have come to collect your birthright.”

Abe still did not respond.

Oga laughed. He laughed a deep and guttural laugh that filled the morning, echoing across the jungle. It was laughter of wisdom, not of cruelty. It was a laughter that questioned the very irony of life. The other armed robbers joined Oga, laughing on cue, for reasons they did not fully understand.

“I know you are afraid to speak, because you may think that I am after your birthright. We all know of your father’s wealth, but I don’t want his money. Someday you may even learn that his legacy was not about his money.”

Abe’s expression turned to confusion. He felt sick in his stomach.

“Ndu, Untie his friend.” Oga announced. Ndu rushed to obey, freeing Ezra from the rope.

“We were tipped off by our friends in Lagos,” Oga continued. “They told me that Osondu’s son would be on that bus, and must be stopped. They wanted you killed for some reason. I agreed to help them, but only to make sure you did not fall into the hands of another gang of robbers. You see, I am an Azuala man, and I wanted to see with my own eyes, the son of my one-time greatest adversary.”

Abe was thinking fast. Ezra was dumbfounded, but relieved to be set free.

“I will pay you whatever you want,” Abe pleaded. “Please release us.”

“I will do more than that, Osondu’s son. Don’t worry. As I said, I do not want your money. In fact, I am fully at your service.”

Abe looked at Ezra with a mixture of shock and confusion. *What? What did he say? Certainly, my song may have been good, but it could not have had the power to achieve this turn of luck.*

“Let me tell you a story of a man I once hated with a blinding passion,” the old man continued. “I was a young armed robber in Azuala back then. Not much older than my son, Ndu, sitting over there. It was

during the civil war, and we were all hungry. We had no education, and we had no hope. Instead of joining the Biafran rebels, we decided to steal the spoils of war, so we kept pace behind the soldiers, picking up the goods that were left in the path of their destruction.”

He shifted his hat to a more comfortable position, swatting but missing the mischievous moth that had decided to perch on it.

“We had all heard of Osondu, the great and fearless American-educated policeman who had single-handedly wiped out armed robbery from eastern Nigeria. At least seventeen of my personal associates had died at his hands. We hated him sincerely, for he was always somewhere in our way, making it impossible for us to survive.”

He unsuccessfully swatted the pestilent moth again. This time, he took off his hat entirely, waiting for the moth’s next move.

“Finally, one day in Umuahia, as I was stealing from a deserted shop, a booby trap exploded on my leg. I lay on the ground dying. Osondu’s men found me, and wanted to kill me, but your father would not let them. He knew I was just a hungry teenager. Amazingly, he personally took care of my wounds, authorized the amputation of my leg; and saved my life. He asked me whose son I was, and which village I hailed from. Armed with that knowledge, he sent my father money, and instructed him to use it to send me to secondary school—a privilege most of us did not have at the time.”

He made a quick swipe with his hand into the air, and finally caught the pestilent moth. He clenched his loaded fist, squeezed the life out of the guilty moth, and threw it aside.

“I returned to my father’s village, and your father convinced me to stay out of trouble till the war ended. After the war, I went back to school, and later worked in the police force under your father for a few years. If not for James Osondu, your father, I would have died that day in Umuahia. I am alive today because of that man.”

Silence.

Abe’s mind was spinning, searching for meaning. Here was another man that his father’s influence had touched. He held his breath in anticipation of the man’s next words.

“So I am happy for a chance to finally repay him. I may be a shameless armed robber today, but I blame that on our corrupt nation. The difference between what I do and what those corrupt politicians do is minimal. At least I’m honest when I kill and steal. In my own way I

have honor. Our people say that the good thing that a man does lives far beyond him. In a strange way, Osondu was both my enemy and my friend. He was my nemesis and my enigma. Before I met him I feared and hated him, and yet today, because of his caring, I am alive and well, and duty-bound to repay his kindness.”

The other thieves were moved by the story. Ndu, the young son of Oga the thief, almost betrayed a tear, but disguised it from the others. Ezra had never heard a speech so moving, so articulate, as what came from the mouth of this common thief.

“Your legacy,” the old thief concluded, holding an embattled fist to his chest, “the legacy your father left for you, is here in my heart, and I return it to you unscathed.”

Abe was now fully in tears, his eyes focused on the ground, fear having given way to an overwhelming grief. For a moment he felt as though he had drifted to another world. The sky had turned purple in his mind, and the air had become gaseous, swirling around him like a protective mist. He felt the soul of his father inside his mind and running through his body. He felt the power of kindness, the strength of character that had transcended time, which had been shown, first to a common thief, and now, years later, to himself.

The legacy your father left for you, is here in my heart, and I return it to you unscathed!

An emotion of mysterious release overwhelmed him. His pain gave way to peace. His fear gave way to joy. He was no longer alone in the world. He could see faint images of his mother and father in the distance, arms outstretched. For a moment, he was no longer an orphan child. He felt he had an identity, unique and powerful in an anonymous world. He felt pride, as though he could hold his head up with no qualms. Here and now in this strange jungle land, and for the first time ever, he truly felt like he belonged to something.

He felt like the son of the great James Osondu!

He could not look up at the people around him, for his tears weighed him down, flowing like a waterfall from a rocky cliff. This was the kind of revelation that turns a boy into a man, or makes one who is lost, found; and he had just experienced it here, deep in the land of thieves. He wiped his face, still facing the ground, not saying a word.

“Ndu.” The man said.

“Oga.”

“Escort this man home to Azuala. I will have your head for breakfast if anything happens to him.”

“Yes, Oga,” Ndu said.

“Extend my greetings to Innocent, your brother in Azuala.” Oga said. “Tell him we are all well.”

Another mischievous moth entered the clearing, swirled around, and landed squarely into the waiting fist of Oga, king of thieves. He crushed it.

The ride from the forest hideout to Azuala took three and a half hours. Not a word was spoken throughout the journey. Ndu was dressed in his fake police uniform, and drove a kombi van painted like a police vehicle, so they were not seriously harassed along the way. Whenever they were stopped, Ndu solved the situation by sending the appropriate official signals, never needing to even show any identification, and never needing to use a bribe.

There was no fear of robbers or policemen, for Ndu carried an air of confidence around him that was infectious. What better protection from thieves than a thief himself?

Hills gave way to valleys, and forest gave way to grassland. A new harmattan wind blew from the south, and the van became chilly as they drove. They crossed the famous and monstrous River Niger. First revealed to the world through the travels of Mungo Park, it was the major river in West Africa, rising in Guinea and flowing for thousands of miles through Mali, Niger and Nigeria into the Gulf of Guinea.

They crossed the Niger atop a long steel and concrete bridge that connected western Nigeria to the east, and entered officially into Igboland. They drove through Igbo cities and villages of varying sizes until they arrived at the outskirts of Umuahia, the city closest to Azuala village.

“I go leave you here,” Ndu said in Pidgin. That taxi over there go take you inside Azuala.”

“Thank you,” Abe said.

“How will we recognize your brother in Azuala?” Abe asked, remembering Oga’s directive.

Ndu smiled. “You go know am when you see am. He is the madman of Azuala.”

The morning had succumbed to the sun, and it was now hot again. The taxi drivers were all shouting the names of various destinations, trying to lure prospective travelers. Abe and Ezra walked across the street and joined the line of people waiting for taxis. As soon as the next taxi arrived, they boarded it, and headed for Azuala.

“Nice song,” Ezra said.

EIGHTEEN

"When a person says yes, his Chi (personal god) says yes also."

Azuala

The late afternoon sky was gray and cloudy, and threatened rain. The taxi cleared a final hill on the 'Umuahia-to-Ikot-Ekpene' road, before arriving at what the driver assured them was the Azuala intersection. Abe could see some of the hills and valleys they had already traversed, rolling away into the distance. The narrow tarred road followed the undulations, stretching through the rich green jungle, and disappearing into the horizon.

Abe and Ezra climbed out of the taxi. The driver also got down to help them open his car trunk, in order to get their belongings out. The road before them was flanked on both sides by a thick, almost impenetrable line of tropical trees, brush, and red dirt. Two clearings on either side of them exposed wide dirt pathways leading into the bush. This was the only clear indication that they had indeed arrived at some form of an intersection.

The driver laid their belongings on the dirt and gestured toward a dusty sign, which was shaped like an arrow pointing into one of the clearings.

“That path leads into Azuala.” He said. “My car cannot go in there. You must trek inside the bush.”

Abe and Ezra noticed the sign, which blended into the landscape, camouflaged by the red dust all over it. The sign leaned precariously at the corner of the path, as though it was not sure that it should still be standing. Abe and Ezra paid the taxi driver, retrieved their belongings, and stood wordlessly as the taxi sped away.

Abe walked over to the dusty sign and shook some dirt from it, hoping to uncover some intelligence as to how they might find Azuala in this seemingly remote wilderness. The sign had some letters painted on it, which read:

‘AZUALA – VILLAGE RENOVATION PROJECT’

Abe wiped up some more dust toward the bottom of the sign, and noticed a rusty golden logo with the name, ‘Western Petroleum’ inscribed on it.

“I guess it must be somewhere in there.” Abe said. “Now we just need to find someone who can help us.”

“What about finding Mrs. Osondu?” Ezra asked.

“No way. Not after what we’ve just been through,” Abe said. “Some crazy person obviously doesn’t want me around, and I have a funny feeling she has something to do with it.” He looked down the road at the taxi as it climbed the last hill, finally disappearing into the distance. He began to comprehend the sheer remoteness of this place, and a sinking feeling came over him. He felt lost in a green jungle wilderness in the middle of nowhere.

Abe shrugged as he recalled the events of the last two days. *Obviously, someone wanted him killed!* Now at least he knew he was definitely being followed back there in Lagos. At worst, someone didn’t want him to get his father’s money. But why kill him over it? Could it be Mrs. Osondu, holding on to what she believed was hers? What kind of evil individual was she to demand the death of an innocent person? Someone she had never even met, who happened to be the son of her late husband?

The questions were pulsating in his head like a migraine. He looked around him at the open road and the pregnant, cloudy sky. The sun had temporarily reclaimed some real estate, and re-introduced the world to its glare again. Being here in the wilderness was definitely better than being tied up and watching armed robbers rejoice over the spoils of their heist.

"Frankly, if we ever see her, I'm not sure I'll have the nicest things to say to her." He said, looking into the bushy clearing, a sense of gloom overwhelming him.

"I want to look for the King or someone of authority."

"Igbos don't really have Kings in the royal sense," Ezra offered, "But they do have chiefs and elders. I'll ask the first person we see to take us to a chief or an elder."

"Now, what would I do without you, Ezra?" Abe said, bravely marching into the clearing with his guitar and bag slung on his back. Ezra followed him dutifully.

"Don't worry. My reward is either in heaven or near the Amtrak depot in Chicago. An oil lamp feels proud to give light even though it wears itself away." He proclaimed.

"You, my friend, have been one great oil lamp." Abe replied, amused at his propensity for proverbs and colorful words, but thankful to have him as a personal oil lamp.

The air was heavy with the smell of fresh jungle foliage, while the sounds of birds dominated the forest. As they walked deeper and deeper into the bush, they noticed rusty pipes, jutting out abruptly from the forest. They were arranged in a cluster of four individual pipes, stacked on top of each other, creating a bundle of three feet in diameter, and held above the ground by wooden posts every six feet along the way. The pipes ran continuously and parallel to the dusty path, and disappeared into the distance miles ahead.

"These look like oil pipes," Ezra said. "There must be some kind of refinery or drilling area near here."

It was pretty common knowledge that Eastern Nigeria produced oil, but Ezra had never considered the fact that Abe's father's village was near the drilling areas. Nigeria was reputedly the world's sixth largest oil producing nation, but you would never know it from seeing the poverty in the streets of Lagos, or the endless lines of cars and people during recurring gasoline shortages in the various cities.

"This is definitely oil country," Ezra said, pointing to another sign coming up on the right side of the path, above the pipes. The sign simply said; 'DO NOT ENTER!' as though anyone would be interested in entering the dark, foreboding jungle pathway it referred to. Once again, embroidered on the bottom of the sign was the now recognizable golden emblem of Western Petroleum.

“So, I assume there are a lot of rich foreigners digging up oil around here somewhere.” Abe said.

“I’m sure there are,” Ezra responded, “Its amazing how remote this place is, and yet, we can still see the hand of western influence.”

“You mean western exploitation.” Abe said cynically, with a chuckle and a smile. Ezra smiled back at him, shaking his head in agreement.

Yes. They were both thankful to be alive.

After walking for a few minutes, they noticed some women approaching them, carrying water pots on their heads, as though returning from a stream nearby. The women balanced the pots perfectly, without the use of their hands, on circular wraps of cloth upon their heads. As they approached, it appeared as though they were singing songs, but their songs turned to noisy chatter when they noticed the strangers.

The women stopped and greeted them.

“N’*dewo*.”

“N’*dewo*.” Ezra replied, speaking in Igbo. “Can you show us the way to an elder or a chief’s house?”

One of the women stepped forward, masterfully balancing her pot on her head. “Who is this *Onye-ocha*?” She asked curiously, ignoring his request, and looking squarely at Abe, with her arms akimbo. She was obviously the leader of the group.

“Nwa Osondu.” Ezra replied.

The women looked at Ezra in disbelief, and then at Abe. They studied him carefully, eyeing him up and down. Slowly, suspicion turned to disbelief, and then appeared to change to joy, as they put down their pots one by one, and began singing and dancing around him. They were dancing for joy, and chanting in Igbo; “the Oracle of Azuala has brought home the son of Osondu”.

Abe was not too surprised by this. So far, most people he met knew the name of his famous father, and responded with respect and adoration, but to these women of Azuala, his presence had a special meaning: Osondu’s son had finally come home, just like the Oracle of Azuala had promised.

“We will gladly take you there, Osondu’s son,” one of them said. “But you have passed the path to the village. Follow us.”

Abe and Ezra followed the women back toward the sign that said, "DO NOT ENTER", and walked with them over the oil pipes, and onto a new pathway which led into the dark jungle. They walked for a few hundred yards through thick bush and foliage, until they finally came upon a large clearing, with huge, giant Iroko trees scattered around, showcasing their arsenal of menacing buttresses. Abe looked up at one of the Iroko trees, and could barely make out where its top was, high up in the sky. *These trees must be hundreds of years old!*

The thick jungle had given way to a clean, well-kept village plaza. The pathway running through the large plaza was well swept, with the marks of raffia brooms used to sweep it still fresh on the ground. The sandy clearing was spotless. No garbage or rotting gutters were anywhere in sight. Abe couldn't help but inhale deeply. He breathed effortlessly as the refreshingly clean, healing air of the village flowed through his lungs.

Abe could see children playing a game of soccer at one end of the clearing. An old man with a pouch slung from his waist was hanging from a palm-wine tree in the clearing, collecting its precious white liquid. Abe saw women and young girls walking through the clearing with water pots on their heads, greeting each other "Nno" as they passed.

They followed the women past the clearing, and onto a well-beaten path. This path was flanked by shorter, but very mature trees growing in the front yards of the village compounds. Cassava-drying contraptions were in front of these compounds, waiting for the weekly frying that turned them into *fufu*. The sun was almost completely blocked out by the trees, making for a cool, shady atmosphere along the pathway.

People along the way shared 'welcome-from-the-stream' greetings with the women walking by, but always kept a suspicious eye on Abe and Ezra.

Finally, they stopped in front of a large compound, and the leader of the women spoke to a young boy that was playing in the yard, asking him to inform the compound of their special visitors. The child hurried inside the compound to deliver the message. She pointed ahead of them. "This is Papa Umekwe's compound. He is the oldest man in Azuala"

"Thank you." Ezra said.

A sign in front of his compound announced Papa Umekwe by his full title, the 'NNAOHA-1' of Azuala, or "the father of the people". The

'one' after the title was equally important, making it clear that he was the first of his lineage to ever carry that great title. His compound consisted of a large yard with a square, thatch roofed mud hut just a few yards away from the gate. The main mud hut was flanked by two smaller huts on each side, with several other huts behind it. The wooden gate had a small door, which led into the clean foreground of the compound. Abe and Ezra walked past the gate and into the front yard, which was as cleanly swept as the rest of the village. A mango tree dominated the landscape on the left side of the yard, providing shelter for the children playing under it.

A young man opened the door of the main hut, and greeted them respectfully as they approached, offering to carry their bags. Abe wanted to decline his offer, but Ezra encouraged him with his eyes. Abe gave up his belongings and followed the young man into Papa Umekwe's hut.

The inside of the hut's central room was cool, and smelled of tobacco snuff and palm wine. The windowless walls were bare, and there was a raffia mat on the floor in the middle of the space, providing a focal point for the six bamboo chairs that hugged the walls.

Papa Umekwe emerged from a back door. He was a slim, rugged, elderly man, probably in his seventies or eighties--but strong and firm in his poise. He wore his red and white cap of title, with a feather in it, and had on a simple white tee shirt over a traditional cloth wrapper.

"*Nwa* Osondu" he said, tapping his wooden cane on the ground. "Please, sit down. My house is your house."

"Thank you," said Abe. "This is my good friend, Ezra." Ezra bowed his head respectfully, and greeted the old man in Igbo. The young man returned with a saucer containing a single thumb-sized kola nut, with a small knife on the side.

"Let us share this kola and talk together." The old man said, his voice rough with age. "When an only kola nut is presented with love, it carries with it more value than might otherwise be associated with a whole pod of several kola nuts."

They all sat down.

"What brings the son of Osondu to Azuala?"

Abe considered the loaded question. How does one answer a question like that, after all they had been through? He decided to be a politician for a moment. Too much truth had gotten him in trouble in Lagos, and he wanted to start out on the right foot here in Azuala.

"I am here to search for my roots." He began. "I am told by all that my father was a great man. I want to learn why, and I want to honor him by visiting his people."

"Well spoken, Nwa Osondu." The old man said. "I see you inherited your father's eloquence. I always told him he should have been a lawyer." He paused and pulled out his snuff pouch. The young man cut the kola nut into small pieces and passed it around. He then retreated to a squatting position in a corner of the hut. Abe and Ezra each took a piece. Papa Umekwe filled his left nostril with the brown snuff and inhaled deeply. He waited for a moment, and then filled his right nostril. He inhaled through his right nostril, this time with his forefinger firmly blocking his left nostril. Suddenly, his face lit up as though his head had finally been cleared of its cobwebs.

"Nwa Osondu."

"Yes." Abe answered.

"Nwa Osondu."

"Yes." Abe said again, wondering if the old man hadn't heard him the first time.

"Nwa Osondu."

Abe looked at Ezra, and around the room briefly. Was the old man deaf?

"I am here, sir." Abe replied.

"How many times did I call you?"

"Three times, sir." He answered, looking at Ezra in confusion. Ezra had on a smile, and a knowing look in his eyes. This was tradition. The Igbo had a way, not only with proverbs, but also with the dramatization of speech in general. This was the salt and pepper that made the soup of speech worthwhile.

"I called you three times because I want to tell you why you are really here." The old man put away his snuff pouch and took a bite of the kola nut. He adopted a strange, distant look in his eyes, and chewed noisily.

"You are here because the Oracle of Azuala brought you here. You are here because our ancestors say that even death cannot quench the hunger of righteousness. Children are like seeds on a windy day; they spread far and wide, but wherever they implant themselves and grow, they will resemble the parent in form and beauty." He shifted his cane from one hand to another. "Your father, who is in the land of spirits, brought you to my house to continue his mission."

Abe was beginning to understand. He was more than just a visitor to these people. They saw him as a physical continuation of his father, here to fulfill a designated destiny. The words of Ogbuefi Udu in *Ajgunle* had sounded very similar to this.

The rain began to fall outside, beating against the thatched roof, sounding first like large stones were being thrown on it, and then turning later into a steady stream of water pellets. A spark of lightning disrupted the sky, followed by a loud thunderclap. The young man lit up an oil lamp, and stood up and helped to close the wooden door, keeping the rain and wind outside. In the now yellow light of the oil-lamp, Papa Umekwe looked rather ominous. He raised his voice above the din of the falling rain.

"Night falls, and the rain cleverly prevents us from talking," He said. "A toad does not jump in the daytime without a reason. The Oracle brought you to my home for a purpose. You must stay in my compound while you are here in Azuala. Our people say that an entire village participates in the raising of a child. Your grandfather was my age-mate, and I knew your father well. You are therefore under my care while you are with us. Osondu would not have it any other way."

He turned to the young man who was squatting quietly in the corner.

"Tell Ifeoma to prepare fufu for our guests. Also, go and call your father, and tell him that his best friend's son has come to see him. Tell him that tomorrow, we will call a meeting of the village elders and titled men, letting them know of our good fortune."

The young man obediently left the hut to carry out his instructions. Papa Umekwe left the central room, and retired to his bedroom. His last words were, "Sleep well, Nwa Osondu."

They ate heartily when the food came. It was a large plate of fufu, with an accompanying bowl of hot okra soup. It tasted like a strange gumbo mix, smelling of fish and oil, and its heat vapor could be seen like a clear smoke rising into the cool hut atmosphere.

Abe noticed how Ezra passionately prepared himself for the food. First he rolled up his sleeves with relish, and then he washed his hands in the water that was provided in a small bowl. After that he washed his face and his feet briefly, actions that seemed rather excessive to Abe. Once the ritual of cleaning up was over, he made neat little balls with the fufu, and then dipped them ceremoniously into the okra soup.

Sometimes Ezra blew at a ball of fufu to cool it down, and at other times, he threw it up in the air and caught it, graciously allowing the air to do the cooling. Ezra was so occupied by his process that he barely noticed Abe staring at him.

"Eat, my friend," Ezra said, wolfing down an oversized lump of fufu. "This is good food."

Abe, now thoroughly amused, folded his hands and continued to watch him. Ezra's ball of fufu was like an instrument of excavation for the bits of meat and fish in the soup. Once he had collected an ample amount of fish and okra with his fufu ball, Ezra would swallow the entire load in one move, causing Abe to be very amazed at his talent.

Abe could not copy him, but still managed to enjoy the food. He did not swallow the fufu balls, but chewed instead. He knew that he wasn't doing the ceremony quite right, but it didn't matter, for he was hungry, and Ezra was right. The food actually did taste great.

Once they finished their food, another young man returned and showed them to an adjoining room with two bamboo beds in it, located on either side of the space. He left the oil lamp and wished them a good night. Abe and Ezra took the cue and settled into their beds. It had been a long day, and a terrible ordeal the day before, so they were naturally exhausted, both physically and spiritually. Ezra fell immediately into a deep sleep, snoring loudly.

Abe stayed awake for a while, listening to the falling rain outside, his mind filled with images of the strange faces and events he had encountered since he set foot in Africa. America was so far away now, somewhere locked in his memory across an unforgiving ocean. Thoughts of jungles and armed robbers were so strong in his mind, that he couldn't resurrect the imagery of Minnesota, Joey, or Shawn. He couldn't even picture clearly, the face of Trip McGee. So he gave up, and continued to ponder his present circumstances as the night progressed.

He thought of this clean, beautiful village in the middle of nowhere, and felt a strange peace. This was so much better than poverty-stricken Ajegunle, and so much more honest than the rich and lavish city of Victoria Island. He played mind games with himself, and concluded that if he ever had to choose between the three, he would definitely settle for living in the village. Here, there was no water, electricity, or any other modern amenities, but there was a purity and tranquility that he had never felt before, not even in America.

Its clean air, its beautiful trees, its polite people--who seemed so honest and spiritually grounded--all were attributes both beautiful and genuine to him. He felt safe here.

Then he was jolted back into reality. He remembered the horrible incident in the jungle. He thought about the horrible ambush, and robbery, and decided it would be best to continue cautiously, and keep that episode a secret. Reporting the incident to people he didn't know might only make matters worse. Besides he had no real guarantee that he was out of trouble here in Azuala. Suddenly, he felt a terrible chill. If only he could get word to Shawn and Joey in America.

Finally, the oil-lamp burned itself out, and it became pitch-black in the room. He could see nothing, and could only hear the competing sounds of Ezra's snoring and the rain outside. Another flash of lightning and a clap of thunder disrupted the night, and his temporary feeling of safety vanished. He became filled with a feeling of trepidation. He wondered what the village plaza leading into the deep forest looked like at this time, with its giant Iroko trees oppressed by the rain in the pitch-black night.

He contemplated what religion these people worshipped, and why they kept saying that the Oracle had summoned him. Suddenly he wondered what malignant, evil spirits might also be out there in this remote wilderness, floating around among the Iroko trees, waiting to wage their everlasting war against the opposing spirits of goodness and kindness.

His mind drifted, and his fears gave way to sweet blankness as sleep finally came to him like a welcome friend. He embraced it. The rain outside became voices, chanting in his mind in a language stranger than anything he had heard so far. The message was simple.

You are the son of Osondu. N'dewo. Welcome home.

NINETEEN

"When brothers fight to the death, a stranger inherits their father's estate."

Oil Money

Roosters crowed in the distance, fading in and out as though they were a continuation of the eerie dreams Abe had experienced all through the night. Morning had arrived, and the rain had stopped, but his senses were jarred by the realization of how cold it had become in the room, and he could feel the slight draft of the harmattan wind that whispered outside. The roosters crowed majestically, calling and responding to each other, and announcing the beginning of a new day for all who cared to listen.

Abe's bamboo bed, cold and hard, but smooth to the touch, become increasingly uncomfortable, so he rolled over in it. He opened his eyes and looked over at Ezra's corner of the still dark room, and could tell that he had already woken up, for he wasn't in his bed. He tried rolling over again, still fading in and out of sleep, but there was no comfort to be found on the smooth bamboo branches that constituted his sleeping surface. Finally, he gave up trying to find comfort, and got out of bed.

He opened the wooden plank window above him, and let in the light of a beautiful Azuala morning. The sun was in the east, away from view, but he could see a beautiful moon still full in the morning sky above him.

The air was crisp, and smelled of dry forest leaves. A sudden draft of cool, harmattan air hit him, and he became aware of the dryness of his lips. He noticed the women outside doing various morning chores, and their children sweeping the yard diligently with raffia brooms. In the distance, he could see young women going to and returning from the stream, balancing water-pots on their heads. Abe felt a comforting peace. It felt good just looking at the Azuala villagers go about their business. He took a deep breath of the morning air.

Suddenly, drums began to beat far away in the distance, shattering his peaceful thoughts, and increasing in volume, as though they were coming closer. Abe could not see beyond the mango tree in the yard, due to all the trees and bushes behind it, so he couldn't tell what was coming, or how close they were. Suddenly a masked spirit-dancer, covered in bright yellow raffia from head to toe, entered the compound, with two similarly dressed subordinates keeping close behind. The drummers followed, continuing to beat their drums, as the spirit gyrated and danced its way feverishly into Papa Umekwe's compound.

Abe instinctively closed the window a bit, leaving only enough room so he could see what was happening, trying himself not to be seen.

"Oracle has spoken!" The spirit shouted in Igbo, to no one in particular, pushing his gloved hands into the air from left to right. He was shaking his upper body as though in an epileptic fit, his feet strutting to the beat of the drums. The women and children cleared the way, unafraid, but respectful of the terrible spirit-messenger.

"Before the sun goes down, the spirit of *Ekepe* will dance for Abuchi Osondu! Azuala titled men; be there! Oracle has spoken!"

The dancers gyrated in unison to the beat and left the compound as quickly as they had arrived, and the women and children returned to their morning chores.

Abe closed the window, shut, hoping he hadn't been seen. Even though the announcement had been made in Igbo, he had been able to make out his name, and realized that the adventure had already begun. He had really wanted to proceed with caution on this round of his journey. *So much for any chance of trying to lay low.* Now the whole village knew he was here.

"Yes, America is a wonderful place." Ezra was saying, to his captive audience of four children. "They have glass roads and fountains falling from concrete buildings. The buildings are taller than the Iroko trees in your village plaza, rising high into the heavens."

The young boy who had helped them with their luggage was fascinated. "Ezra, can you take me to America?"

"Of Course!" he replied. "And when we get there, you, myself and Abe will ride all over the country on an Amtrak train."

Abe couldn't help but smile. Ezra was at his usual exaggerations and Amtrak story-telling again. The shocking events of the previous few days had obviously worn off, and he was back to his old form. *What an amiable, determined, and loyal guy!* Abe sincerely hoped they could return to America together, their mission accomplished, so Ezra could ride off into the sunset on an Amtrak train. Heck, he was so grateful, if he could afford it, he would rent Ezra his own personal train, complete with a train-driver to take him around the entire contiguous United States, and truly make his dream come true.

There was a loud knock on the door. The younger children ran out of the hut, chanting about America as they exited. The older boy opened the door, letting three elderly men inside.

The men entered the hut, all wearing hats with feathers and traditional beads flowing down over their lion-skin scarfs. They were dressed alike, as though in uniform, all with long, black felt shirts hanging casually over traditional wrappers that covered their knees. The long shirts were beautifully embroidered with golden lion-heads, the mark of titled men.

"Go and call Papa Umekwe." One of them said to the boy. They all sat down, gazing with wonder and happiness at Abe. One of them shook his head and held his hands up to the thatched roof, silently praising an unseen god for Abe's arrival.

"Osondu's son. You are welcome." The prayerful one said. The other two quickly echoed his words.

"Thank you." Abe said politely, preparing to leave the room.

"Please, do not go." One of the other men said. "When a child washes his hands, he can sit and eat with kings. Just by coming to Azuala, you, Osondu's son, have truly washed your hands."

Abe sat down obediently next to Ezra, as they waited in silence for Papa Umekwe. The men made themselves comfortable, and each brought out snuff bags to engage in their morning snuff rituals. They talked among themselves about the upcoming Ekpe and yam festival, and about all the changes occurring in their land. One of the men raised his snuff pouch with pride.

“The snuff from Ndiorowe village is of a much higher quality than that of Azuala. I traveled the entire distance from here to that village just for my snuff.”

“You are suffering from *long-throat*, Umezuruike.” One of them responded. “This is pure greed! The alcohol that is insufficient for a whole town ought not to intoxicate one man. Be satisfied! Azuala snuff is just as good, if not better.”

“Are you calling me greedy, Iroabuchi?”

“No, I only said you have a long throat.”

The third man was silent, ignoring the dueling old men. He had a particularly over-sized nose, but an amiable disposition in his face. He was too busy concentrating on how to excavate the fine snuff grains from his pouch without spilling any of it. Abe and Ezra watched, enjoying the ranting of the three silly old men.

Umezuruike was the oldest of the three men, and in his younger days, had made a successful career of trading in cocoa, oil, and crops with the white man. His financial success had earned him the reputation of having ‘sold out’ among many in Azuala. But most people respected him, and even more were now emulating him, profiting from doing business with foreigners. He married many wives, had several children, and was merry at all times, having lived a life of relative opulence. Umezuruike was a liberal, a firm believer that change had come to stay in Azuala. Why fight it? He believed it was better to profit from the white man’s arrival, than to sit and bicker endlessly in poverty.

Iroabuchi, his good friend, yet staunchest rival, opposed him bitterly at every turn. Unlike Umezuruike, he had never created any business relationships with the white man, had never amassed much wealth, and only married one wife. He was a staunch supporter of those conservatives who wanted things to remain ‘the old way’. He was very

stubborn, aggressive, and easily provoked. Iroabuchi was nonetheless a harmless man, who enjoyed his snuff and palm wine to no end.

Ndubuisi, was the very religious and quiet one, usually keeping his thoughts to himself, and generally staying out of trouble. Although given to occasional bouts of flatulence, he was nonetheless a wise and respected man of Azuala. When he wasn't stuffing his enormous nose with snuff, or publicly allowing an occasional fart, he was usually very well grounded in his reasoning. However, like Iroabuchi, he was a poor man, and suffered constantly from regret. He lamented endlessly about a life wasted in his youth, and he had a tendency to bore people with stories of the many things he should have done if only he knew then what he knew now. Overall, he was a positive thinker, and the ultimate mediator between Umezuruike and Ndubuisi, usually able to keep the two in check.

All three men loved to congregate at old man Papa Umekwe's compound to enjoy each other's company, and revel in a friendship they had enjoyed and kept strong for many years.

After a few moments, Papa Umekwe entered the room, and joined them, placing a plate full of kola nuts on the mud floor. Papa Umekwe was the village Godfather, fully respected and admired by all, especially for his wisdom and storytelling prowess.

"He who brings kola brings life." One of the visitors proclaimed.

"It is true." Replied the others in unison. Papa Umekwe sat down on the bamboo chair closest to Abe, and handed the men the kola nuts.

"Abe, did you and your friend sleep well?" Asked Papa Umekwe.

"Yes, sir. Thank you." Abe replied.

"This man here is Umezuruike. This one here is Iroabuchi, and that quiet one over there is Ndubuisi." Papa Umekwe said, pointing to each man in turn. "They are titled men, and all were your father's great friends and age mates."

"It is true." They replied.

"Let us talk together." Papa Umekwe said, this time addressing the visitors.

Umezuruike spoke first: "A toad does not jump in the day time for no reason. Papa, we thank you for your hospitality. We thank Oracle for bringing Osondu's son to us. But we are concerned. There will be trouble

in Azuala if this boy fulfills his destiny. With all due respect to the memory of my friend, we should let sleeping dogs lie. This boy should not stay here in Azuala.”

Iroabuchi spoke next: “Papa, your wisdom is greater than mine, but as I see it, Umezuruike here has grown fat on the white man’s oil. I think that Osondu’s son should stay here in your house, and cooperate with the oracle to find his father’s wealth. It is our only hope. The white man’s days are numbered in Azuala, especially now that Abuchi is here.”

Umezuruike flashed Iroabuchi a fierce look, but decided not to be angry for the moment, and sat back quietly. Papa Umekwe looked at Ndubuisi, the quiet one, who was by now contemplating which nostril to fill with his snuff. The competition between his massive nostrils appeared to be fierce, and he held up his snuff-filled thumb, waiting patiently, not yet able to make up his mind.

“Ndubuisi,” Papa Umekwe said, “Like your nostrils, the rivalry between Umezuruike and Iroabuchi is still very huge. But please help us here; do you have anything to add?”

“Well, as you know,” Ndubuisi replied, taking a break from his concentration, “I don’t have seven wives and a big yam farm like Umezuruike, and my son did not die at the oil wells like Iroabuchi’s son, so I am neutral. But I will say only one thing.” He paused, shifted in his seat, and involuntarily broke wind. The others respectfully disregarded what they heard, but the growing smell was more difficult to ignore. He pushed the remaining snuff in his hand deep into his left nostril, which had apparently won the competition for his attention.

Satisfied, he concluded: “When I was younger, I thought the world was mine for the taking, and in my arrogance I relied on my own intelligence. Little did I know that several spiritual forces were always working around me, quite outside my control. Too much wisdom can be folly. Let the Oracle decide.”

Abe looked at Ezra to check for protocol. He leaned over and whispered in his ear as the men discussed back and forth.

“Is it proper for me to speak?”

Ezra nodded. “They say you have washed your hands,” He whispered in response, “So join them. Talk freely.”

“Papa Umekwe.” Abe said. The men all looked at him. Silence claimed the room. “Please, I am here on a simple mission to discover my roots.” Abe began. “I don’t really understand the history behind most of

what you are saying. All I need is a little guidance, and I will be gone in a few days. Who can help me with this mission?"

The men all shifted in their seats and returned to their snuff, respectfully deciding to let Papa Umekwe respond.

"My son, I am sorry," he began. "Old men are only good for talking. Like old fools, we have been discussing your life here without even consulting you. Let me explain." He brought out a piece of *Nzu* chalk from his pouch, and drew three small circles on the ground. He pointed to the first one.

"Many years ago, when the white man first came to our land, your grandfather, Uzoanya Osondu, was one of the first to be educated in their ways. The white man made Uzoanya very rich, giving him full access to the oil money, and appointed him to a high position in the government. But your grandfather became greedy, and after watching the white man exploit us, he decided to join them. Along with his friends in the government and other high places, they formed a secret society, called "*Agwo*", and grew richer and richer. The *Agwo* Secret society was a pawn of the white man, used for controlling our people and passing million-Naira oil contracts between themselves. All this while, our villages were destroyed under the load of uncompensated oil exploitation."

Papa Umekwe took a solemn bite from his kola nut.

"I'm sure you noticed all the oil pipes as you came to Azuala. It wasn't always that way. They burnt and tore up farmlands, destroyed many of our villages, and we have been forced to relocate many times. I will ask one of my grandchildren to show you the old village, which the oil company destroyed. The moral of the story is that your grandfather and his secret society friends grew fat with the white man, while our people slowly died of starvation."

A young woman entered the room with plates of *Ugba* and crayfish salad, and placed them on the ground in front of the men. Abe couldn't help but notice her striking appearance. She had beautiful high cheekbones, supporting a very smooth and pleasant face, and she carried herself with an air of feminine dignity. Her eyes met his briefly, making him realize he had been staring, so he quickly looked away as she left the room. The men all began to eat from the salad, chewing loudly as they listened.

“Papa Umekwe,” Ndubuisi said, “If I could become a young man again, I would have long since married this daughter of yours.”

Umezuruike said: “Not while I am alive, Ndubuisi, Ifeoma would have been my wife first.”

“In that case, we thank *Chukwu* for keeping both of you old.” Papa Umekwe retorted. “Old banana leaves were once young and green, but you, my friends, have never been green.”

“Well said, Papa.” Iroabuchi chimed in, laughing. “Umezuruike’s long-throat is scratching him again. But this time the itch has grown downward towards his groin. His mother did not properly teach him not to eat other people’s food.” Ndubuisi and Papa Umekwe joined in the laughter. Umezuruike made a terrible frown. He did not appreciate being singled out by Iroabuchi. After all, Ndubuisi started the joke. They quarreled petulantly amongst themselves.

Ezra joined in the laughter. Abe found himself laughing as well. The constant bickering between the old men was indeed a funny sight to behold.

Umezuruike flashed Iroabuchi a final fierce look, this time almost reaching his boiling point. But once again, he decided to ignore his anger, and laughed nervously along with everyone else.

Papa Umekwe pointed at the second white circle he had drawn on the mud floor, and once again addressed Abe.

“Your father on the other hand, was a great man. His greatness was not because of his inherited wealth, but because even at a young age, he refused to profit further from that wealth, believing it was ill gotten, and preferring instead to give it away to help others at any opportunity he had. You see, James Abuchi Osondu did not want his father’s oil money because it was the white man’s money, which had been achieved through the blood and toil of our exploited land. Your father hated your grandfather for his collaboration with the oil companies, and devoted his life to the sole purpose of expelling the Secret Society, and the white men who supported them. That is why he joined the police force when he returned from America.”

Abe and Ezra were listening intently. Papa Umekwe was a great storyteller. After taking a deep breath, he continued:

“Your father wanted to fight the forces of evil and exploitation wherever he could find it, and quickly became a hero in our land. After your grandfather Uzoanya died, the white men established their

company, Western Petroleum, and continued to exploit our land, taking the oil from our villages, while destroying our environment and leaving us destitute. We fought Western Petroleum in every way we could, under the leadership of your father, but they were too strong, especially with the government and the secret society behind them. Your father was a fierce, stubborn warrior, and he was our only voice against the exploitation. And that is why they killed him."

Abe, almost involuntarily, suddenly sat up straight, determined to get answers to the various questions he had on his mind.

"Who killed him?" Abe asked.

"Agwo. The Agwo Secret Society." Papa Umekwe replied. They will destroy anyone that stands in their way, anyone that seems to pose a threat to them. We must be careful."

"Do you think they would try to kill me just because of who I am?"

"It is possible."

"Was my father a member?"

"Definitely not. He was too busy trying to destroy them."

"How did he die?"

"No one knows till this day."

"And what happened to all his money?"

"He hid most of it before he died, and gave the rest to his wife, Mrs. Osondu. It is believed that only Mrs. Osondu and the Oracle know where his money is today."

"Does anyone know who the current members of the Secret Society are?"

"We know of one man, Chief Ugonna, but he lives in Umuahia. He has been the chairman of our local government area for many years. Your grandfather, Uzoanya, was the only Secret Society member we knew of in these parts, and that is why the curse was brought into your family. The Oracle proclaimed that every Osondu must die in order to wash the land of the evil Uzoanya brought upon us." Papa Umekwe bent over and pointed to the third and last circle he had drawn on the floor.

"And this is where you come in. The Oracle also prophesied that a son of Osondu, who would bear his name, would one day arrive and use his birthright wealth to help our people. That is why we knew you were coming. We have known you, your name, and your destiny ever long before you were born. This is your legacy."

There was a moment of silence. Abe broke it, still determined to get answers to the thousands of questions on his mind.

“So the Oracle carried out the curse?”

“Yes. Uzoanya’s wives were the first to die, and then all of his children followed, one by one, all dying mysteriously. The only Osondu that survived is Mrs. Osondu, your father’s wife.”

“Was she responsible for my father’s death in any way?”

“No one knows. Our people say that because all lizards lie on their stomachs, one cannot know which one has a belly ache. Some say she is a likely suspect, and in fact, many of our people blame her for his death, but no one has proof. All they do is gossip, and spread stories about Mrs. Osondu’s power, wealth, and connection to voodoo. If she was a member of the secret society, then she was guilty--but till this day, no one knows. She keeps to herself somewhere in the adjoining city of Umuahia, and enjoys her riches from far away. We rarely ever see her, but we know she is very powerful.”

Papa Umekwe took a pinch of snuff before continuing. “Now, the reason these men are quarrelling is that your destiny can only be fulfilled if you cooperate with the oracle to find your father’s money. Nigerians, like most humans, respond favorably to money, and that is the only way to gain the influence we need to defeat the oil companies. You must use your name and influence to help rid our land of the white man’s exploitation.”

“What do I have to do?” Abe asked.

“Don’t worry. Uka Dibia will tell you. He is the Oracle’s spokesperson. You do not have to make up your mind now, but at some point you will have to choose if you want to help the people of Azuala or not. A man who is advised and he takes it, is still a man who acts from his own free will.”

Ndubuisi stood up. “You have spoken the truth, Papa Umekwe,” he said, “I was mistaken. It is not only for the Oracle to decide, but rather, it is for Abuchi here to decide. Let him make up his own mind.”

Everyone responded in chorus. “It is true.”

The men all stood up to leave. Umezuruike raised his hand, to get attention.

“Papa Umekwe,” He said. “Did we offend you in any way?”

“No, my son.” Papa Umekwe said.

“Then why did you not offer us palm wine today?”

"Because you finished my final supply the last time you came here. Nzu the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching. Since you drink without stopping, I have learned to hide my supply whenever you arrive."

The men burst out laughing. They exchanged goodbyes and promised to reconvene at the dance later that evening.

Later in the morning, after they had freshened up and eaten fufu for breakfast, Abe and Ezra sat down in the front yard, watching the children play.

"Papa Umekwe seems like a good man." Abe said.

"Yes, he is very wise. We are lucky that he has taken us in." Ezra replied.

"Something occurred to me in there. Remember when Akin Obilo said my father was a member of the Secret Society?"

"Yes."

"First of all, how did he know that? And even if that kind of information is common knowledge in rich circles, as he said, why did he say my father was a member? I certainly don't think Papa Umekwe would lie. He said clearly that my father was not a member. So either Akin was mistaken, or he was lying."

"Exactly!" Ezra said. "Your friend Akin Obilo has always bothered me."

"How so?"

"As Papa Umekwe said, every lizard lies on its belly, so we cannot tell which has a belly-ache. First of all, he thinks I am a parasite, which offends me. But then, maybe he is right, after all, I am helping you in hopes that you will in turn help me go to America when we find your money. But then he turned around in the same breath, and immediately asked you to join him and invest in his business. Who is really the parasite? He seems to have taken a great interest in you from the beginning. He just bothers me."

"I wouldn't worry about that." Abe said, sensing Ezra's defensiveness, and wanting to change the subject. "At least we've made some progress. I now know that this Dibia man may be able to help me figure out where the money is. Once we get the money, we're outta here."

“At least we hope so.” Ezra added.

“Yeah. I’m not looking forward to any more surprises, and I’m certainly not looking forward to dealing with Mrs. Osondu.”

“Speaking of surprises,” Ezra said. “Can you imagine that beautiful young girl is Papa Umekwe’s daughter?”

Abe shook his head in agreement. She was indeed a beauty, but he didn’t want to let on just how much of an impression she had made on him.

“You probably noticed that I didn’t want to bring up the incident with the armed robbers.” He said, getting back to the subject.

“Who could have tipped them off? Who is really trying to kill me? Is it Mrs. Osondu, or the Secret Society, or both? At least, I can understand Mrs. Osondu not wanting me to take away the money she has probably been depending on all these years, but where does the Secret Society come in? Could they be one and the same? I bet there is a link between the people who followed us in Lagos, and whoever got us into the whole armed robber mess.”

“I bet you’re right.” Ezra said.

“By the way, what does ‘Agwo’ stand for?” Abe asked.

“It means Snake.” Ezra said. “The snake is the most feared creation of our God *Chukwu* in the Igbo culture, and it is also the most cunning.”

Abe took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. It was beautiful, with shades of white clouds occasionally interrupting the bright blue heavens. It was a peaceful sight, and in sharp contrast to his feeling of anxiety.

Armed robbers, Oracles, Voodoo, the mysterious Mrs. Osondu, and Secret Societies called Snakes! No one said it would be easy.

What had started as an exciting journey to claim a fortune was fast becoming an entanglement of dangerous events and circumstances. He tried not to give in to his fear. Greater than the fear of being hurt, or wounded, out here in a remote jungle, was the new, creeping fear of failure.

A sense of homesickness suddenly came over him. He closed his eyes, and vivid pictures of the West Bank in Minneapolis finally entered into his mind, helping to push the fear away. He had had so much trouble focusing his thoughts before, but now he could think clearly again.

He could see Joey and Shawn, trying to strike business deals in New York City. That whole endeavor was like another lifetime in his little daydream now; New York, the music industry, and Trip McGee. He wondered what had happened since he was out of commission. He knew they would be worried sick since he hadn't called in so long, especially after the incident with the armed robbers.

A feeling of responsibility, almost bordering on guilt, came over him. For all they knew, he was probably dead or something, and it wouldn't be right to let them worry about him that way. He had to get in touch, and he had to do it soon.

"I've got to get to a phone somehow," Abe said. "I've got to call America."

TWENTY

"He who bathes in con-dung should expect flies."

The Martyr

"Guys, let me put it to you like this," Trip McGee began, "It's not a pretty situation, but this record deal has got to be signed this week--with or without Abe."

Shawn held his head in his hands. Joey rocked from side to side. Neither answered. Trip McGee took a much-needed sip from his glass of wine.

They were sitting in a restaurant in Greenwich Village, right in the heart of New York City's busy nightlife. They had spent the entire day calling the Nigerian and the U.S. embassies, hoping to get some word of Abe. All they had received so far were busy signals or operators who couldn't help them.

The waiter came over with their food. Trip took a bite of his meal, and stopped. Neither Shawn nor Joey was eating.

"Look. Here's the deal," he continued, pushing his plate aside. "I got a call from Lance Trudeau of One Way Records. This is serious business. He wants to sign you guys this week, and not a day later. Everybody knows Lance Trudeau, and you have to do what he says. If we don't sign this deal now, we'll all miss out on the chance of a lifetime!"

Shawn perked up in his chair. "What about Abe?"

"Yeah." Joey blurted. "What part of 'no' don't you understand? We promised Abe we would wait for him."

Trip was frustrated. He leaned over towards them and took a final swig of his wine.

"I have a plan for that," He said, tired of arguing. "First of all, if we get the advance money, which could be hundreds of thousands of dollars, we can use some of it to pay for an investigation into where Abe might be, and what's happened to him. If we stay broke, we stay in the dark."

Trip continued in a lower tone, "Look, I'm not as rich as I dress, okay? As it is, I can barely pay my local rent and phone bill, let alone all these phone calls we've been making to Africa."

Shawn and Joey looked at each other, their resolve to resist him softening. Trip McGee had a slightly embarrassed, but sincere look on his face as he admitted his poverty. For the first time, they could sense that he was telling the truth.

"Here's my plan," Trip said. "Lance won't want to sign you guys without Abe since he's the lead singer, so I'm going to have to sell him on a whole new strategy altogether."

The guys listened closely.

Trip continued: "What if we admit to Lance that something has happened to Abe, but spin that he was martyred in Africa because he was fighting for the freedom of oppressed races there? We could make him a hero! We could release the record with an announcement to the world that the singer was a martyr. That song he wrote, 'I Am a Man', would be a perfect single because it's all about racism, and we could do this huge dramatic video of injustice in America paralleled by exploitation in post-colonial Africa. We would honor Abe that way."

The guys could tell Trip made sense. If Abe were in fact dead, at least it would be something done in his honor. Maybe Trip wasn't such a bad guy after all.

"Even if it were a one-time record," He continued, "It would sell like wildfire, just like those rappers, Biggy-Smalls and Tu-Pac did after they died. People love a good story, and they love an ironic situation like 'the political band whose singer was a martyr'." Trip made a sarcastic double-quotation sign with both his hands, and rolled his eyes for added effect.

"MTV and BET would be all over it," he continued, "Think John Lennon, Marvin Gaye--even Bob Marley. They all got bigger after death

than when they were alive. The whole martyr thing would be a slam dunk for *Danshiki!*”

Shawn and Joey sat there amazed at the passion and talent of Trip McGee. Trip held his breath and waited for an answer. The guys were slowly coming around. Here was a chance to score. He knew he had them in the red zone, so he decided to try for a touchdown.

“Look, on the flip side, I can almost guarantee you there’s nothing wrong with Abe anyway. His phone battery probably ran out or something. Guys, this is Africa, remember? There’s a good chance you simply misunderstood whatever it was that person said on Abe’s phone. Problem is, we only have a few days to go before we all lose the chance of a lifetime. Remember, we all stand to benefit. And that includes Abe too!”

Shawn and Joey were nodding their heads in gradual agreement. Trip was actually making a twisted, weird kind of sense. Hope was returning slowly but surely, brightening the mood at the table, and Trip could sense it. *Goal! Touchdown!*

Trip continued. “And then, once we get the record out, Abe will undoubtedly return, and the media will be all over his ‘resurrection’. Someone will leak to the media that this was all planned, and the scandal will be enormous! And all the publicity will only mean more sales for us!”

The man was brilliant. Shawn and Joey smiled at this point. They were convinced, and nodded their heads accordingly. Trip exhaled, relieved from his passionate performance.

“Guys, we’re going to be rich!” He shouted, to the astonishment of some restaurant guests sitting nearby. Trip pulled his mobile phone out of his jacket and frantically dialed a number.

“Lance Trudeau, please.” There was a moment of silence, and then Trip continued.

“Lance. We’ll be in your office to sign this thing tomorrow morning.”

Pause.

“Can we get together tonight to celebrate?”

Pause.

“You got it. Thanks, Lance!”

Trip dropped the phone and turned to Joey and Shawn. “Guys. I’m meeting him tonight to sell him on this new idea. Tomorrow, you guys become stars!”

It was too good to be true! They finished their dinner and walked back to Trip McGee's office in Lower Manhattan.

TWENTY-ONE

"An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb."

The Visitor

"It is customary for you to receive your well-wishers personally," Ezra said, "Besides; our people talk a lot, so you want to make sure that only good things are said about you throughout the village."

So they sat there, greeting visitors who arrived intermittently, while Papa Umekwe slept.

The Azuala sun had now reached its highest point in the sky. It was Abe and Ezra's second day in Azuala. All through the morning, different visitors had come to Papa Umekwe's compound to pay their respects to Abe, and to congratulate him for seeking out his father's people. Abe had never been in a situation where so many people knew so much about him. It was a little unsettling to be the center of attraction in an African village.

They had just finished saying goodbye to three women guests, when they heard the sound of a car pull up to the compound.

"I thought there was no way a car could get in through the forest?" Abe said.

"There must be a back way different from where we came in." Ezra said.

The car pulled up to the compound gate, and a white chubby man came out of it. He wore khaki trousers, a crisply ironed white shirt, and an oversized khaki hat. He resembled a rich European hunter or an explorer, and approached the compound as Abe and Ezra watched through the open door.

"Good afternoon" the man said in perfect Queens English. Ezra and Abe replied, and they asked the man to have a seat. The visitor noticed Papa Umekwe sleeping, and smiled.

"My name is Paul Greenstone, from Leicester, England, but most people here call me Mr. Green," he said. "Welcome to Azuala."

"Thanks, Mr. Green." Abe said, quite surprised. He had not expected a Caucasian visitor in the middle of Azuala. After an uncomfortable silence, he asked: "How did you get your car in here?"

"Oh, we have a dirt road from the old village," Mr. Green said. "Once you get there from the Umuahia main road, you just follow the trail behind the oil wells, and it brings you straight here."

"How was your trip into Azuala?" Mr. Green continued, "This is a long way from Minnesota!"

"How did you know—?"

"We know pretty much everything about everyone who passes by these parts. It's a small village. People talk."

Mr. Green took off his hat, and said understatedly: "We also know, for example, that you have had a most unpleasant trip getting here. You barely made it to Azuala with your life, I hear."

Abe stood up reflexively, and lunged toward Mr. Green. Ezra held him back. *How on earth could Mr. Green know this?*

"I wouldn't get over-excited if I were you." Mr. Green said calmly, twiddling with his hat. Abe reclaimed his seat.

Ezra watched the exchange between them, and finally spoke up: "Are you from an oil company?"

"Why, yes," Mr. Green said smiling, "I see you must have been briefed on that."

"Not really," Abe cut in, "We saw all the oil pipes and the signs for Western Petroleum on our way in."

"Yes. I'm from Western Petroleum," Mr. Green admitted. "In order to get to the oil sources, we built all the roads leading into this bush,

including the Umuahia main road you arrived on. This village owes a lot to Western Petroleum!”

Mr. Green put his hat back on, and abruptly turned to leave.

“Will you be registering to vote in the upcoming election?” he asked.

“Probably not.” Abe said.

“Whatever you do, make sure you vote for Chief Ugonna. He should win this election. He’s a good man.”

Abe could detect the threat in Mr. Green’s voice, even though at this point, he was probably just campaigning for his man, Chief Ugonna. It seemed as if he was warning them. Mr. Green looked at Papa Umekwe, who happily snored away, and then spoke in a hushed tone:

“Don’t listen to everything these people tell you. They have a tendency to exaggerate.” He winked and shook his head in Papa Umekwe’s direction. The old man stirred in his sleep.

“I’d stay away from their bickering,” he continued in his hushed tone. “These Africans have a way of complaining about anyone who is doing better than they are. You don’t want to get caught in the middle of their problems with the authorities. You don’t want to get hurt.”

Abe and Ezra stared at him.

“I’d better be off!” Mr. Green announced. “Oh, one more thing. Protect yourself from those damn mosquitoes. They carry Malaria, and in Africa, that is like a death sentence to us foreigners. Here’s my number on this business card. If you ever need anything, let me know. Any son of Osondu is a friend of mine.”

Abe took the business card.

“Have a safe visit,” Mr. Green announced as he left the room. “And stay out of trouble!”

Abe pulled Ezra into the back room, almost tripping over the empty bamboo chairs. Then he closed the door and whispered.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Abe asked.

“I think so,” Ezra said. “That one doesn’t qualify as a friendly visitor.”

“I feel like our every move is being watched,” Abe said. He knows way too much for my liking!”

“News travels fast around here.” Ezra said, “But I don’t think that’s why we should be worried.”

“What do you mean?”

“He is not a lowly messenger. He is a man of importance. Whoever is behind all this has sent their top white man to deliver his warning. That tells me they are serious as hell.”

TWENTY-TWO

"As a man danced, so the drums were beaten for him."

The Duel

People swatted the little pests everywhere! The mosquitoes gathered in full force along with the village people who had arrived at the plaza for the elders' meeting. The late-afternoon sun started its descent into the western horizon, and was barely visible through the thick treetops of the Azuala village plaza.

Boom-kiti-Boom-kiti Boom Boom!

The Ekpe drummers sat in the middle of the plaza, playing away feverishly as the elders and titled men of Azuala slowly filled the log seats that had been arranged for them. The flute players flanked the drummers, supporting them with eerie harmonies. Azuala villagers gathered around a circle drawn in the sand, in anticipation for the wrestling match arranged in honor of the titled men's meeting. Teenage boys with whips occasionally brandished their raffia weapons at the gathering crowd to ensure that they would not enter the wrestling circle.

The tag team wrestlers arrived, their faces and bare chests war-painted with red and white chalk marks. They pushed their way into the circle, shaking their torsos to the frantic beat of the drums.

Boom-kiti-Boom-kiti Boom Boom!

Boom-kiti-Boom-kiti Boom Boom!

First entered the reigning champions. One was short and stocky, and the other was very huge and muscular. The big one was a bit over six feet, and probably about three hundred pounds, unusually large for an Azuala man.

The crowd cheered especially loud as the big man entered, calling him 'Okeke-the-gorilla'. The challengers entered the ring shortly after, but both were short, weak-boned, and rather feeble-looking. No one cheered for them.

A naked man entered the village plaza, and sat by himself in the buttress of an Iroko tree, watching from far behind the crowd of people who had gathered. No one paid much attention to him. His thick, uncombed hair and overall dirty appearance gave him a very ferocious look, but his nakedness sent the ultimate signal. *He was a madman!* Abe and Ezra walked into the plaza, and noticed the naked man in the background. They sat on the raffia mats that had been laid on the ground for them, to the left of the titled men.

"That must be Innocent, the madman of Azuala." Ezra said, referring to the naked man. "The sign of madness in our country is when you start walking around naked in public."

"So that must be the armed robber's son, then?" Abe said.

"It would seem so. I think he looks rather dangerous. We should stay away from him."

"He can't be *that* dangerous."

"You never know."

"I'm going to deliver Oga's greeting to him." Abe said stubbornly. "We owe Oga that much for saving our lives. I'll even give him some money. It's a kind and honorable thing to do."

"Let me teach you a proverb that fits your honorable attitude," Ezra said. Abe leaned closer to hear him above the noise of the growing crowd.

"When a man says 'yes', his *chi* also says 'yes'."

"What does 'chi' mean," Abe asked.

"It means, 'your personal god'. It's all about the power of positive thinking. I know you never really understand our proverbs, but remember this one whenever you're in doubt, or lack confidence."

"Sure--" Abe said, "I'll say 'yes' to my chi before I go deliver his father's greeting. But I'm going to do it all the same." His honor was mixed with resolve and stubbornness. He was determined to somehow repay Oga's kindness.

"Just be careful." Ezra said. "A madman does not understand honor and kindness."

The referee entered the middle of the ring, which had now become fully surrounded with villagers hungry for a good show.

"On my left," he announced, "Is 'Okeke-the-gorilla', with his partner Odili." He pointed to the giant man and the shorter one respectively. "And on my right—" He looked to his right, and realized that no one was there. The challengers had slipped away unnoticed. A murmur swept through the crowd like a wind-blown wildfire. The opponents had withdrawn their challenge! This had not happened in years. Okeke's reputation was good, for he had never lost a battle, but at least, he had always gone home after actually winning a contest, not because his challengers conceded victory.

"Well," The referee shouted, "Okadigbo and his partner have run away, so we must declare that they are old women!" The crowd burst out in laughter. "It looks like our undisputed winners are still Okeke and his partner Odili!"

Okeke stood up, and raised his hands from left to right, acknowledging the cheering crowd. By now, all the elders had arrived and taken their seats.

Ezra whispered to Abe. "Let me show you something about Igbo people." He said. "There's no easier way to become a hero than to show some physical power and cunning. First, you must boast, and then you must win, and nothing beats a wrestling match for that."

"Ezra--!"

Before Abe could finish mouthing his response, Ezra bolted into the middle of the ring, and raised his hands in the air for all to see. Abe cupped his face in his hands. *Not Again!* Ezra was at his usual crazy pranks again.

“Azuala Kwe’nu!” He shouted for all to hear, waving his arms passionately.

“Hey!” the people responded in unison. The drummers and the flutists stopped playing.

“Azuala Kwe’nu! He said again. Once again, the people responded in unison.

“My people,” Ezra continued, now that he had everyone’s attention, “A child does not die because the mother’s breast is dry. There will be a fight today, even if it means I shall face them myself.”

Abe couldn’t help but admire the little man’s bravery. *His poor chi must be working overtime saying ‘yes’.* Another murmur swept through the crowd. Soon the murmur turned into a full-blown cheer. People wondered who this stranger was with the guts to challenge the great Okeke. However, a challenge had now been made, and it was up to Okeke to accept it or reject it.

Okeke looked at the cheering crowd, and realized that his tag team had to fight to keep honor. He whispered to Odili, and the short man sprinted up and out of the Iroko buttresses like a gazelle, and jumped into the ring next to Ezra.

The drums began to beat again, and the fight was on!

Boom-kiti-Boom-kiti Boom Boom!

Boom-kiti-Boom-kiti Boom Boom!

Odili was built like an efficient little war machine, his center of gravity located squarely in the middle of his sizable gut, which hung very close to the ground. He and Ezra made an interesting looking pair, both short and stocky, with their bellies protruding.

Odili circled menacingly, and with one lightning move, swooped Ezra off his feet, and high into the air. As he fell, Ezra regained his balance like a cat, not allowing his back to touch the ground.

They continued circling each other.

Ezra appeared to use this first attack to read his opponent, concluding that he was just a mindless charger. He circled patiently around, waiting for the next charge. The drums continued to beat as they danced. Once again, Odili charged into Ezra. This time, Ezra was ready. He quickly sidestepped the charging man and left his right foot in the way. The mad rush turned into a disaster for Odili, who fell flat on his

face. Before he could get up, Ezra pinned him down, and ended the fight.

The crowd roared. Ezra was a hero.

Okeke came out of the buttresses and entered the ring. Next to Ezra, he was simply a giant of a man. No wonder they called him the gorilla. Ezra readied himself for another attack, once again looking for an opportunity to first study his opponent.

Abe watched closely. He couldn't help but recall the first time he met Ezra. This was exactly what he was doing that day at the Old Lake State Prison. The poor guy certainly wasn't afraid to pick fights with people twice his size.

Like a charging bull, Okeke swooped in and grabbed Ezra with one hand, and threw him a few feet into the air. Ezra landed with a thud, but couldn't get up because Okeke was on top of him like a bolt of lightning. It was over as soon as it began. Ezra's winning streak was over. The crowd exploded in a unanimous cheer.

Okeke walked over to Abe.

"The servant has fallen," He taunted, "Is the master also an old woman?"

Abe looked around him, first at the elders to his right, and at the crowds of Azuala villagers all around. He noticed Papa Umekwe sitting with Umezuruike, Ndubuisi, Iroabuchi, and the other titled men of Azuala. Behind Papa Umekwe, stood Ifeoma, his beautiful daughter, looking even more striking than he remembered her to be. Then he looked at poor Ezra, who was still rubbing his back from the nasty fall he had just endured. He remembered Ezra's words. *No easier way to become a hero!*

"No!" Abe shouted for all to hear. Something in the heat of the moment edged him on, and he found himself facing Okeke-the-gorilla, and trying his hand at a little boastful taunting.

"You celebrate your victory over a smaller man," Abe said, surprised to hear himself speaking, "But between the two of us, *you* may be the old woman!"

The crowd cheered. They wanted blood. Okeke couldn't believe it. The air was tense, stretched taut like the skin of a brand new drum. No one had ever openly challenged him! He spat on the ground, and readied himself for battle. The referee was so thrilled, he started to dance, and the drums followed him. The crowd was swaying and encouraging as Abe

entered the circle. Papa Umekwe leaned over and told Ndubuisi how Abe reminded him so much of his father.

"The palm kernel cannot help but fall near the palm tree," he said.

The fight began. Abe, at six feet, was about the same height as Okeke, but not half as muscular. His dreadlocks flew in the wind as he circled with Okeke. He was operating on instinct and adrenalin now, having never wrestled before. It all felt strangely exhilarating.

Okeke made the first move, but Abe stepped out of the way. They continued to circle. Abe tried to lunge at him, but missed as Okeke ducked and grabbed him in the middle section. Okeke lifted Abe high up in the sky, getting ready to throw him. The crowd cheered in anticipation of a swift victory.

Abe looked briefly at the cheering crowd, and felt an inevitable shame building, but in a flash of desperation, he twisted his body sharply and freed himself from Okeke's iron grip. Okeke was taken by surprise, and momentarily off-balance.

In a move born more out of desperation than skill, Abe swooped in, grabbed him by his left leg, and pulled. Amazingly, the gorilla came down--all three hundred pounds of him! His fall created a painful thump on the sand as he landed awkwardly. Abe instinctively threw himself on top of the fallen man, and grabbed his neck in a stranglehold. Okeke struggled, but was too stunned to free himself in time before the referee swooped in and stopped the fight.

Unbelievable as it was, Abe had won!

The crowd cheered out of control. The drums were beating at a frenzied pace, struggling to be heard above the roar of the crowd. No one had ever defeated Okeke in all the nine hamlets of Azuala. Young women ran into the center of the circle and broke out into songs of praise for Abuchi Osondu:

"Abuchi's back! Never hits the ground! Whoever this angers, let anger kill him! Who does it anger? It angers someone like Okeke!"

*Azu Abuchi! Erugu ala,
I-bobo, konko si konko,
Onye iwe na ewe,
Ya we ghuo ya,
O na ewe onye?
O na ewe onye di ka Okeke!*

Ezra smiled and winked at Abe as he approached.

"See, they say you're the hero of Azuala!" He said. "If the election were held today, you would win."

Abe could barely hear Ezra against the noisy crowd. He raised his hands and accepted the applause, and walked back to the raffia mat near the elders.

The referee announced to all that the match was over, and it was now time for the elders' meeting. He then ordered everyone to go home, so the elders could talk in private. To enforce his order, the referee and the teenagers began pushing and dispersing the crowds that had gathered. Women, children and untitled young men were not allowed to listen to the titled men's discussions. The crowd slowly dispersed, chatting noisily as it left. Soon the village plaza was empty, except for the elders and titled men.

When the last of the villagers had left, Papa Umekwe stood up to speak, beginning with the introductory romance between a speaker and his audience.

"Azuala kwe'nul!" He called in greeting.

"Hey!" The elders answered in one voice.

"Azuala kwe'nul!"

"Hey!"

"Azuala kwe'zuonu oooh!"

"Heeeey!"

Papa Umekwe stopped to catch his breath. He was an old man, and could not afford to show the oratory excitement of younger men. In a gruff but quiet voice, he began his speech.

"Those of you who have ears have heard of Osondu's son."

"It is true." The elders answered.

Those of you who have eyes have now seen Osondu's son."

"It is true." They answered once again.

"He who has people is greater than he who has money. We were great because we had the father, and we are great again because we have the son."

The elders murmured in agreement.

"We are here today because the Oracle said we would be here. We are all witnesses of the day Osondu's son returned to save his people. But we are in danger of a terrible thing befalling us. Chief Ugonna's men are

planning to rig the local government election as usual, and we have heard that Western Petroleum has given them even more money to ensure a victory. None of our candidates are a match for them.”

Ukonu, one of the titled men, stood up, interrupting him.

“Papa, but why is this a terrible thing?” He said. “After all, they have been rigging the elections for years, and we have never complained.”

“Fat men do not complain. Like some of our people, you have been very friendly with Chief Ugonna, and you have become fat and happy.”

The elders hissed in agreement, and jeered at Ukonu, forcing him to sit down. Umezuruike kept his eyes to the ground, visibly uncomfortable, for he knew he was in that category as well.

Papa Umekwe continued: “As you all know, the Oracle promised that Osondu’s son would come, and in the same year we would win our battle against the white man and his African counterparts. The terrible thing that may happen is if we cannot take advantage of this opportunity, and unseat those corrupt people in office once and for all.”

He sat down, and pointed a warning finger into the sky as he offered this last comment. “Only a dim-witted dog will try to quench a fire with the wind in its fart. For too long all we have done is complain, and it has achieved nothing. We must fight the exploitation of our land immediately, and in a big way. Osondu’s son must decide if he is willing to use his birthright to save the people of Azuala. It is his decision. They say age brings wisdom. I am an old man, and I have spoken.”

Ndubuisi stood up.

“Papa Umekwe speaks the truth.” He said. “A man cannot sit and watch while a she-goat gives birth in an unsafe place. Our land is dying, and our people are in poverty while the exploitation continues, making other people rich. Only Osondu had the money to fight this battle, and his son has arrived to claim his legacy. We must open our mouths and ask Osondu’s son if he can help us. If he says no, then we can continue to suffer as usual, with our eyes open.”

Everyone looked at Abe. It was awkward being considered a hero and savior of a people he had just met. He didn’t feel he deserved all the attention, and he certainly didn’t want to get into any more trouble. The people were all waiting for him to speak.

“How can I help?” He sputtered.

“You must talk with your father through the Oracle.”

The thin, scratchy voice that spoke came from a very small, blind man sitting behind the elders. His face was mangled and thin with age, his eyes, dark holes below his large forehead. He stood up to speak.

"I am Uka Dibia, the witch doctor of Azuala. Your father will show you where to find his money, your legacy, and you can use it to save your people. But first, you must go under the ancient *mmo* spell, and journey with the Oracle into the land of the dead to speak with him. Returning from the dead will depend on you and your personal *chi*, but it is the only way to find your legacy."

Uka Dibia sat down. Abe looked at Ezra, who made a face that suggested he didn't know what to do either. Anticipation mounted. Everyone was looking at Abe. The sun had all but disappeared behind the horizon, and the village plaza was quickly being engulfed in an eerie darkness. The elders of Azuala were silent.

So this was the moment of choice! This was the moment that stood between finding his legacy, or losing it all—the moment between his mission's success or failure. This was the crossroad between a good decision and a bad one, which could lead to glory or failure, or even death by voodoo. Abe knew that this decision would have as much impact in his life as his decision two years earlier to quit law school, maybe even bigger. In this moment, Abe remembered the words of Oga the thief.

The legacy your father left for you is here in my heart, and I return it to you unscathed.

Abe paused as he considered his situation. In his heart, he felt a kinship with these people, and wanted to help them.

What would it hurt to give them a few million for their cause?

After all, he would be completing his father's work, fulfilling his destiny, and there was absolutely nothing wrong with that. For the first time, it appeared his journey was coming to an end. He could see the money now, like a light at the end of a long and torturous tunnel.

He broke into a sweat, a feeling of intense fever coming over him. The elders sat attentively in anticipation. You could hear the sounds of Azuala crickets beginning to dominate the evening air, mingling with the

breeze as it blew through the leaves all around them. Something in the cool wind cleared Abe's thoughts, and his decision came suddenly to him. He rose to speak.

"When a man says 'yes'," he declared, tackling his newly acquired proverb for added effect, "his chi also says 'yes'. Let's do it! Let's go see the Oracle!"

Papa Umekwe and all the elders cheered and rocked in their seats with joy. Abe had a sinking feeling he had just unwittingly accepted a job he had no experience for. He looked at the row of elders. To these trusting villagers, he was Osondu's son--the savior and liberator of Azuala.

Suddenly all the excitement became too much for him. Nausea churned in his stomach,¹ and he keeled over and vomited!

The elders were flabbergasted, and all fell soundless. Ezra leaped to Abe's side. The feverish heat blinded Abe's senses. Darkness overwhelmed him, and he passed out.

TWENTY-THREE

"Hunter is the Hero until Hunted gets a chance to speak."

The Old Village

Abe was sick. *Really* sick! He woke up abruptly in the middle of the night, and found himself alone in the darkness of Papa Umekwe's mud hut. The hut was cool, ventilated from an open window above his head. He lay still on the bamboo bed with sweat pouring down his face, arms and legs. Despite the cool atmosphere, he was burning up! He knew instantly that he was sick. His throat was sore, and he could not taste the saliva in his mouth. He tried to speak, but his lips would not move.

He remembered the wrestling match, and passing out earlier in the village plaza, but nothing more. Like his vision, his memory was just a blur.

He was in agonizing pain, unable to move himself, and his limbs were weighed down as though under the influence of an unseen force. Helpless, he stared at the ceiling, and then gathered enough strength to try to roll over in the bed, only to find himself quickly crashing to the floor. He groaned on the cool mud floor.

Ezra and Ifeoma sat quietly in the adjoining room. Papa Umekwe had assigned Ifeoma the task of taking care of Abe, for she was the most experienced in these matters. Ezra had insisted on staying awake with her.

They both heard the sickening thud as Abe hit the floor, and rushed into the room with an oil lamp. Together they lifted him back onto his bed. Ifeoma ran out of the room and returned with a large bowl of boiling medicine leaves and a pot of cool water. She applied the cool water with a cloth onto Abe's brow. Abe tried to speak, opening his mouth slowly, but no words came out.

"Do not strain yourself," Ifeoma said gently. She carefully wiped the sweat from his face and arms, and covered him with a thick wrapper. Ezra watched her. She then placed the bowl of hot medicine leaves under a stool in front of the bed.

"Ezra, help me lift him up," she said. "The medicine leaves are ready."

Together they lifted Abe to a seating position on the bed, and placed his feet on the stool. Now he was directly above the hot bowl of medicine leaves. Ifeoma covered Abe from head to toe with the thick wrapper, forcing the fumes and hot vapor from the leaves to stay inside and surround him with their medicine.

Abe could smell the healing fumes as the medicinal vapor of the boiling leaves rose into his nostrils and up to his brain. The vapors felt soothing and jolted his senses. The heat from the vapors made him sweat even more. He sat there for a while as Ifeoma and Ezra looked on.

"He will be fine," Ifeoma said to Ezra. "You can go back to sleep."

"Thank you for taking care of him," Ezra said, as he left the room.

Ifeoma sat on a stool next to Abe, and waited for a few minutes before removing the hot bowl from under Abe's stool, and helping him back into the bamboo bed. Abe finally found his strength, and was able to whisper.

"Thank you." He mouthed painfully.

"Do not speak," Ifeoma said. "Save your energy."

A surge of pain swelled from his chest up to his head, and the room began to spin. He felt the pain spread from his eyes to his spine, and he wiped liquid mucus from his nose.

"You are so kind." He said. "Thank you for helping me." His delirium began to get the better of him. His vision blurred. It sometimes appeared as if there were more people in the room. One minute he saw Ifeoma, and the next he saw the spirits of his deceased mother and father sitting in the distance watching him.

"Mom?" He whispered.

“Your mother is not here.” Ifeoma assured him, realizing he was delirious. “Go back to sleep.”

“Sing to me.” Abe said.

Ifeoma realized his disordered speech and hallucinations were not going away, so she sat down quietly beside him, pulling the wrapper higher over his chest.

“Please sing to me.” Abe said again, opening his eyes, and looking at her directly. “I’d like you to sing to me.”

Ifeoma realized he was referring directly to her this time. She prepared to fulfill his awkward request, knowing that sick people sometimes need to be treated like babies. She began, in Igbo:

Nne nne’m oro, - ewo

Si chara ofe, - ewo

Weri nke nwa ya o mutara dobe n’ala - ewo

Weri nke munwa nwa ogbo dobe n’uko - ewo

Mma aka n’uko, - ewo

Aka’m erugu ya, - ewo

Mma ukwu n’uko, - ewo

Ukwu’m erugu ya, - ewo

Anyan mmiri barabara na obu n’onwu nne meri’m oh - ewo

She sang the sad Igbo nighttime story-song of a poor orphan child who grew up oppressed in his wicked stepmother’s home. The stepmother had a habit of putting her own child’s food low on the floor where it could be reached. However, she deliberately put the orphan child’s food high up on a shelf where he could not reach it. The story-song explained how the orphan struggled unsuccessfully to reach his food, and finally gave up in despair. First the child tried using his hands to reach into the high shelf, but failed. Then he tried reaching in with his feet, and failed again. Finally the child broke into tears, and blamed Fate for the untimely death of his own mother.

The night carried Ifeoma’s song up into the stars. Abe couldn’t understand a word, but he quickly fell into a much-needed, deep, dreamless sleep to the sound of her soothing voice.

Morning came the next day with the sounds of merchants hurriedly making their way to their market stalls. The sun had made its way above the horizon, and the air was alive with the tension of business. It was *Nkwo* market day in Azuala, and Papa Umekwe's compound was abuzz with the preparations for trading. Ifeoma had just finished sweeping the compound, and was now carrying out market preparation chores with her mother, Udochi--Papa Umekwe's last and youngest wife.

Udochi was very worried about their sick guest. "That man must not die under your care." She whispered to Ifeoma. "People are talking. They say that Mrs. Osondu may have asked a distant Dibia to put a spell on him. Why else would he fall sick so suddenly in public?"

Ifeoma kept busy helping her mother wrap her market wares into a basket. She carefully lifted the fufu bags and put them together with the tomatoes, onions, and other vegetables that Udochi planned to sell. She did not respond. Her mother was the celebrated village gossip, and was better listened to than argued with.

"Child, did you not hear me?" She barked. "Be careful. That man is cursed, and he must not die at your hands."

Ifeoma quietly finished tying her mother's market bag. She avoided a fight by agreeing.

"You are right, mother." She said. "But I think he is improving. It must be malaria, for his fever is already dying down."

"Just be careful." Udochi hissed. Without another word, she concluded her packing, and balanced her market basket on her head. She walked off to join the growing lines of men and women marching away toward the market stalls.

Abe groaned, and Ifeoma ran into his room. Ezra was already there.

"How are you feeling today?" She asked.

"Much better." He said. "I feel like my head exploded and was put back together piece by piece."

"Yes, that is malaria. You may feel better in the daytime, but it will be worse again at night for a few days. So save your energy. Just lie down while I get your food."

Papa Umekwe entered the room.

"How are you feeling today, Abuchi?"

"Much better, thanks." Abe replied. "Your daughter works miracles."

“Yes, she does. She alone seems to run my entire household. Unfortunately, all my four wives, including her mother, have turned to gossiping and bickering in their old age.” He sat down next to Abe. “You, on the other hand, are a miracle worker yourself. Nobody has ever defeated Okeke-the-gorilla.”

“It was just my chi saying yes,” Abe said, winking and smiling weakly at Ezra. “So when do I get to see the Dibia?”

“As soon as you feel better.” Papa Umekwe said. “I will ask someone to take you to see him. He lives in the old village. In fact, he and Innocent, our village madman, are the only people who still live there.”

“Why did everyone move?”

“Ah,” Papa Umekwe said. “That is a long story I can only tell when you have a full stomach of fufu. If you feel strong enough, come to my room after eating, and I will tell you what happened.”

Papa Umekwe left the room.

Ifeoma returned with Abe’s food, a hot bowl of fufu with Okra soup. Abe looked at her carefully, as though for the first time. She was indeed beautiful. She had long, thin legs, supporting her solid, athletic feminine frame, and her skin was as smooth as a newborn baby. Her hair was braided in a traditional African style, framing a striking face, and flowing down her shoulders gracefully.

Her eyes met his, and he quickly looked aside, not wanting to be caught staring. She left the food on the floor for them, and quietly left the room.

“She saw you staring, you know.” Ezra said matter-of-factly, between lumps of fufu.

“I know.” Abe replied, rolling his eyes, and knowing he had been busted. They finished their food in silence, and then walked into Papa Umekwe’s hut.

“I see the food agreed with your stomach?” Papa Umekwe asked. They agreed it was a great Okra soup. Ifeoma never failed to deliver on great soup.

“So, the old village—?” Abe started.

“Yes, the old village.” Papa Umekwe said. “It is not a trivial matter, and that is why I wanted you relaxed and healthy. Please sit down and make yourself comfortable. Malaria takes a while before it fully goes.”

They sat down.

Papa Umekwe began his story: "This village we live in today was practically built from scratch right after your father died some ten years ago. We all lived a few miles from here in the old village, which was fifty times more beautiful than what you see here. It was beautiful until Western Petroleum started drilling oil right in our backyard. When they first came, we welcomed them, thinking that they would bring progress to our land and we would all become exposed to modern civilization. But their actions did not match their words. They did nothing but spill oil on our farms, torch our homes, and soil our rivers. When we protested, they told the government that they were investing in our communities, but all were lies. Instead, our people were dying daily from oil spill diseases while Western Petroleum and its allies got richer. We became marginalized and destroyed in contrast to those who benefited from the oil."

Abe felt his fever returning. He began to feel the chills again.

"So, did people move out when it became too unhealthy?" he asked.

"No, in fact, if necessary, we were prepared to stay in our beloved village and die. Your father had already hired lawyers to help make our case against Western Petroleum, and we were determined to stay there as living evidence of the injustice. We only moved out after the massacres of 1990."

As if on cue, Ifeoma entered the room with a warm cloth, and gave it to Abe. He wrapped himself in it, and thanked her.

Papa Umekwe continued: "The massacres of 1990 were sold to the news media as 'normal' tribal warfare between the Northern tribes and the Igbos, but we all know it was orchestrated by Western Petroleum and the Agwo Secret Society to cover up the evidence of their exploitation."

"Tribal warfare?"

"Yes," Ezra said, jumping in to explain. "In America, what you call racism is what we call tribalism. Hatred is hatred. In your country, people distinguish each other by the color of their skin, their religion or ethnic groups, and then they commit their atrocities accordingly. Here, we all look the same. We are all black, but we still hate each other severely. Different tribes hate Igbos, and vice versa, and sometimes they will go through villages killing hundreds of people, just like the days of the Biafran war."

"Your friend speaks the truth." Papa Umekwe said, nodding his head.

"In America," Abe said, "Many of us are unaware of what happens internationally. I once wrote a song, in which I described three forms of American racism. One was severe, one was ignorant, and the other was foolish. It looks to me like this tribalism is all these things. It seems like racism is not necessarily something the white man does exclusively to the black man, but rather something that humans do to humans all over the world. If I hadn't come here, I would have always thought that racism is a black and white issue. Racism is not always about color, its about groups and families and turf. Its really just one big mess of global tribalism!"

"You are exactly right," Papa Umekwe said, anxious to finish his story. "Western Petroleum and the Agwo Secret Society killed three hundred of our tribesmen in that raid, and burned the old village to the ground. Your father knew it was the secret society, and tried to expose them, but was unsuccessful before he died. We moved out of the old village because they burnt it down. Western Petroleum doesn't seem to bother us in the new village. I hope it's because they care about us, not because they haven't discovered any oil here."

"Papa," Ezra said, "When you were asleep the other day, a white man from Western Petroleum was here."

"Mr. Green?"

"Yes, Mr. Green."

"Don't mind him. He is a fool! These days, he seems to be more involved in our politics than in his oil business."

"Maybe the two are one and the same." Abe offered.

"That is an interesting point you make," Papa Umekwe replied thoughtfully. "Ever since your father died, they have been in control of the Local Government chairmanship through their puppet, Chief Ugonna, and they have been running their exploitation schemes smoothly. Now that election time is here again, I'm sure they want their man to win as usual, to keep the contracts and bribes flowing."

"Who is Chief Ugonna's opponent?" Abe asked.

"No one, really," Papa Umekwe smiled. "Our people are very stubborn and resilient. We will vote for anyone except him. Some people even write Innocent the madman in the ballot as chairman, just to frustrate the process. Chief Ugonna usually wins from a combination of

rigging the election results and from votes in surrounding villages. The Azuala vote is always contentious.”

Papa Umekwe spat on the ground next to his seat, and rubbed the spittle into the mud floor with his foot.

“Our people can be such hypocrites, though. Can you imagine? Some of our people now actually vote for that useless Chief Ugonna, because he pays them! Things have really changed. In the old days, men fought wars, and created wealth for their villages before earning a title. That man simply bought his title! Nowadays, we give our votes and titles to the highest bidder, even if he knows nothing and cares not for our customs and welfare. Beware of Chief Ugonna and his friend, Mr. Green.”

They thanked Papa Umekwe for his explanations, and walked out into the compound.

“Ezra, I’ve got to go see the old village.” Abe said, pulling weakly at Ezra’s shirt.

“But you are not well,” Ezra complained.

“I’ve got to see it. I’ve had this funny feeling, and everything seems to point to the old village.”

“Then we’ll need an escort.”

“I’ll take you there.” A voice said from behind them. It was Ifeoma. She walked up to them in the yard. “You’ll need someone who knows their way around there, and besides, I can take care of you along the way.” They happily obliged.

The trek to the old village took about thirty minutes. The hot sun felt good against Abe’s head. They walked down the dirt road that must have brought Mr. Green into the village, because they could see his tire marks all the way.

They approached a river that was thick black, covered with oil, and smelling badly. Several fish lay dead on the shore of the river, and a few birds were scattered along the banks. Abe pointed out that he had read about oil spills and seen it on TV, but it always seemed like someone else’s problem. Now he could see how dangerous it really was.

“Where do the people get their water from?” He asked Ifeoma.

“We’ve had to discover new springs or water holes.” She said. “In fact, our new village is located near one of the last fresh springs in this area.”

They crossed the river by climbing over a log bridge. Once they got to the other side, the forest gave way to a clearing, and in the distance, they saw the ruins of the old village. They walked through a field of grass that had grown over what used to be mud huts.

A wind from beyond the village carried the distant pounding sounds of oil drilling. The pounding reverberated through the ruins of the dead village, hauntingly carrying with it the guilt and blame of ongoing exploitation and displacement.

Finally they entered the ruins of the old village and saw the devastation everywhere! Thick, black oil covered the ground of the former village. Their shoes became dirtied by the black stuff as they walked through it. Dead trees were everywhere, and once beautiful mud houses were burned halfway to the ground. Mementos lay scattered about, memorials to the people who once lived here. A small raffia doll lay on the ground, obviously abandoned in a hurry by the young child who owned it.

It was a picture of terror, fear, and loss. For a few minutes, Ifeoma looked on as Abe and Ezra stood quietly in the middle of the old village. They were stunned by the desolation all around them.

Abruptly, in the distance, a dark figure emerged. It was a naked man.

“That is Innocent the Madman.” Ifeoma said. “We should probably return to the new village now. He can be dangerous if one disturbs his home.”

“I want to deliver a message to him,” Abe said.

“I think she’s right, Abe,” Ezra said. “Maybe we should head back.”

“You guys can start heading back,” Abe said stubbornly, “I’m going to fulfill a promise.” He marched off in the direction of the madman.

Innocent stood still at first, astonished that someone would dare approach him. Abe continued to move toward him. Once the madman realized Abe’s intent, he turned around and ran. Abe ran after him. Ezra and Ifeoma shouted his name, almost in unison, but Abe didn’t stop. So they followed after him, albeit at a safe distance.

Abe followed Innocent through the old village, running over what used to be large compounds. They ran through a large area that must have been the village plaza, but all that was left were the scarred and

burnt remains of formerly majestic Iroko trees. They ran through what looked like a market place, with abandoned stalls littered about.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Innocent stopped! He stood in the middle of the old marketplace.

Abe stopped, keeping a respectable distance away from him. Ezra and Ifeoma stood a few yards behind, and hid behind a tree.

Innocent sat down on the ground.

Abe copied him.

"I am here to deliver a message from your father!" Abe shouted. "Your father, Oga, asked me to greet you!"

Innocent looked at Abe, studying him.

"I also want to give you some money, so you can buy things for yourself."

Abe took off his shirt and threw it in Innocent's direction.

"Here, take my shirt and cover yourself. I am your friend."

He also brought out a small wad of money from his pocket and threw it to the madman. Innocent did not respond. Abe got up, preparing to leave.

"Your father saved my life," Abe said, "So I am here to repay him. If you ever need anything, let me know, and I will help you."

Innocent did nothing, remaining still, studying Abe as he walked back toward Ezra and Ifeoma. Then magically, the madman spoke.

"*What is your name?*" Innocent asked, in perfect English.

Pleasantly surprised, Abe turned around and faced him again.

"My name is Abuchi Osondu" he said.

"You are lying," Innocent said. "That was the name of my master. You are playing a trick on me."

"No I am not. That is my name."

"Then you must be my master's son?"

Abe looked back at Ifeoma and Ezra. Ifeoma stepped out from behind the tree and replied, "Yes, he is your master's son."

"Wonders shall never cease!" Innocent declared, laughing wildly. He picked up the shirt that Abe had thrown at him. He picked up the money as well, and slowly put on the shirt.

"You have come to avenge your father?" he asked.

"Yes," Abe said.

"Do you know who killed him?"

"No," Abe said.

“Do you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Come back another day, and I will tell you!”

Unexpectedly he turned and ran away, screaming wildly. Abe joined Ezra and Ifeoma, and they began walking back to the village.

“How come he calls my father his master?” Abe asked Ifeoma.

“Because he was. Innocent was one of your father’s servants. He became mentally ill after your father died, and has not spoken a word to anyone for years. I am surprised he spoke to you.”

“Ezra, we’ve got to come back here,” Abe said, soliciting his support. “I want to know who killed my father. Whoever it is, they are probably the same people who want me dead as well.”

“Just be careful,” Ezra said, as they walked back to the new village. “Our people say that sometimes it is better to be a coward. We often stand in the compound of a coward who survived and point at the ruins where a brave man used to live.”

TWENTY-FOUR

"A fly that has no counselor follows the corpse to the grave."

Politics

Evening approached, and Abe's fever returned with a vengeance, just as Ifeoma had predicted. She made him lie down immediately after they returned to the compound. His eyes were spinning in his head, which was pounding with the force of the oil drilling machines they had just left behind in the old village. She covered him with a thick cloth, and left the room. Ezra sat next to Abe's bamboo bed.

"Ezra," Abe said weakly.

"Save your strength," Ezra said.

"I have to go back to see the witch doctor."

"Why don't you wait until you get better?"

"I have to see him now."

"You know, Abe," Ezra said matter-of-factly, "I have never seen anyone quite as stubborn as you. You have truly inherited our Igbo stubbornness. First you drag us to that hellish old village, then you run after a madman in your sick state, endangering us all, and now you want to go right back there to see the witch doctor! You're crazy!"

"If you don't take me, I'll go by myself."

Ezra paused for a moment.

"Do you even know what a witch doctor is?"

“No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.” Abe said, smiling sheepishly.

“They are devilish voodoo worshippers. They can be very evil. I wouldn’t advise visiting one when you are almost dying of malaria. He might give you a potion that your sick American body cannot handle.”

“I want to see the witch doctor today.” Abe said with a quiet determination. “Remember, I’m here on a mission, and the elders say he holds the secrets to my father’s legacy.”

He looked at Ezra. “That’s why we’re here, remember? To get my money, and discover the truth.”

“Ha!” Ezra blurted out sarcastically, “The truth?” witch doctors are not necessarily known for telling the truth. They will tell you anything you want to hear for a price.”

Ifeoma returned to the room with a bowl of hot akam porridge mixed with water and sugar, and put it in front of Abe. She sat down next to him, and began gently feeding him with a spoon.

“Let me tell you the story of the witch doctor,” Ezra continued, “Once a sick, dying man went to a witch doctor with his older brother. He asked the witch doctor to find out from the spirits who was killing him. The witch doctor first interviewed him about all his friends and relatives, and about who his enemies might be. The witch doctor then tossed up his talisman, and read the thoughts of the spirits. But before he told them who was killing the man, he asked for his money and told the older brother to leave the room. He then informed the sick man that it was in fact his brother who had put a spell on him.

Ifeoma laughed and shook her head. “The same brother who brought him to see the witch doctor?”

“Yes, Ezra replied. “But that’s not all. Later, he called that same brother into the room and asked the sick man to leave. He then told the man that his sick younger brother suspected him of causing his disease, and had just invoked a deadly spirit to kill him.”

“So I guess now he had them both hating each other.” Abe said, joining in the spirit of the funny story.

“Uh-huh, so he charged the older brother some money and helped him put a double curse on the already sick younger brother, and so on and so forth. As you can imagine, both brothers eventually died from all the voodoo spells, and the witch doctor became very rich in the process.”

“Enough talk,” Ifeoma said to Ezra. “He needs to drink his akam for strength.”

By now, Abe was beginning to drift off to sleep, and rejected the akam after only a few spoonfuls. Ezra's story had put his embattled body into a relaxed mode, and he was nodding off. Struggling from a combination of physical weakness and feverish pain, he managed to smile and whisper as he closed his eyes:

"When I wake up, I'm still going back there to see the witch doctor."

Ezra shook his head. Yes, on any side of the ocean, Abe was a stubborn fellow.

The Azuala market day began to wind down to a close. Men and women from neighboring villages made their way back home. It had been a good market day for Udochi, Ifeoma's mother, who sat happily counting her money in her open-air market stall. She had sold all her fruits and vegetables, and was now ready to inform the women in the adjoining market stalls about the latest village news.

"Have you heard?" She asked the two women who were closest to her. They moved closer, knowing Udochi's reputation, and were more than glad to hear the hot new rumors.

"They say that Innocent the madman now wears clothes, and actually spoke today."

An old woman in the next stall exclaimed. "Eh?"

"Yes!" Udochi continued. "They say he has been heard talking non-stop since early this afternoon, just like a normal person."

Four other women gathered around Udochi's stall.

"But we thought he was both mad and dumb!" One of them said.

"Yes," Udochi said. "Wonders shall never cease! The gods have been acting crazy ever since Osondu's son came to our village."

"What could he possibly be saying?" Someone asked.

Udochi leaned over to the women who had gathered, and whispered. They strained to hear her above the din of the dispersing market. "Don't tell anyone I told you this," She said. "I heard that he has been calling the name of Osondu's killer!"

"Who's name?" Someone asked. Udochi shook her head, as though marveling to herself about the incredible secret she was about to divulge.

"Is it Mrs. Osondu?"

Udochi flashed a quick, disapproving glare at the woman who spoke. "You didn't hear that from me-oh!"

"Who's name then?" They asked, knowing that Udochi couldn't resist sharing her juicy secret much longer.

"They say Innocent has been calling the name of an evil spirit from another tribe. And they say this is the same spirit that made Osondu's son fall sick after the wrestling match."

"Eh-wool!" the women exclaimed in unison. One of them held her head in shock and sadness.

Udochi began to pack up her empty bags, and folded the last of her supplies into her market basket.

"You did not hear anything from me oh!" She said in parting.

"Of course not!" They replied.

The women dispersed. Despite Udochi's warning, this rumor would be all over the village in a matter of hours.

Udochi quietly put her basket on her head, and walked home. A satisfied smirk on her face indicated that she was content. The day had been a productive one! Not only did she sell everything she brought, she had also satisfied her urge to share what she knew.

As Udochi approached the market exit, six Western Petroleum hummer vehicles pulled over in a cloud of dust near the gate, and she stopped cold in her tracks. *Six trucks!* Rarely did the oil company ever come into the village with this much fanfare. Several other people also stopped to see the spectacle. This was obviously more than a late market-shopping visit. Udochi put down her basket and moved out of the main path and into an empty stall, intent on observing this for herself.

The driver of the first jeep got out and opened the passenger side, and out of it came the European from Western Petroleum, Mr. Green, his eyes squinted as though emerging from a dark tunnel. He was dressed in his usual white shirt, hat, and khaki attire.

The driver then walked to the back of the truck and opened the door for some other men, all Nigerian, richly dressed in either military government uniforms or the traditional *Danshikis* of the Northern tribes. The other jeeps were disembarked in a similar fashion, and out came what was probably the richest entourage of strangers to ever visit the new Azuala village.

The last jeep gave birth to an even stranger spectacle; five heavily armed men in military uniforms stepped out, and stood at the ready with

their automatic Kalashnikov machine guns. It was a fearsome sight to behold. A staggering total of some twenty-four strange men were now standing in front of battle-ready hummer vehicles at the Azuala market entrance.

A few market women ran away at the first sight of the military men and their AK47 machine guns. Not since the massacre of 1990 had there been such a show of force in Azuala. A fearful murmur went through the curious and gathering crowd. Udochi was now almost trembling, and wondering if she had made a good decision to stay and witness this. Fearing for her safety, she slid further inside the stall she had entered.

A high-ranking officer from the last vehicle climbed onto the large exposed roots of an Udara tree near the market entrance, and placed a loudspeaker to his mouth. He was dressed in full military regalia, and wore the rank and badge of a General.

"People of Azuala," He shouted in Igbo. "Don't forget to vote for Chief Ugonna in next week's election. Vote for Chief Ugonna as your new Local Government Chairman!"

He shouted this repeatedly, and after a while, he gave the loud speaker to one of the other men, this one dressed in a flowing *Danshiki*. Mr. Green and the other dignitaries looked on.

"Don't listen to the voices of those who want to return to the days of chaos!" The speaker shouted, "Remember the tragedy of the old village. A vote for Chief Ugonna is a vote for peace and prosperity!"

The second man handed the loud speaker to a very richly adorned, fat man in a flowing white *Danshiki*. The man carried himself with an air of overall power and authority. A long, white feather in his cap signified that he was a titled man of Azuala.

"Do not be afraid, good people of Azuala, I am here personally because of how much I care about your community." Udochi realized it was Chief Ugonna in person. She had never seen him before, and now he was here talking about how much he cared. Her suspicion rose to a maximum.

"This is an important election," Chief Ugonna continued, placing his hand on Mr. Green's shoulder. "Western Petroleum has promised to provide new investment opportunities and financial reparations under my leadership."

Chief Ugonna was expecting a jubilant cheer in response to his campaign promise, but none came. The crowd was silent, listening and

watching intently, with a mixture of curiosity and fear. A young woman standing near Udochi spat on the ground, and muttered the Igbo word for 'stupid liar' under her breath. Unfortunately, it was just loud enough to be heard across the now silent market place. The crowd laughed. Chief Ugonna returned a weak smile at the comment, but his confident face slowly gave way to a big wrinkled frown, and he stopped speaking.

"Who said that?" The General shouted, looking around frantically. No one responded. He looked into the crowd, which was now stunned with silence. His eyes wandered slowly among the people like a patient hunter. Chief Ugonna gave him back the loud speaker and retired to a background position. Finally, the General rested his gaze squarely on the guilty woman. He flashed a wicked smile, and pointed energetically in her direction.

"Seize that woman!"

The armed men moved into the crowd, rifles at the ready, pushing people aside as they made their way in the direction of the young woman standing near Udochi. The poor woman didn't even have a chance to run for it. In a flash they were upon her, and dragged her kicking and screaming into the middle of the gathering. The officer approached her.

"What did you call him, woman?"

"Stupid Liar! You are all liars!" She screamed, still struggling to regain her freedom. Chief Ugonna looked on, a frustrated grimace on his face.

Mr. Green stepped into the middle of the circle of people, and inspected the woman. A spark of recognition struck him, and he announced that she was the wife of Ogbuefi Ajah, one of the elders of Azuala.

"Brave woman," He said, feigning admiration. "Her husband is one of the warlords against progress. He was one of the trouble makers in the old village."

The high-ranking military man laughed a terrible laugh. "We shall have to make an example of her then, shan't we?" He said, asking no one in particular. He stepped down from the exposed roots he was standing on and proceeded to answer his own question.

"Yes we shall! Corporal! Bring the whip!"

The woman screamed and cried profusely, flailing about in the tight grip of the armed men until her wrapper almost came lose. The Corporal came back with a long whip and positioned himself to beat her. The

crowd was frozen. They could not believe what was about to happen, but no one had the guts to challenge the men and their machine guns.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

The whip cracked menacingly on the back of the young woman. She screamed and fell on the ground, sobbing and shouting uncontrollably. The crowd swayed and shouted in agony with the crack of the whip. The air was tense with the pain of injustice. By now, a great crowd had gathered, including people who were not in the market, but heard the commotion in the surrounding village. Three Azuala men could take it no more, and jumped into the circle. They were ready to fight, but the soldiers' guns held them at bay.

Suddenly, seemingly out of thin air, a figure threw himself into the circle from the branches of the large Udara tree above.

It was Innocent the madman!

He began dancing a crazy dance in the circle, showing his nakedness, pushing his hips from left to right, and crossing his eyes for extra effect. The soldiers were momentarily surprised, and stepped back, initially watching in amusement as the madman circled over the fallen woman.

"I know who killed him," He sang in a drunken voice. He shook and gyrated in such a way that his genitals were flying in different directions. The woman seized the opportunity in the momentary confusion, and dashed away into the crowd. The soldiers did not pursue her. The madman's performance was too good to miss.

"I know who killed him," Innocent shouted repeatedly, "I know who killed Osondu!"

At first it was amusing, but then the General's ears perked up once he heard the name Osondu. He immediately barked an order, and a single shot was fired.

Innocent fell flat on his face, clutching at the gaping bullet hole that had suddenly appeared on his back. The crowd went mad. People stampeded and ran every which way, screaming in horror at the sight they had just witnessed. Some Azuala men in the market place finally found their courage and rushed the soldiers.

A fight immediately ensued. The armed men fired shots randomly in the air, and arrested anyone they could catch, but the men in the crowd

quickly outnumbered them. Innocent slowly and painfully picked himself up, and limped away into a nearby bush.

There was total chaos. Chief Ugonna, Mr. Green and the other government officials all hurried back in their vehicles and sped off to safety, letting the five soldiers with the rifles do the dirty work. What had started as a crude election campaign rally had turned bloody, and a full-scale political riot erupted in the marketplace.

Udochi escaped in all the confusion, and made her way back home as fast as she could, abandoning her basket in the market. People rushed by her, as they ran out of their compounds to go see the confusion that was happening in the marketplace. As she entered Papa Umekwe's compound, most of her family members were standing by the gate, also wondering what all the commotion was about.

"They are shooting at us!" She shouted frantically. "They are shooting at people in the marketplace!"

Abe woke up to the sounds of all the commotion, and Ezra was already preparing to go see what was happening.

"I'm coming with you." Abe managed to say, trying to get out of bed.

"Please, Abe, get some rest." Ezra bolted out of the compound, and joined the growing crowd on their way to the marketplace.

Abe got up slowly, and put on his shoes. He was determined to see for himself what all the confusion was about.

At the market, a large crowd of people had gathered in a circle. He made his way to the center of the circle, and discovered what had happened. In the middle of the open space, five soldiers had been tied up with raffia by Azuala strongmen. His former opponent, Okeke-the-gorilla, appeared to be their ringleader. People everywhere chanted and shouted in unison, as though cheering on their favorite soccer team.

*Nzogbu zogbu,
Enyimba enyi,
Drive them from our land!
Drive the exploiters from Azuala!
Nzogbu zogbu,
Enyimba enyi, Nzogbu enyi mba enyi!*

Someone hurriedly lit a fire near the middle of the circle, next to the five soldiers. Others fed the flame with sticks. Okeke barked some orders, and the five prisoners were dragged toward the menacing flames. Ezra noticed Abe and walked over to him.

"You couldn't resist coming, eh?"

"What's going on here?" Abe Asked, ignoring the comment.

"They say it started as a political campaign rally, and someone started shooting, so a full-scale riot began. These soldiers were overpowered and are now being held as prisoners."

"What's going to happen to them?"

"From the look of that fire, I wouldn't be surprised if we are going to witness some jungle justice!"

"You mean they are simply going to burn these men alive?"

"That's what it looks like."

"Over tribal politics?"

"From the things they are chanting, it would seem so."

Abe had heard enough. He jumped into the circle of people and waved his arms in the air till he got everyone's attention. Ezra followed him.

"Ezra, tell them to let these men go!"

Ezra complied, and shouted Abe's request in Igbo. Okeke the gorilla looked at Abe and Ezra as though they were culprits that had just disrupted his party. He was angry! These were the same guys who disrupted his wrestling match the other day.

"Why?" He demanded.

"Because even if you win this battle, you cannot win the war this way." Abe answered. Ezra translated as quickly as he could.

"You will only give them a reason to burn down this whole village just like they did before."

People could see his point. Some shook their heads at the wisdom of Osondu's son. The men fanning the flames of the fire stopped momentarily, and looked to their leader, Okeke, for his final word on the matter. The soldiers were sweating, and scared out of their minds.

"Please let these people go." Abe continued, pleading with Okeke. "We must fight the exploiters in court, not by this kind of savagery."

Okeke raised his hand, and held it in the air for a moment. The air was stretched taut with expectation, not unlike the wiry muscles on his arm. His thugs and the entire crowd looked on to see what his response

would be. All he needed to do was give the order, and his loyal thugs would carry out the executions.

Despite their rivalry during the recent wrestling match, Okeke was smart enough to know a leader when he saw one. Finally, slowly, he brought his hand down. They would save their fight for another day.

The soldiers were released and chased out of the village. They ran like scared little rabbits all the way through the marketplace and into the bush.

TWENTY-FIVE

"Every lizard lies on its belly, so we cannot tell which has a belly-ache."

Better Days

"Damn, what a dream!" Shawn announced, yawning. He took off the blinds from his face. "Are we close yet?"

"Not yet," Joey replied. "They said it would be a three hour flight. So far it's only been about an hour." The Boeing 737 jet had just reached its final cruising altitude. It was packed with people, all returning to Minnesota from either business or pleasure in New York. Going home felt good for Shawn and Joey, but the uncertain new life that lay ahead made for an interesting mix of excitement and fear.

"What was your dream about?" Joey asked.

Shawn shifted in his chair and examined their spacious first class cabin. He took a determined swig of his wine.

"I dreamt our record deal was all just a hoax, and that Trip McGee was a figment of our imagination."

"Get used to it," Joey said matter-of-factly. "This is the real deal Holyfield!"

Joey looked down at the brand new Rolex watch he had purchased, and examined it guiltily. He wondered why he and Shawn had let Trip McGee talk them into such a wild spending spree the day before. They had filled two carry-on bags with all kinds of cool, expensive stuff, ranging from pocket computers, to CD players and fancy clothes. Trip had always insisted that life was to be lived to the fullest, and suggested that since they now had "a little money", and were on a path to financial success, it was important that they dress and look the part as well.

“Do you trust Trip McGee now?” Joey asked.

“Hell no!” Shawn laughed. “But at least he delivered the deal!”

“That man is either a genius or a crook!” Joey blurted out. His distrust for Trip McGee had come back right after they ostensibly signed their lives away the day before.

They were given a one hundred thousand dollar signing bonus, but in their excitement, they had never bothered to ask how much Trip stood to make from the signing deal. A couple hundred thousand? A million maybe? He shrugged at the thought.

He looked at his Rolex again, and the rich, diamond-studded clock interface stared right back at him. He realized he felt guilty because they did all this without Abe. The guilt swept over him like an ocean wave, swelling, and gyrating until it crashed against the rocks of an imaginary shore. Even though they had deposited Abe’s share in a bank account, he still wished Abe had been around for the signing. After all, this entire deal could never have been possible without Abe, and yet, he wasn’t here, and no one knew if he would ever return.

“I still can’t believe we got signed.” Shawn said.

“Me neither,” Joey replied somberly.

“Abe will trip out when he gets back.” Shawn said with an air of optimism, shaking his head at the same time.

Joey didn’t respond, but instead, turned to look out the window again, preferring to keep his feelings to himself.

“We’ve got to make plans,” Shawn said. We have to hire band roadies and the latest musical equipment.”

Joey didn’t comment.

“Maybe we even need to buy our own mobile digital recording studio like all the stars have.”

Joey wasn’t paying attention anymore. His thoughts roamed from the recent loss of his brother Jordan, to the possible loss of his best friend, Abe. Things had not been the same ever since the phone call with the strange African who said Abe was dead. Something at that moment had triggered the pain of his brother’s death, which he had tried so hard to avoid. It had all come bubbling up to the forefront of his thoughts. Every thought of Abe’s potential, uncorroborated demise reminded him of his brother’s. And every memory brought him to tears. He practically tuned Shawn out and lost himself in the beautiful view of God’s clouds right outside the window.

Shawn went back to sleep.

Joey couldn't sleep, and finally convinced himself to listen to some music. He turned on his CD Walkman, and selected the last song they had recorded in Minneapolis before going to New York; a hopeful, haunting, Christian song about the future, entitled "Better Days". It was the only religious song Abe had ever written for their band. Abe had always said that politics and religion were two branches of the same tree, and this song was the confluence of his two belief systems. Joey felt especially drawn to his haunting voice, crooning confidently, yet solemnly to a higher power.

*Better days,
I could never find;
Without him by my side;
Without his love to guide and see me through
Better days,
That's what we prayed for;
A chance to laugh and cry
And celebrate the love we've had to share
I was lost, but now I'm found, and in this believe;
Better days,
In Jesus, are coming soon*

They arrived in Minneapolis at about six in the evening. They landed smoothly, and only then did Shawn wake up. The captain's announcement of their arrival signaled the beginning of their journey out of the belly of the mechanical beast they had been flying in. They gratefully brought down their bulging carry-on bags from the overhead bins, and filed out of the plane with the other passengers.

Once outside the plane, Shawn turned on his brand new Sony CD-Radio-player, and put on the headphones. All of a sudden, a huge smile lit up his rugged face.

"Unbelievable!" He proclaimed. "They're playing our song, man! Just like Trip McGee said. It's on KAZR-FM right now! We're stars!"

Joey hauled his heavy bag of goodies over his shoulder and walked determinedly in front of Shawn. He tuned his Walkman to KAZR-FM.

“Damn! You’re right!” He responded with as much excitement as he could muster. “They’re playing ‘I Am a Man!’”

It was true; their song was actually on the radio. Trip McGee was indeed a genius. Joey smiled and shook a high-five with Shawn as they walked toward baggage claim. He was thrilled to hear their song coming through the radio waves, but he maintained a short distance ahead of Shawn.

He kept his face forward. A single teardrop formed in the corner of his eye.

TWENTY-SIX

"If you dispute land ownership empty-handed, the person who has yams will be planting them there."

Evidence

Abe woke up, and realized immediately how uncomfortable the hard, cold bamboo branches were. The cloth he had been covering himself with, was damp and clingy with his own sweat, and he slowly rolled out of it. The morning had come, and the roosters were announcing it proudly. His fever was completely gone now, and except for a sore aching all over his body, he felt like a new man. It was great to wake up knowing that his limbs could once again handle the wishes of his mind. He was anxious to get back to the business of looking for his inheritance.

Abe got out of bed and entered the main living room, where Ezra was sitting and finishing a breakfast meal of fufu.

"Evidence," he said to Ezra. "What we are missing is evidence. All I've heard since we came here is stories about voodoo and politics. Before we can help, we need solid proof of the atrocities that these Western Petroleum and Secret Society people have committed."

"Yes, Ezra replied between mouthfuls. "You are right. These villagers have never had the knowledge or the financial resources to build a case against Western Petroleum."

"I'm going to try to change all that." Abe said. "But first I must find this damn money and get some hard evidence. I'm starting to--"

"May I speak frankly?" Ezra interrupted.

“Sure.”

“This is the first time I’ve heard you talk about helping these people with your money, if we ever find it. That is a very good and honorable thing, and even though no one has explicitly said so, it is what they are all hoping for. Our people say that a debt may get moldy but it never rots. They will always expect this of you, and they will be proud and happy to know where your heart is.”

“Thanks, Ezra.” Abe said.

“Sorry,” Ezra said. “Please continue; I interrupted you.”

“Well, I was saying that I’m starting to come up with an idea. For example, what if we could somehow catch Western Petroleum and Chief Ugonna red-handed, talking about their plans? We could expose their evil and build a case around that particular piece of evidence, and then if we’re lucky, we’ll be able to tie it all back to past crimes that they’ve committed against these people.”

“Sounds dangerous, Abe. These people carry guns, you know, and it’s not just for decoration.”

“I know,” Abe said thoughtfully, shaking his head and rubbing his dread locks. “I know.”

Abe felt a sudden pang of fear for the unknown, but shrugged it away. After coming this far, he was determined to get this job done, and he knew that he had to gather some evidence to do it. He steeled his nerves, and breathed heavily, preparing himself for whatever this mysterious jungle world had in store for him. He left the room to get some fresh morning air, leaving Ezra alone to enjoy his soup and fufu.

Abe stepped out into the yard, and sat down next to the mango tree to clear his thoughts. He looked down both sides of the Azuala pathway. One path led from Papa Umekwe’s compound to the village plaza, and onwards beyond the bushes to the nearby stream, while in the other direction, the path snaked deep into the village market place. He could only see a few people in the distance on both sides. The path was at peace this morning, a sharp contrast from the market’s political riot of the night before.

What a day it had been yesterday! Azuala seemed like a microcosm of the same problems that people must go through all over the world. There was the hatred between tribes; the common thread, just like racism, that ensured turf protection for various human groups. Then there were the

rich oppressors, like Mr. Green and the Army Generals, who rose above the poor people, keeping them destitute while amassing private wealth. Then there was the usual tension between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. And of course, there were the betrayers, like Chief Ugonna, those who had sold out and crossed the line, joining the exploiters to pillage their own communities.

Abe shook his head sadly. It took traveling halfway around the world to realize that all the injustice he had ever complained about in America was here in abundance. It was the same injustice the world over, existing and disguised in several forms; and it all boiled down to man against man, nation against nation, race against race, thriving even here in the heart of far-away Africa.

Ifeoma's voice jarred him from his little daydream.

"I see you are feeling much better today?"

"Yes!" Abe replied. "I feel great! You are a miracle worker!"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," She replied bashfully. "You said yes, and your chi said yes back to you."

Abe smiled. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the farm," She replied, "to get some cassava tubers and burning wood. You and your friend Ezra have eaten me clean out of my fufu and soup materials."

Abe smiled again. Yes, her soup certainly tasted good, and she was funny too. He didn't realize how great of a sense of humor she had.

"Can I come with you?"

"Sure, but you have to help carry wood. It wouldn't look good if I was doing all the work with an able-bodied man around."

Abe agreed, and they walked out of the yard.

Ezra saw them leaving, and decided it was better to let them go without him. He watched them briefly as they disappeared into the bush. He decided to join Papa Umekwe to await the visiting elders in the main hut. Ezra was happy to see Abe walking off with Ifeoma. He was wise enough to know that there are some things a man must do alone.

Papa Umekwe shuffled in his seat as the last of the three elders entered his hut and took their seats in his bamboo chairs. Umezuruike,

Iroabuchi, and Ndubuisi cruised in slowly, one after the other, sitting down with caution so as not to break any bones in their old age. They each silently prepared their snuff bags, and took one sniff each, individually thanking the gods in their own way. Umezuruike waved his hands to the sky; Iroabuchi preferred to open his two palms toward the sky as though asking a question of the gods; Ndubuisi simply let out an obscene little sound from his posterior.

Papa Umekwe did not offer them any kola nut, and they did not even greet one another in their usual way; a glance and a nod were sufficient, for there were grave matters afoot.

Ezra maintained a respectable silence, and huddled into the shadows in the corner of the room. Even as a visitor to Azuala, he could tell that the concern in the air was real, for Chief Ugonna and his thug politicians had just crossed a line that was dangerously reminiscent of the old days. This could not go unchecked, otherwise, events would overtake them again, and another destroyed village might not be too far ahead.

"A farmer does not conclude by the mere look of a green covering that a corn is unripe;" Papa Umekwe announced, breaking the silence. "He tears it open for examination."

"It is true." The men murmured in acceptance. Umezuruike took a good look at the other elders and spoke:

"I have a confession to make."

"Oh-ho." someone said.

I heard a rumor the other day, which I did not take seriously until now." He took off his feathered hat and placed it on the ground, and adjusted his palm-wine gourd from his left shoulder to his right.

"Ezemba of Ekipiri told me several moons ago that the Oil Company was considering drilling for oil here in the new village."

"Chei-Chei-Chei!" The men exclaimed in astonishment. Ndubuisi and Papa Umekwe stood up, arms akimbo, and ready for war. Iroabuchi remained sitting with his mouth open and his nostrils flared.

"Umezuruike, if you were not a grown man with a family and three cows, I would insult you like a child!"

Ndubuisi echoed his disgust and spat on the ground.

"Why did you not tell us?" Papa Umekwe continued.

"Because this is not the first time I have heard this. I hear this all the time from my friends in Umuahia, but they have never acted upon it the way they are doing now. Yesterday's show of force was completely

uncalled for. Not since the days of the old village has the oil company ever gotten so overtly involved in our politics like this, with soldiers and everything. That is why I am now concerned.”

“You have spoken a true word.” Ndubuisi seemed to offer an olive branch to his rival. “But it is not enough to observe the problem, for we all have eyes. What shall we do about it?”

The men fell silent.

Ezra moved a little closer to them, out from the shadow in the corner. “I think Abe can help you.”

“Is he prepared to go under the witch doctor’s spell?”

“Yes, and even more than that. He is very stubborn, and insists on seeing the Oracle, despite my advice.” Ezra replied. “I have seen that look in his eye, and I know he wants to help of his own free will.”

“But even if he sees the oracle and discovers his inheritance, what can one man do against an entire army?” Iroabuchi asked. “A hunter who has only one arrow does not shoot with careless aim.”

“I hear you, Iroabuchi, Papa Umekwe chimed in, “But there is something special about that boy. He has the spirit of his father.”

“And he thinks like a lawyer,” Ezra said. “If we find his father’s money, he will be able to act like a very rich lawyer. I know that he can use his father’s money to bring the power of the legal system to this oppressed village.”

“But what can we do to support him, besides the bickering and hearsay of old men?” Umezuruike moaned, “Besides, Western Petroleum has lawyers waiting to defend them from here to Jericho. We don’t stand a chance.”

“Maybe we do,” Ezra said, “Abe told me this morning that he is working on a plan to get some evidence to build a case against these oppressors.” He paused for a moment. “He sounded very determined, and he thinks that what we are missing is the right evidence.”

“The oracle is all the evidence he needs.” Iroabuchi stated with conviction.

Papa Umekwe shook his head in disagreement. “I think Abe is thinking more about physical evidence, as they do in America, not just the words of spirits.”

Umezuruike complained again, saying that it would be impossible to find such evidence, but Papa Umekwe hissed loudly and turned to Ezra. “It is a lazy man who says, ‘It is only because I have no time that my

farm is overgrown with weeds.' If evidence is what we are missing then let us go and get it. Ezra, please continue telling us how Abe can help us."

"Well, I would rather let him tell you himself, but from my own experience, I know that we can build a case, with the right physical evidence, and I know that Abe is willing to help."

"Young man," Iroabuchi asked, "What exactly do you consider the *right* evidence?"

"Well, I consider myself a veteran in American deportation law myself, as I have been deported from America several times. Whenever they caught me trying to sneak into their country, the American soldiers always made sure they took pictures of me at the border, red-handed, to prove my guilt in court. They even took my fingerprints right on the spot. That way, every time they saw me again, they would simply go to their computers and pull up all the different attempts I had made, and introduce the whole thing to a judge as evidence. It had become such a procedure that on the third and fourth time they caught me, I smiled and posed for the camera just to annoy them."

The elders laughed.

"The judges never even bothered to hear my side of the story once they saw the mountains of evidence. One judge even laughed so hard at the ways I had tried to enter the country, that his toupee fell off, revealing his baldness for the court to see. You see, in America, the right evidence is catching somebody red-handed. They don't joke with that kind of evidence, for it is the most powerful tool in proving someone guilty."

Papa Umekwe took a brief sniff of his snuff, and wiped his hands clean.

"Good intentions, like soup, are a good start, but they are not the thing that fills the stomach if one is hungry. Only fufu can do that. Can Abe actually help us get evidence as powerful as that?"

"Well, as I said, all I know is that he wants to help," Ezra responded carefully, "but he'll have to explain his plan to you himself."

"So where is he?" Ndubuisi asked impatiently. "Let him speak for himself."

"He went to the farm." Papa Umekwe responded quietly, taking a last nonchalant sniff from his snuff pouch. Ezra smiled. He didn't know the old man had noticed. Papa Umekwe turned around and called out

loudly for one of his children in the back huts. When a young boy appeared, he asked him to run to the old village and bring Uka Dibia the witch doctor.

"When Abe returns, let him follow Uka to the land of truth. Whether it is evidence or spirits he finds there, the time has come for him to support his good intentions with action."

Abe and Ifeoma walked through the village, past the market place, and toward the bush path that led to the old village. After walking about a mile, they turned off the beaten path into the bush.

"This is my father's section of the village farms," Ifeoma said, making an imaginary circle to signify a wide open area in around them. "All the villagers farm in different sections of this valley, and when one area's soil is exhausted, they leave it and move to another area for the next season."

Ifeoma knelt down and began harvesting cassava. She described the entire process to Abe as she did it, and was very articulate.

"First you must soften the soil around the tuber so that you pull out only the good ones."

Abe listened and watched with interest as she worked the soil with her hands. He watched her strong, yet feminine fingers knead the soil until it was soft enough to pull out the cassava yam tubers.

"Tell me about you." He blurted out.

"There is nothing to tell."

"There must be something. For example, do you have a boyfriend, or a husband maybe?"

She laughed. "What would I be doing with a boyfriend? My father would kill me if he found out I was playing around. And no, I don't have a husband. You ask such silly questions."

Abe moved closer, and knelt down beside her. He couldn't help but notice the mounds of her full breasts, bulging against the pull of gravity, yet remaining firmly hidden behind her dress. He put his fingers into the earth and copied her method of slowly kneading the soil. He did this until he could feel his fingers touching hers ever so slightly beneath the surface. Their eyes locked for a brief, uncomfortable moment, and then they both looked away.

"I'm sorry," Abe said. "It was probably rude of me to ask."

She didn't answer, and continued working on the soil. Abe got up, and looked across the farm, far away through the trees above the valley, and into the beautiful blue-grey sky above. The urge to write a new song about this moment was strong. He could already hear the poetry, the painting of a story of a beautiful young village girl, innocently farming in a far away bush. Alone with the man whose life she had just saved, who was now captive in the clutches of attraction beside her. Both were helpless, and unable to cross the chasm between them.

He walked a small distance away, and then turned back suddenly and knelt on the ground beside her. He gently touched her face, and pulled her close to him. He could feel her heart beating violently against his chest as he held her tight. Her body was warm and soft to his touch. She trembled. He kissed her forehead, and then slowly worked his way down toward her lips. She was not used to this strange form of affection, so she avoided his kiss, but slowly and steadily she began to return his embrace with earnest.

"Thanks for taking care of me." He said, looking into her brown eyes. He saw in her eyes a mixture of admiration, fear, and awe. For a brief, magical moment, they exchanged that knowing glance that requires no language.

Finally he let her go. She gathered up a few sticks and the cassava tubers she had excavated. They walked back to the village, surrounded by the mystery of awakened affection.

PART 3

An Awakening

TWENTY-SEVEN

"Chicken says it looks upward even when drinking water, because the kite which kills it comes from the sky"

Juju

According to Abe's watch, it was six o'clock in the evening as he walked into Papa Umekwe's compound, thoroughly exhausted from his excursion with Ifeoma. She had taken the back entrance so she could go straight to her mother's hut, ostensibly to more quickly offload her cassava and wood, while Abe had proceeded directly toward the front entrance. They both agreed it was better that way.

He was still a bit weak from his bout with malaria, and felt the need to rest after the long walk. But his heart felt strangely filled and renewed after exposing his gratitude to Ifeoma. He couldn't quite understand the look he had seen in her eyes earlier in the day. It seemed to have been a mixture of excitement and foreboding, but he couldn't decipher it. He hoped he hadn't crossed any cultural or religious lines approaching her as he did, but then again, maybe all was well, and her silence during the walk home was just part of the mystery of the moment they had shared together.

He entered Papa Umekwe's central hut just as the elders were preparing to leave. Uka Dibia, the witch doctor, had joined them and was sitting next to Papa Umekwe. Abe took a good look at him. He couldn't

help but notice how sinister the old man looked, his skin dark as charcoal and wrinkled like an ancient glove. But most disturbing were the two perfectly shaped circular holes in his head where his eyes must once have been. Abe wondered what devilish surgical procedure must have removed those eyes so cleanly from his head.

Iroabuchi cleared his throat. "Abuchi, you almost missed us. Uka Dibia has been waiting for some time. Where have you been?"

Abe looked around the room and caught the faint glimmer of optimism in Papa Umekwe's eyes. For the first time, he noticed how deeply wise and telling his eyes were. In those dark eyes, he could sense the years of pain and hurt he had endured at the hands of the oppressors, and now he was gazing at him with the hope of a possibly brighter future. Ezra, on the other hand, was looking away, concealing a mischievous smile.

Abe cleared his throat. "I took a walk to clear my head."

The men burst out laughing. Umezuruike, Ndubuisi and Iroabuchi twirled around in their bamboo chairs with child-like glee. Abe felt a bit on the spot, and eyed Ezra sharply, wondering what he might have told them. Ezra responded with a shrug. His facial expression pleaded ignorance and innocence for whatever Abe's eyes were at that moment accusing him of. Even Uka Dibia the witch doctor betrayed a sheepish smile.

Papa Umekwe finally motioned for silence and asked Abe to sit down. Abe obeyed. Placing his right hand proudly on Abe's shoulder, and looking him straight in the eyes, Papa Umekwe began to speak: "Like your father, you have taken the place of a son in my heart. We are all here to thank you and give you our blessing before you visit the Oracle tonight."

"It is true." The elders replied in unison.

Papa Umekwe drew a circle on the ground with his forefinger as he continued.

"Your friend Ezra has told us that you are thinking of how to help us, and for this, we thank you. Our people have a saying that 'If the lizard of the homestead should neglect to do the things for which its kind is known, it will be mistaken for the lizard of the farmland.' We know you are of the same blood as your father, but by these actions of yours, you are showing that you are also of the same ilk."

"Thank you." Abe managed to say.

"But we want you to be careful," Papa Umekwe continued. "A journey to the land of spirits is a mighty task for even the most powerful of men. Do not seek with your mind to understand what you see, but rather believe with your heart. You must first believe in order to understand, and not the other way around."

The elders all echoed their agreement. Abe was more confused than anything else, but was anxious to get started. Uka Dibia stood up, balancing himself awkwardly on his walking stick.

"No one can accompany you on this journey." Uka Dibia said, an animated expression on his face; his blank eye sockets focused on the thatched roof ceiling above him. "I will only show you the way to the oracle's entrance, but once you cross into the other world, you will be on your own. Are you willing to go?"

"Yes." Abe muttered.

The time had come to confront the unknown, and he was ready. He was strengthened by the belief that on the other side of this strange excursion lay the riches his father had left for him. At this point, he just wanted to get the whole thing over with.

Uka Dibia stretched out his wrinkled hand toward Abe, and motioned for his help. He wanted Abe to be his 'blind man's guide'. Abe moved toward him. Uka held Abe's arm very tightly, causing Abe to wince, almost making a noise of protest.

Abe could smell the foul, unspeakable odors of old age and rotting animal flesh that emanated from Uka Dibia. He struggled to breathe, hoping the foul fumes wouldn't overcome him. *Did the medicine man ever bathe?*

"Elders," Uka Dibia announced, "We are leaving for the old village *mmo* shrine. The oracle will be invoked tonight. If the god *Amadioha* permits, we will return tomorrow."

The men bade them Amadioha's blessings and goodbye. Ezra gave Abe the American 'thumbs up' sign, and wished him good luck. Abe felt his heart sink into the bowels of his stomach like a large stone thrust into a deep, bottomless lake. He knew he was going to need all the luck he could get. He made the 'thumbs up' sign back to Ezra.

As Abe and Uka Dibia walked out through the front gate, Ifeoma put down the cassava tuber she had been peeling in the back, and stood up to get a better line of vision. A feeling of pride and respect for Abe swelled up in her, masking the concern she had for his safety. She watched Abe

and the witch doctor walk away until they disappeared completely down the path.

After they crossed the village plaza, Uka Dibia led Abe away from the beaten path and into thick, undisturbed bush foliage. Even though the witch doctor was blind, he seemed to know exactly where he was going. He directed the way as he maintained the iron clutch he had on Abe's arm.

The sun had all but disappeared now, and Abe was able to see only by the light of a bright moon. The pale planet was beginning to show its face from behind distant clouds on the other side of the sky. It was shamelessly but successfully defeating the dying sun in the competition for who would dominate as the stronger source of night-light.

Abe heard the pounding sounds of the oil wells in the distance, and realized that this must be how Uka Dibia usually found his way back to his dwelling place, following his highly sensitive ears and navigating blindly through pathless bushes. They crossed the river of dead fish that Abe, Ezra, and Ifeoma had seen the day before, and walked through the open field, which led to the entrance into the old village.

Just before entering the village, Uka Dibia ordered Abe to turn right, into yet another undisturbed bush path. They walked in this direction for what seemed like several miles.

Finally they came to a stop at the mouth of a cave. They were at the foot of a mountain near the end of the forest. By now, the sun had fully died, and the moon hid behind a cloud. It was completely pitch dark! A small oil lamp that could be seen shining from deep inside the dark cave provided the night's only light.

Uka Dibia shuffled quickly past some bushes and into the little crevice that was the cave's entrance, and motioned for Abe to follow him inside. Abe followed with trepidation.

The stench of rotting, dead animals that normally accompanied Uka Dibia was now multiplied tenfold inside the hot, humid cave he called a home. Abe struggled to overcome his nausea. He was too tall to walk upright in the small space, so he knelt down and crawled behind the ghoulish witch doctor, as they made their way deeper into the cave.

Finally, they arrived at a dead end, with the oil lamp in the middle of the space. It appeared to be the witch doctor's central work or living area.

Small and boxy, it was seemingly carved out of the rock itself. Abe looked around, and noticed the skulls of men and animals laying around the dark little cave room, in no particular arrangement. The stench of animal and bat droppings filled the air. Pieces of blood-drenched bones and cloth, dried foliage, and other sacrificial ornaments hung from the cave ceiling.

Uka Dibia sat down in front of his oil lamp, and brought out his talisman.

A newly sacrificed, headless chicken lay fresh in its own blood in front of Uka Dibia. He looked even more devilish than before as the reddish-yellow light from the oil lamp produced eerie shadows in the sunken sockets where his eyes had been. Abe swallowed his saliva in one quick lump and felt his head and his heart pounding in unison with fear.

Uka Dibia threw his talisman violently on the ground and simultaneously tossed up four cowries with his left hand. His various accoutrements of invocation scattered on the ground in a random fashion. He slowly picked the cowries up one by one, and announced each one in a strange language, as though interpreting deep meanings from their random arrangement. Finally he picked up the talisman.

"Your father is ready to see you now." He grunted. His blank eye sockets trained on Abe's face, as though he could see him. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes," Abe said.

Uka produced a palm wine gourd with a foul-smelling, greenish-red liquid inside. "Drink this!" He said, and began chanting something unintelligible, as though he were possessed and speaking in tongues.

Mmong Obong, bia!

Bia weri nwa Azuala!

Mmong Obong, bia!

Bia weri nwa gi!

Abe coiled back, but then bravely took the putrid gourd from the witch doctor. He couldn't get himself to drink it!

He focused his mind's eye on the final objective of his trip to Africa. He thought of the money. The possible millions. He thought of returning rich to America, and back to his band with Joey and Shawn. He thought of the potential to destroy the oppressive alliance of the Oil Company

and the Secret Society. He thought of his father's legacy. He put away all thoughts of a possible demise here in this dark, satanic cave, and hoped only for success when this was over. He simply had to drink it!

Bravely, he drank the contents of the gourd. It was strangely sweet, yet putrid, nauseating and syrupy. It felt like he was drinking raw eggs flavored with urine, but he forced himself to drink from the gourd until it was completely empty.

Uka was impressed. "Well done my son. You are very brave. Now kneel down here and rest for a while."

Abe knelt down. Uka Dibia produced a damp, blood-soaked cloth, and wiped its contents slowly on both sides of Abe's neck. Abe's disgust was so great that he was about to vomit. But he fought the nausea as the chicken blood seeped into his shirt's collar.

Uka Dibia then brought out a razor blade. Abe was alarmed! The witch doctor motioned for him to be still. In a flash, he made a small incision on Abe's forehead. Amazingly, Abe watched as Uka painlessly removed what seemed like a tiny white stone from his forehead, a feat he was sure had to be some form of slight-of-hand trickery. Abe was impressed. He had not felt a thing!

They sat there for a few minutes, looking at each other, exchanging not a word.

Suddenly, Abe began to feel very woozy. Whatever he drank was beginning to have its effect. As he drifted slowly to sleep, he could hear the ominous chuckling of the witch doctor. Uka Dibia blew out the oil lamp, causing the room to grow dark.

"The oracle of Azuala now awaits you," Uka Dibia said, and then he disappeared deep into some unknown crevice in the cave.

Alone. Abe was completely alone in the pitch-black darkness and filth of the cave. He tried to move. He couldn't. He was paralyzed. Powerless, he relaxed his muscles and closed his eyes. He could see nothing. Hear nothing.

SWISH!

Suddenly he felt a swish-like movement of air around his head. The cool blade of a knife sliced clean through his exposed neck, causing his dread-locked head to jump lithely off of his body.

THUD! His head fell to the ground.

His neck's arteries were squirting blood wildly into the air, and his dismembered head rolled awkwardly. It finally stopped beside the dead oil-lamp on the cave floor. Stopped dead.

Abe screamed! He screamed! SCREAMED! But Uka Dibia did not return. He did not return despite the terrible noises now emanating from the dismembered head of a dying young man.

Ifeoma felt a sudden jolt! At that very moment a terrible intuition overwhelmed her thoughts. She was worried about Abe. Papa Umekwe had asked her to come and clean out the living room after the elders had left, especially the area where Uka Dibia had been sitting. Papa Umekwe and Ezra were sitting in the corner quietly, the elder partaking of his tobacco snuff, while the younger man held his head solemnly in his hands.

"Will he be alright, Papa?" Ifeoma asked.

"May it be so, my daughter." Papa Umekwe replied grimly. "He has the heart and the will for this task, but I hope he also has the strength."

"Is it true," she asked. "That seeing the oracle can be similar to seeing a 'Mammy-Water' mermaid, but unlike *Oghanje*, you are not actually cured of anything?"

"Yes. The only purpose of seeing the Oracle is revelation. What is already hidden in your heart becomes suddenly revealed to you. Abe must carry the *Ugboajah*, which is the oracle's vessel, into the land of the dead. If he survives, we believe he will see his father, who will show him where his money is, and how to use it to help our people against the oppressors. At least, this is what we are asking the spirits for."

Ezra chimed in. "But is it real, Papa, or is it just hallucinations and hypnotism?"

"Ezra, it is real to those who have done it. Our people believe in a parallel universe of spiritual beings. Before the white man came with his religion, we had our own hierarchy of gods, led by Amadioha the thunder god. The gods and their attendant spirits ruled over the dead, but also had great influence on the living. They were all-seeing and all-knowing, so if you really wanted to know something, you had to consult them through the oracle and its witch doctor--"

BOOM!

Suddenly, Papa Umekwe was interrupted by a loud noise outside the compound. Multiple explosions followed the initial noise. People began to shout from neighboring compounds. The sound of explosions and vehicles approaching disrupted the once tranquil night air. Papa Umekwe had not heard such chaos since the Biafran war.

“EVERYONE GET DOWN!” Ezra shouted.

All hell broke loose, and in a matter of seconds, Papa Umekwe’s compound had practically exploded as though struck by multiple rounds of lightning. The Umekwe compound was a war zone!

The thatched roof ceiling began to cave in, as two gun-toting army men kicked the front door open. They remained outside briefly and threw smoke bombs into the hut.

Ifeoma ran out of the room, and escaped into the back yard to warn the rest of the family. She raised hell in the back, and everyone fled. They all ran straight into the bushes behind the compound, and into safety in the next village clan.

Papa Umekwe remained glued to his bamboo chair. Ezra instinctively ducked behind a door.

A soldier in a gas mask emerged from the smoke and cautiously entered the room, his gun trained at Papa Umekwe.

“Where is Osondu’s son?” He shouted at the old man.

“Eat shit!” Papa Umekwe retorted. “You will never find him here!”

SLAP!

Blood flowed freely from the old man’s mouth. The violent slap was repeated.

“It is *you* who will eat shit, old man!”

Enraged, Ezra threw himself at the man, knocking him down. They struggled for a moment on the floor, but the other soldiers quickly entered the hut, and immediately overpowered him. A brutal knock of an AK-47 machine gun on Ezra’s head sent him quickly to sleep.

“Ok, let’s go! We have his friend.” The soldier announced. He tossed a small package at the stunned old man. “Make sure you give that to Osondu’s son!”

The men left the room as quickly as they entered, with Ezra as their prisoner. It had all happened so quickly, like a well-practiced terrorist raid. Papa Umekwe felt a rising pain in his chest. He clutched at the package and tried to shout for help, but could not find his voice. The

pain and the smoke and the darkness soon overwhelmed him, until mercifully he passed out.

The half-naked mad man saw the entire attack from the Mango tree just outside the village plaza. Once the armed trucks left, he practically fell out of his hiding place and ran into the forest. Voices shouted in his head. Even in his psychotic, crazed mind, he knew he had to warn Abe and Uka Dibia!

He simply could not move fast enough through the bush on account of his gunshot wound. He pushed himself agonizingly and roughly through the dry branches and thick brush, determined to find Abe and Uka Dibia. Blood seeped from his open wound and colored the foliage a thick red along the path of his violent push through the leaves. He was determined to warn them of the evil fate that had just befallen Papa Umekwe's compound. He shifted in and out of consciousness, but kept moving along stubbornly.

He knew that they must have gone to Uka Dibia's cave, so he kept pushing toward there. Finally, he came to the foot of the cave opening and stumbled, hitting his head, and quickly losing consciousness.

Abe was strangely at peace in the dark, weightless firmament that he found himself in, and he was filled with wonder as he looked at his dismembered body across the cave floor. He felt no pain, but could not move any of his limbs.

Slowly he felt his body's essence and form beginning to come together like a bluish smoke above his head, and this time, his body was part of the smoky structure. The spirit form of his body floated upward as it solidified, abruptly hitting the ceiling of the cave and then coming down hard on the ground.

He felt his consciousness transferred to the once smoky, now solid being above him, and he found that he was no longer in a dark cave.

He became slowly enveloped by a pure, growing white light, and he could now see white clouds all around him, comforting him, and providing a cushion for his feet.

He wondered if he was in heaven because it was so bright, but he saw and heard no one--not Jesus, not Mary--no one. Unexpectedly, loud

drums broke the eerie silence, and were followed by sweet music that was strangely familiar.

With the sweet music as a backdrop, his thoughts wandered to all the people he knew, starting from the people he had met most recently. He saw Papa Umekwe, and Ezra, and Ifeoma. Then a door appeared out of nowhere, and he walked through it. Beyond the door, were Shawn, and Joey, and Trip McGee and Joey's brother Jordan. Now he knew he must be dead, because Jordan was the only one who actually looked back at him. The rest went about their business as though he were simply not there.

"How's the band, Abe?"

Abe had no answer. Could not answer. He looked down at his floating feet, and tried to gather his thoughts to respond, but when he raised his head again, all the people were gone. The white clouds were also gone, replaced by a thick green forest, strangely familiar, like the forest of thieves he had just visited on his journey to Azuala.

A figure approached him. Abe knew immediately who it was. It was James Abuchi Osondu! His father! His own father!

A male voice spoke, but the figure's mouth did not move in concert with the words.

"How are you, my son?"

Dumbfounded, Abe could not answer.

"What questions do you have of me, child?"

"Are you my father?"

"Yes."

"Where is my mother?"

"I am here as well," another voice said. Abe could not see any other forms, but he was sure he had heard a different voice. A woman's voice.

"Why are you here, child?" It was the male voice again.

"I have come to claim my inheritance, and to help the people of Azuala."

"You are a noble child."

"Where is my inheritance?"

"But you are a stubborn child."

"Is there any inheritance? Or has this all been a wild goose chase?" Abe was losing his patience.

"The Udara seed does not fall far from the tree. You are *my* stubborn child."

Abe looked around and saw an image of himself in that bar in Old Lake, Minnesota, fighting for his life against Scarface. The image flickered and then disappeared. The face of his father returned and the voice continued.

"Have you ever stopped to ask why you were really brought here?"

"No."

"You are here to provide hope to a people that have none. You are here to learn the true meaning of legacy."

"And what is the true meaning of legacy?"

"Only you will answer that. Come with me."

Abe found himself involuntarily walking behind the figure as it floated along effortlessly, through thick bushes, rivers, valleys, and barren deserts. Finally they came to an oasis--a resting place with a single grave, a pond, and a palm tree.

"You will find your legacy in my grave. Then you must seek my dear *Ada*, and she will give you the tools you need. Use these tools to destroy your enemies and save your people."

"Father, who killed you?"

"Your enemies killed me."

"Who are my enemies?"

"They will reveal themselves. Go now. Go in peace, my child."

"How do I find--?"

The figure disappeared, and everything turned dark.

The next thing Abe remembered was the stench of Uka Dibia's breath, as he tried frantically to awake him from his slumber.

"WAKE UP!" Uka Dibia shouted. "Innocent here says there has been an attack on Papa Umekwe's compound! We must return to the village now! We can try this another day!"

Abe regained consciousness feeling very groggy, but generally all right. He touched his neck quickly and was happily astonished to discover that his head was still sitting squarely on his shoulders. He wondered how far into the land of the dead he had actually gone, but was happy to be back alive and in one piece, head, neck and all. He looked at Uka Dibia and was amazed that he could actually be happy to see his ghastly, eyeless face.

In the corner of the cave was the crumpled body of Innocent, writhing in pain from his gun-wound. Uka Dibia must have dragged him in.

Rubbing his neck, Abe remembered his terrible encounter with the spirits. Surely it hadn't really happened. It must have all been a dream. Just a silly, crazy, mixed up voodoo dream.

TWENTY-EIGHT

"If the lizard of the homestead should neglect to do the things for which its kind is known, it will be mistaken for the lizard of the farmland."

Mrs. Osondu

It was midnight, and several villagers had gathered around Papa Umekwe's compound, attracted by the loud explosions they had heard. People formed a circle around the fire that was still burning in the compound, chatting in wonderment about what may have caused this. Some young men were frantically throwing water at the fire, and had done a decent job so far of keeping it contained as it burnt itself out. Women held their children tightly a safe distance away, their faces brightly illuminated by the flames. The central hut had been all but burned down to the ground, and only a smouldering pile of thatch and mud remained where Papa Umekwe's hut had once stood.

The news of what happened had already spread throughout the seven clans of Azuala. Papa Umekwe's family had returned from their flight, and found the old man, who was now recovering from his shock in Udochi's hut. His friends, the elders Umezuruike, Iroabuchi, and Ndubuisi, were standing by near the flames, cursing the gods and the obvious but unnamed accused, for letting this kind of evil befall such a good man as Papa Umekwe.

"They are afraid that Osondu's spirit has been revived in us through his son," Umezuruike said. "There is simply no other explanation. If they were retaliating for yesterday's uprising in the market, then why would

they attack only Papa Umekwe's hut? What has the poor old man done to them?"

The others shook their heads in anguish. Everyone knew that "they" referred to Western Petroleum and the secret society, but no one dared voice their names.

"And they have taken his poor friend Ezra." He continued. "Surely they will come back for Abuchi."

Abe arrived at Papa Umekwe's burning compound with Uka Dibia, and ran up to the flames. He was astonished! His mouth hung open as if it were so heavy that it would drag him to the ground. Ifeoma had just joined the circle, and was helping the young men clear out the rubble. Abe ran up to her.

"What in God's name happened here?" he asked.

"Soldiers broke in, attacked Papa's hut, and kidnapped your friend."

"Ezra?"

"Yes." Ifeoma replied. Abe felt the insides of his stomach fall out from beneath him. *Oh no!* Not his trusted friend Ezra!

"Is Papa Umekwe alright?"

"We hope so. He's recovering in the back. He was very much shaken up."

Abe pushed past Ifeoma and the gathering crowd, and headed towards the back. Ifeoma followed him. They walked into her mother Udochi's hut, where Papa Umekwe was lying. The old man looked even older than he had just this morning. His eyes were swollen, and his entire face was puffy. Blood flowed freely from a corner of his mouth.

"They left this for you." Papa Umekwe muttered weakly. "I tried to stop them--"

Ifeoma interrupted him. "Papa, please rest." She gently covered him with a blanket, and wiped up the blood oozing from his mouth.

Udochi looked at Abe and Ifeoma disapprovingly. Somehow she knew this whole mess was related to Abe's presence in their compound. These events only further substantiated the fears she had expressed to her daughter about him the other day. It didn't help that rumors had already started spreading about him seemingly having more than a passing interest in her daughter. Apparently, Abe's trip to the farm was promptly reported to Udochi earlier in the day. These were not good

signs, and she firmly believed that Abe unknowingly carried evil juju and danger about with him wherever he went.

Abe gently took the package from Papa Umekwe. The old man closed his eyes and slipped into sleep.

Ifeoma asked him if he wanted some food, but he declined the offer. She looked at her mother. Udochi's judgmental eyes had almost burned a hole in her head, so she decided to leave, hissing loudly. Udochi followed suit to have a good stern talk with her daughter. Abe sitting alone beside the exhausted, sleeping body of old man Papa Umekwe.

Trembling, Abe looked at the small package in his hand. It felt like a cardboard box, wrapped in old newspaper. It wasn't too heavy, but definitely contained more than a simple paper note. He wondered what could be inside.

He felt an immense culpability and blame. All this had happened because of him. He wondered what could have happened to his friend Ezra. He looked at the box again, and realized that an answer probably lay within. Any answer would do at this point. If the Secret Society and Western Petroleum had gone through all this trouble, then he was probably closer to answers regarding this entire situation than ever. He finally steeled his nerves and began opening the package.

He tore the old newspaper off first, and noticed immediately that the cardboard box had writing on it. It was simply addressed to "Osondu".

He finally opened the cardboard box. Inside it was a mobile GSM telephone. He studied it briefly, hoping it wasn't some kind of a booby-trapped explosive device. Overcoming his fear, he turned it on. Other than the lights of the welcome screen coming on, nothing happened. Knowing someone may have used it before, he pressed the redial button, and immediately, it began to ring someone.

On the other line, a husky voice answered. "Hello, Abe," the voice said. "We have been waiting for your call." Abe was dumbfounded. It was unmistakably the voice of Mr. Akin Obilo!

There was a new quality in Akin Obilo's voice that was drastically different than Abe remembered. It wasn't jovial and helpful as it had been in Lagos. Rather, it was stern and commanding. Under the circumstances, Abe immediately realized he was talking to his worst enemy, and the thought produced a cold chill that crept all over his body.

"Why don't we get together for coffee?" Akin said.

"Where are you?" Abe replied.

"In Umuahia, just down the road from you. I can send my driver to get you."

"No thanks," Abe retorted. "What have you done with Ezra?"

"Oh I wouldn't worry about your friend Ezra. He is as happy as a child with a new toy. I am still amazed at the things which make men tick--"

"What the hell do you want, Akin?" Abe exploded. He was tired of the deceitful small talk.

"You want to play rough?" Akin retorted. "Fine. Lets get right to the chase. I told you in Lagos to join with me financially so we could make some *real* money, but you turned me down. Instead, you've listened to the crap from these villagers, and have spurred them back into their silly, ageless fight for freedom. I will not have that! You need to stop inciting them to revolt, or else, you will never see your father's money, or even your precious America again!"

Abe sat in silence. The situation was obvious now. Akin held all the cards. Abe collected himself, and turned to his more analytical legal brain.

"Now," Akin Obilo continued, "are you willing to negotiate this thing peacefully, or do we need to do this by force?"

"I'll come and meet you."

"Good. Come alone. I don't want to see any of your little brave villagers. We are at Government House in Umuahia. I want you here first thing in the morning."

The phone clicked, and went dead in Abe's hand. Realizing the opportunity to communicate with the outside world, he frantically tried to call his friends in America, but the phone didn't work. It quickly dawned on him that it was programmed only for one call. He threw the phone aside in despair.

Abe's mind raced through all the possibilities of the situation. What did Akin mean by saying Ezra was as happy as a child? What was at stake here? At least, now Abe could connect the dots, and they all happily led back to Akin Obilo. He must have been behind all the spying in Lagos, and he must have also been the one who tipped off the armed robbers to

kill him in the jungles of Benin. All because Abe had refused his offer to cooperate and invest in exploiting the people of Azuala further.

Things began to make sense now. Abe realized he had been a bit naïve in trusting Akin Obilo, just because it had been so refreshing to see such an educated, successful Nigerian in the midst of all the chaos in Lagos. He was greatly saddened by the realization that even this most celebrated intellectual icon of Nigerians was not much more than a common thief.

He realized now that Akin must be a member of the secret society, and in cahoots with Western Petroleum. How else would he have known about the violence the other day? Abe wondered how he could be held responsible for something he did not even really participate in, but began to see that Western Petroleum and the Secret Society probably considered him a threat, just because he was his father's son. He represented a symbol of freedom and rebellion, which stood in the way of any plans for expansion and exploitation that the oil companies had. He was in their way, and they would probably do whatever they could to get rid of him.

His mind raced for an answer to this desperate situation. He had to go to Umuahia, but if he did, he would be a sitting duck in case they wanted to capture him. And then there was still the issue of finding his father's money.

All roads now lead to Akin Obilo. But Abe still had an ace up his sleeve. As long as Akin Obilo still needed his father's money for his business deal, Abe knew he was safe.

I know what my next move must be. First I must find my inheritance, and then I'll go to Umuahia protected. Then I'll have a back-up plan with the villagers, whether Akin Obilo likes it or not. I will recruit my own village army! This is all-out war! I refuse to be left defenseless!

Abe left the room, and called out for Ifeoma.

The wounded man struggled to lift his half-naked body up after having fallen down for the third time. His unkempt hair got caught in the thick dried bush branches all around him as he struggled, pushing on through the forest toward the village.

The gaping wound in his back was still releasing blood at a fantastic rate, and life was being quickly drawn away from him. Images of flashing lights danced across his face, confusing even more, the poor mind of a mentally deranged man.

Innocent knew he must live to speak with the son of Osondu. The spirit voice of his master kept leading him on. He had already carried out his master's first wish, and informed Abe and Uka Dibia of the attack on the village while they were in the cave. He had inadvertently saved Abe's life by forcing Uka Dibia to wake him up before he went too far into the land of the dead. Now he had one more duty to carry out. In his crazed mind, Innocent had one more goal in life. He was determined to carry out this last order from his master.

He followed the voice in his head, and crept painfully toward the village, navigating by the smoke he could see coming from Papa Umekwe's compound in the distance. Yes, once he conveyed his master's last message, he would lay back and die peacefully. He would leave this crazy world, which had nothing to offer him anyway, except shame and abuse because of his perceived mental disability.

This would be his last parting shot, and the voice of James Osondu in his head would definitely be pleased with him.

He pulled himself forward, and broke out of the thick brush, landing in the middle of the Azuala pathway. He crawled under an oil pipe and tried to hoist himself up, but the pain was too much. He needed to rest. The lights were flashing again in his head, and the voice of Osondu was getting louder, commanding him to carry out this last duty. The blood was flowing from him, and he let out a frantic, blood-curdling scream for help, in the language of insane men. The lights instantly stopped, and he passed out on the oil pipes of the Azuala road.

Ifeoma was already heating up some food for Abe, despite his initial rejection of her offer. He came up behind her and pulled her aside.

"I just spoke to the kidnappers, and they want me to go to Umuahia immediately."

"But you mustn't," Ifeoma pleaded. "It is a trap."

"I know," Abe said. "But it's the only way we'll ever solve this problem."

"Can I come with you?"

"No. The people who are behind all this have asked that I bring no one. But I still need your help. Can you help me talk to Okeke and some strong villagers who are willing to fight, tell them to prepare for war? If I am not back by mid-afternoon, they must come after me."

"Abe, this is not a good idea. You will be like a moth flying into the flame. Let me come with you."

"I don't want anyone else hurt because of me. Please do as I said. Round up the men, and tell them I'm going to be at Government house in Umuahia. They've got to be my back-up plan if I don't return by noon."

Ifeoma put her head down in sadness, tears flowing from her eyes. She raised her head and looked at Abe with sorrow and fear beaming from her eyes.

"What did the Oracle tell you?" She asked.

"It was hard to understand. I drank some ugly-tasting hallucinogen and fell asleep. I saw all sorts of crazy images, but I think it was all just a dream."

"Didn't you see your father?"

"I certainly saw something. I thought it was the image of my father, but then, how would I know for sure? In fact, there is something I wanted to ask you."

Ifeoma perked up as Abe continued. "The image did say something that puzzled me. He mentioned a name of someone who could help me."

"Whose name did the image mention?"

"Someone named Ada."

Ifeoma immediately fell to her knees. She clutched her chest, and crouched down in fear. Abe knelt beside her, and held her as she trembled.

"I hope you realize you truly made contact with the spirit of Osondu." She whispered, as though she were trying not to be too loud in case the spirits in the air were listening. Abe was confused. He could not get her to talk, for she was shaking too much with fear.

At that moment, they were rudely interrupted by the sound of crashing wood. The door crashed open, and the half naked body of Innocent the mad man fell into the hut. Okeke the gorilla entered the room as well, along with some other men who had tried to restrain

Innocent. They were ready to protect Abe and Ifeoma if the mad man attacked them. Ifeoma and Abe had reeled back in shock.

Innocent pulled himself up slowly and sat on the ground, leaning against a bamboo chair close to the entrance. Blood ran freely from his open gun wound, drenching the shirt Abe had given in thick red blood. He certainly did not look like he had the energy or the will to attack anyone. He whispered as he spoke.

"I have a message for you."

His clear language and command of English astonished the villagers around him. Somehow Abe was not so surprised. Somehow he knew that despite the occasional mental illness, Innocent the mad man was an educated man. He remembered being similarly surprised about his father, Oga the thief.

Ifeoma instinctively grabbed a cloth and began to nurse the dying man.

"The people of Azuala have long believed I was insane. They thought I was deaf and dumb, but they do not really know me. Despite my condition, I am still the proud son of Oga Iweadiguru, and loyal servant of Abuchi Osondu."

He coughed and caught his breath, painfully choking out blood onto the floor. Abe motioned for Ifeoma to move aside. He asked Okeke and the men who were standing by for help, and together they propped up the dying man.

Abe held up Innocent's head and looked him in the eye. "I have a message from Oga, your father."

"Ah, my father," innocent said, a smile filling up his battered face.

"Your father saved my life," Abe said to him, "and I promised I would deliver his message to you. He told me to tell you that he and your brother Ndu are both alive and well."

"Thank you. Tell them that I have done my duty. Tell them I have delivered Osondu's message, and I have not died in vain."

Innocent began slipping into unconsciousness, and Abe propped him up a bit more. His eyes slowly opened, and he began to speak.

"Osondu told me a secret with his last dying breath. I have held onto this secret for years, but now I must tell it to you."

"What is the secret?" Abe demanded.

"You are the true son of your father." Innocent continued. "No one shall hurt you, for he watches over you."

“What did he tell you?”

“He told me of his enemies...Western Petroleum ...Secret Society.” Blood splattered from Innocent’s mouth. He gasped to continue. “Beware of three men; European, Arab, and Nigerian. The Nigerian is a rich business man in Lagos. They were all once business partners, but they turned against your father, and joined the Oil cartel to exploit Azuala. He said that they have plans to expand their area of oil exploitation, and eventually control the world’s oil supplies. He said that you alone have the power and the proof to destroy them, but in order to do so, you must expose them, and bring in the powers of countries outside of Nigeria. Only then can you destroy them, for they are too powerful to be destroyed from within.”

“What were their names?” Abe asked.

Innocent coughed out some more blood, and whispered.

“One more thing,” he said. “Osondu said that you would find your inheritance waiting for you in the house of his beloved--”

“Whose house?” Abe asked frantically. Innocent held his mouth open to speak, and struggled, but no more words came out. Only air and blood. The poor, troubled man had finally found his freedom in another world. He had done his last duty with pride and dignity. He had survived his gunshot wound long enough to deliver the message from his master. His job was done. Innocent the mad man was no more.

Okeke and the other village men helped to carry the lifeless body of Innocent out of the hut, and away to be left in the Forest-with-no-name. The vultures and kites would feed on his remains until he was no more. In Azuala, mad men were never buried in normal graveyards.

Abe looked at his watch, and it was now three in the morning. He had only a few hours left to organize himself and get to Umuahia.

He couldn’t help but admire the spirit of the dying mad man of Azuala. His message, though a bit vague, was strangely powerful and to the point. He was happy at least that he had conveyed his own message from Oga the thief, and he knew that Innocent had died knowing that his father and brother cared for him.

Abe had long wondered how anyone could defeat such an entrenched power as the Secret Society, with its lock on power at all levels of the government, and with its financial backing from the powerful Oil companies. It all seemed so simple, and so accurate, if only he could pull it off. Only an external super-power with political interests in the control and flow of oil could fight against this evil. If only that country felt that the problem of the Azuala people was also their problem, and it was in their “national interest” to intervene. If only that super power was the United States!

Abe recalled the Gulf war, in which America formed a coalition of nations and fought Iraq to submission thereby keeping them away from total control of Kuwait’s vast oil wealth. He realized that there may be something similar here, and his mind was racing for an answer.

Innocent was right! If he could somehow mobilize the power of other countries to fight against this injustice, the fight would be more even. Instead of defenseless villagers, the oil companies and the secret society would be fighting against the will of the international community. This was brilliant! His respect for his father grew immensely in that moment of epiphany.

Excited now, adrenalin flowed through his veins. Abe turned to Ifeoma.

“When is the earliest I can get a taxi to Umuahia?” He asked.

“I will call someone from the neighboring clan. You should have a taxi in an hour.”

“Ifeoma, thanks again for all your help.” Abe instinctively held her close to him, and looked into her eyes. She was still trembling as though she had seen a ghost. She looked up at him.

“Make sure he takes you to Mrs. Osondu’s house” she whispered. “That’s who Innocent was referring to as your father’s ‘beloved’. You must go there first.”

“Alright,” Abe responded tenderly, comforting her with his touch, “Why were you so shaken by what I said I heard in the caves? I thought you fainted.”

“Because you proved that you had truly traveled to the land of the dead and returned. It is a terrible mystery that you are even alive.”

“How can you tell I actually made contact with the dead?”

“Because you mentioned Ada’s name to me. That was why I nearly fainted. Only Osondu’s spirit could have told you that name. You had no way of knowing her name. That was proof enough for me.”

“Who the hell is Ada?”

“She is the one your father wants you to see. She is the same ‘beloved’ one that Innocent spoke of.” Ifeoma buried her head in Abe’s shoulder. “Ada is Mrs. Osondu, the beloved wife of James Osondu.”

Abe held back the sudden chill that came over him. He held Ifeoma even tighter. This time her touch comforted him.

TWENTY-NINE

"If you must eat a toad you might as well look for a fat and juicy one."

International Thief-Thief

It was now almost five o'clock in the morning, and still dark. The taxi navigated skillfully along the pot-holed road that connected Azuala with the rest of the civilized world. Umuahia was not more than fifteen miles away, but the journey would surely take them a bit more than an hour traveling at the pothole-ridden pace they were going.

The taxi driver was a man from the Ndiorowe clan, which was historically loyal to the Osondu clan. Ifeoma had picked him well. He was also one of the few taxi drivers that knew the secret way to Mrs. Osondu's house, so Ifeoma had asked him to take Abe directly there, despite the darkness this early in the morning. He drove through the dark without strong headlights, and without fear, knowing the road almost by instinct, every bump, every curve, and every last annoying pothole.

Abe rubbed his neck, which was still mysteriously tingly from his adventure into the spirit world. Whatever he had drunk in that devilish potion had left him imagining that the events in his dream were real. Or were they in fact real? Had his head actually been cut off and put back together in some unbelievable Juju ritual?

He shook himself away from such a fantastic thought. He had never been one to believe in voodoo, and mysterious as the night's events had

been, he felt safer just relegating the whole experience to the level of a strange hallucination-induced dream. He was content to leave it at that. Nothing more, nothing less.

But he couldn't help but wonder what the immediate future held for him. He reflected again on the mysterious Akin Obilo, and the chilling words he had spoken. He reflected on his comment that Ezra was 'happy as a child'.

Had Ezra betrayed him?

Abe realized how little he actually knew of his dear friend Ezra. One thing he knew for sure--Ezra was at heart, a good and kind person, albeit willing to do anything for a chance at getting back to America. He wondered what Akin Obilo might have offered him. Even worse, he wondered what secrets of the Azuala people Ezra might have divulged, either willingly or by force. He chose to take the high road, and think only good thoughts of his friend Ezra, who had hitherto been loyal to him, and had weathered the same stormy journey that he had, all the way through their torturous adventure from Lagos to the village of Azuala.

The taxi pulled into a clearing, drove for a while through an unpaved dirt road, and then turned onto a beautifully paved, smooth black-tarred road. Abe was shocked at how smooth the ride had become. Streetlights suddenly came on all around them, illuminating the jungle night. After all he had been through, he wondered how any road could be this smooth and modern deep in this backward part of the world.

He motioned to the driver. "Where are we?"

"We are on Mrs. Osondu's private road, sir."

"*Amazing!* This has to be the best road I've traveled on since I came to this country!"

"It is money, sir. If you are rich in this country, you can buy anything you want."

Abe marveled at the irony of it all. He felt some disdain for Mrs. Osondu. Imagine having your own road! Here again, in the midst of poverty and despair, the rich of Nigeria were happily helping themselves to the accoutrements of wealth and luxury, while the poor suffered alongside them. This was no different than the phenomenon of Victoria

Island and Ajegunle in Lagos. The rich versus the poor. The haves and the have-nots.

Even the electric streetlights worked in this area, and there were traffic signs dictating the speed at which one must travel. Mrs. Osondu seemed to have built her own private paradise!

"This place is just like the U.S.A.!" He proclaimed.

"Yes," the driver smiled. "Mrs. Osondu has 'plenty-plenty' money."

They pulled into the driveway of a huge mansion. It was strangely out of place in Abe's mind amidst the backdrop of Umuahia and the Azuala village. Like something out of a fantasy cartoon, it loomed eerily above him, its strange mix of colonial architecture and modern security technology disrupting the dark jungle scenery all around it.

Video cameras, warning signs, stadium lights, and a huge, tall gate dominated the entrance driveway, sending a clear warning to trespassers to stay away on pain of severe punishment. No guards were in sight, but the security measures were everywhere, fully automated and electronic in nature. Abe could see why no one ever came here. It was impenetrable, like a heavily fortified and gated fortress atop an oasis in an endless desert.

"I will wait here." The driver said, "I cannot enter with you, Sir." Abe agreed. He had to enter on his own. He thanked the driver, and walked toward the huge, gated entrance.

A voice from a loud speaker suddenly disrupted the night. Abe knew he was being watched.

"Who are you?" The voice said.

"Abuchi Osondu."

"Enter. Madam is waiting for you."

The gates opened, and Abe entered. Inside was an even more fantastic sight than the external view of this richly adorned mansion. Gold laced, glass chandeliers hung from a three-story ceiling in the foyer, and a butler dressed in a well-ironed black suit came to welcome him. Abe felt like he was in a posh hotel somewhere in far-away Europe.

"This way, please. Madam is in the reception room."

Abe followed him. They turned several corners in a winding maze of rich hallways adorned with large pictures of the Osondu clan history. As they walked, Abe saw a picture of what must have been Papa Uzoanya Osondu, his grandfather, and several pictures of James Osondu, impeccable in a police uniform. He noticed in one picture of his father,

the origin of his own facial features. A strange feeling of pride came over him. This was the first time he had actually set eyes on the image of his father, and yet, it looked strangely and hauntingly familiar.

The entire place was a shrine to wealth and success. Abe felt very much out of place. They arrived at the reception room--a double-story space filled almost entirely of shiny glass, silver, and gold-laced furniture. Someone was seated in a chair near the far wall, facing away toward the window.

"Welcome, Abe." A woman's voice said, without turning around to face him. She spoke impeccable Queen's English. "Would you like to join me for some tea?"

Abe shook his head, too astonished to speak. He knew he must be standing in the presence of Mrs. Ada Osondu. Slowly, she swiveled around in her chair, and faced Abe and the butler.

"Ezenwa, you may leave now."

The butler left. Abe looked at Mrs. Osondu for the first time, and for a moment, she simply looked back at him. They stared at each other in what seemed to Abe like the longest moment in the world.

She was a petite, yet strikingly beautiful, mature woman, probably in her late fifties. Decked out in a sparkling Igbo traditional garment and a beautiful Kente cloth head-wrap, she was nothing like what Abe had expected her to be. Her face was kind and gentle, and she was the sweetest, warmest looking person he had seen in a long time. A strange sense of peace and comfort flowed through him, but the adrenalin in his blood was still at a feverish boiling point.

"Come here, my son."

Abe moved closer to her and she hugged him politely.

"Sit with me. I have been waiting for you for many years. I was told of your arrival in Azuala and wondered when you would come to see me. I know you must have many questions. I am at your service. This house is your house, for you are the son of my late husband, James. I never had any children of my own, so I have always waited for the day I would meet you. Please, sit with me."

Abe sat next to her, still very flabbergasted at the material wealth that surrounded him. He said nothing, for he did not know how to respond to everything that he had seen.

"Well then," she said, sensing his discomfort. "I see there is not much to say. Forgive me. In my old age, I tend to forget that people may

not always be as comfortable in my world as I wish. Are you sure Ezenwa should not get you something to soothe your nerves?"

"No thanks. I am fine."

"You must have had a terrible experience in Azuala. You look all shaken up. But we can chat later. For now, let's get straight to the point."

She stood up and walked over to a table across the room. Abe watched her move ever so graciously, almost gliding across the floor in her long, shiny gown. She took out a file from a drawer in the table. She removed a shiny bankcard from the folder, and handed it to Abe.

"This is the inheritance James left you. It is fifty million dollars, deposited in a Swiss bank account in your name. All you need to do is use the information on this card and call from anywhere in the world, and they will release funds to you, and to you alone. This is the gift and the will of your father, James Osondu."

A warning light bulb went off in Abe's head!

Fifty Million Dollars!

In one instant, he had become a millionaire--at least on paper. It was way too easy! His sense of apprehension was rising to a fever pitch; after all, this was exactly the amount of money that Akin Obilo had told him he would receive. He coiled back instantly, away from Mrs. Osondu. Could she be in cahoots with Akin Obilo? Was this all just a trap?

"Do you know Akin Obilo?" He managed to ask.

"Why, yes." She answered, taking a sip from her tea. "He is one of the evil men who killed your father."

Abe studied her, and decided she was sincere. He began to feel a bit more comfortable, and his curiosity overtook him.

"Tell me about how my father died."

"It was simple really. As you probably already know, your grandfather helped to bring the oil companies to Azuala. Akin Obilo and your father were once friends. Then they met Farouk Omar, the Arab oil magnate, who was also the largest equity shareholder and owner of Western Petroleum. Akin Obilo agreed to join Farouk's terrorist-infested, evil empire, but your father didn't. They saw him as a threat because he knew their plans and secrets. So they eliminated him. It was that simple."

"Why didn't my father want to join them?"

“Excellent question, and it seems you are ready to talk now.” She pressed a button next to her chair. Ezenwa entered the room immediately. “Get Abuchi some breakfast, and bring me my usual orange juice.” Ezenwa bowed and disappeared again.

“If we’re going to talk, then let’s do it well.” Mrs. Osondu said, smiling kindly at Abe, knowing he was finally relaxing around her.

“You see, my son. there is this thing called the Agwo Secret Society, which is really just a front for the oil companies, the government and the Arabs who run the cartel as they exploit poor village communities like Azuala. Your father joined the police force, and kept a watchful eye on them. Their ultimate plan was to control all the world’s oil, so they can control world politics and call the shots against super powers like the United States. I’m sure you remember the Gulf war?”

“Certainly.” Abe said.

“Well, Saddam Hussein’s plan to conquer Kuwait was nothing compared to what these people have been planning. These guys dream big. Really big! They want to create their base in the impoverished places of Africa, such as here in Azuala, where no one suspects or challenges them. Then, they want to slowly but surely gain control of O.P.E.C., and ultimately, the world’s entire oil reserves. They also want to do it without regard to the welfare of the local communities. As we speak, Farouk, Akin Obilo and their company have already set up their base in our town, Umuahia. Surrounding villages like Azuala mean nothing to them other than a big reservoir of black gold.”

Ezenwa returned with some food and coffee, and left the room again.

“James learned of these plans and wanted to expose them. He sent secret messages to the C.I.A, hoping for some kind of intervention, but nothing happened. Then he began attacking the oil companies with his own village militia. He became a local hero in these parts through his struggles with the establishment, until they finally caught up with him and killed him.”

Mrs. Osondu wiped the tears that had filled her eyes. “You’ll have to excuse me. I will never truly get over the loss of your father.”

“Why did America not come to his aid?”

“Ah, *American National Interests*. You see, there is this threshold upon which a foreign policy issue must cross before it is considered to be in ‘America’s national interest’ to intervene. Your father’s request simply did

not get them that excited at the time. In fact, there were rumors that some highly influential and unscrupulous American businessmen had initially funded the army and entire oil career of Farouk Omar. Many people in the third world believe that the world's greatest super power is fundamentally hypocritical. They built Farouk up and funded him when it was in their national interest to do so, but when your father called for help against him, they simply weren't quite ready to attack their man."

"So they just let the plans continue, knowing all they did?"

"Yes, until now."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, now the stakes are much higher. Farouk, Akin Obilo and their cartel are now rumored to have nukes."

"Nuclear weapons?"

"Yes, and once they consolidate their power and oil wealth, they will be probably be pointing those weapons at America."

Abe was frozen for a moment, contemplating what Mrs. Osondu had just told him. This could mean all-out war. The western world meets the third world. All over oil, and it would all be somehow coordinated from a tiny village in West Africa, the last place on earth that anyone would suspect. He felt both scared and strangely exhilarated at her words.

"How do you know all these things?"

"Ah, another good question. I make it a hobby of putting things together. After all, what can a lonely old lady do in a big house like this? Come with me."

She led him through a balcony, down a flight of stairs, and into a large hallway.

"Your grandfather built this house." She said. "But your father refused to ever live in it. He didn't want to have anything to do with what he called, 'dirty oil money'."

At the end of the hallway, she opened a door into a large room filled with computers, communication devices, radios, televisions and other high technology media equipment.

"I moved in here after he died, and I built this place so I could devote my life to exposing the activities of the secret society." She looked at Abe. "They have survived this long because no one could really prove anything against them, though your father died trying. He was a big Fela

fan, and always called the Oil companies *International Thief-thief*. He was convinced that they were operating at an international level to rob and rape the poor villagers for their own benefit. I have spent these many years gathering incriminating evidence to blow these people off the planet and finish your father's dream. Now that you're here, maybe you can help me expose them and finish the job."

Abe was startled. He had never seen this much computer wizardry anywhere, not even in a sci-fi movie. He looked at Mrs. Osondu, and mentally took back all the terrible thoughts he had held about her ever since he first heard of her. Now he understood why she was such a mystery to everyone, from Lagos, all the way down to Azuala. She was an enigma! The villagers naturally tended to think she was some kind of voodoo witch, and everyone else suspected her of being part of the secret society. But now he knew better. She was the fantastic missing link that could help him fulfill his destiny.

"I have to go visit Akin Obilo." Abe blurted out, looking at his watch. It was almost seven in the morning.

"I know," She said, walking over to a desk nearby. She pulled out a listening device gadget. "I want you to wear this. If we can get them live on tape incriminating themselves, then we can nail this thing shut." She then sat down in a nearby chair. "I obviously don't need to tell you to be careful. It's an understatement to say that Akin Obilo is your number one enemy."

Abe put the listening device inside the lining of his shirt, turned it on, and buttoned up. He was more than impressed. Mrs. Osondu had certainly prepared for his visit.

"I'll be okay," he said, reassuring her. "He wants my money, and as long as I still have control of it, I'm sure he won't touch me. It would be stupid of him to lose fifty million dollars forever."

Mrs. Osondu couldn't conceal the pride she felt. "Spoken like a true Osondu."

Abe pulled out his wallet, and handed her a card. "This man, Mr. Trip McGee, is a business associate of mine in New York. Whatever you record, please send it directly to him with instructions to get the information to the appropriate people. If anything happens to me, he should know about it."

Mrs. Osondu took the card. "Are you sure you are up to this?"

“Absolutely,” Abe said, getting up to leave. “Thank you, Mrs. Osondu. “I’ll be back. You and I have a lot of catching up to do.”

He left the room, and made his way back out to the waiting taxi. Mrs. Osondu watched him drive away from her window on the second floor. Once they were out of sight, she picked up the phone and dialed a preprogrammed number. “He’s on his way.” She said into the mouthpiece. “How long will it take for you to get here?”

The voice on the other end responded briskly: “I’ll be up in a minute. I am already here at the back entrance.”

THIRTY

"Nza the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching."

A Common Enemy

The visitor was shown into Mrs. Osondu's mansion through the back entrance. His exposed gun and knives, dusty brown robes, and bloodstained headscarf were quite out of place in the plush elegance of the big house. But he moved into the building with the ease of someone who was accustomed to the place. He had been here before, and the three staff members he passed in the hallway greeted him respectfully as he hobbled past them on his wooden leg.

At the urgent request of Mrs. Osondu, Oga, king of thieves, had journeyed here with his gang from the faraway jungles of Benin. He greatly respected her, and knew that only something very important would warrant her request for his immediate presence. He had ordered his fellow thieves to wait for him outside in the nearby bushes, while he made his way deeper through the hallways of the big house.

Ezenwa the butler led him up to the room where Mrs. Osondu was waiting. He offered Oga some breakfast and Coffee, both of which were promptly declined. Oga had no time for pleasantries. He was anxious to discuss whatever important issue was on Mrs. Osondu's mind this early morning.

Mrs. Osondu, seated in her chair by the window, turned around to face Oga. Oga bowed respectfully in her presence, and greeted her in the traditional way.

"N'dewo." He said, meaning, 'Hello'.

"N'dewo." She echoed.

He took a seat and looked around him, quickly absorbing the riches and splendor of Mrs. Osondu's world. Were it not for the many years of friendship and loyalty between them, he knew her house would surely not be standing, for it would have long been raided by a band of local thieves. He had sworn a pact of protection with all the other gangs in the area, to make sure that she, in particular, was never attacked.

"Your skill continues to impress me," Mrs. Osondu said. "It still amazes me how you always manage to bypass my security systems."

Oga nodded stoically. "Thank you."

Mrs. Osondu got straight to the point. She knew Oga had no time for pleasantries.

"I have news."

"I hope it is good." Oga knew it was not, for it was obviously something that she did not want to tell him over the phone. Something that warranted his presence.

"It is not good." Mrs. Osondu said honestly. There was no appropriate euphemism for what she had to tell him.

"Your son, Innocent, has been killed."

Oga stood up abruptly, betraying no emotion, and prepared to leave. He tied his headscarf a little tighter than it had been on his head, and shuffled toward the door.

Mrs. Osondu watched him, commiserating with him, knowing that he was simply responding as gallantly as he could. She had been through grief and loss before, and she knew very well, that there was never a good or correct way of telling someone they had just lost a beloved one.

"Thank you," He said. "I have some business to attend to in faraway Calabar, so I think I must be going."

"I know who is responsible." Said she, looking him squarely in the eyes.

Oga turned around slowly, and returned to his seat. He sat down again, his legs buckling awkwardly. He looked away, his eyes glazed with coming tears he wanted concealed.

"We have a common enemy, Oga, and I can help you exact your revenge."

"Who did it?"

"Akin Obilo."

Oga wiped his eyes, and turned around to face Mrs. Osondu. His pain slowly but surely turned to rage. His rugged face had taken on a fierce countenance that could wake a dead man from the grave. He fumed in silence and disbelief. Words could not describe the images running through his brain. *Akin Obilo!* The same man who had so many years ago ordered the death of the great Osondu.

"Your son was a hero. He saved a market woman from the clutches of Obi's men. It happened a few days ago in an incident at the Azuala market. Innocent was shot, and died a day later.

"Where is his body?"

"In the Forest-with-no-name."

There was a moment of silence between them. Mrs. Osondu watched as the situation sunk into Oga's mind. His beloved son, Innocent the madman, was no more. Mrs. Osondu imagined the pain he was feeling, which she could easily compare to the day she learned that her husband, James Osondu, had been killed. She remembered how her initial reaction, a mixture of pain and loss, had slowly turned to hopeless despair, and then surprisingly to anger. Anger at the same well-known leader of the Secret Society, Akin Obilo, who was responsible for ordering his death. She remembered how she had silently sworn to devote herself to a life of solitude, a life completely consumed by plotting her revenge. Now, after all these years, was her chance to exact that revenge.

"Where is he?"

"Akin Obilo and his Secret Society are at Government House. They are probably, at this very minute, holding Abe prisoner."

Oga's eyebrows came together in puzzlement.

"Yes. Abe went over there to try to broker peace for Azuala, but he is in grave danger. I need your help."

"What do you want me to do?"

Mrs. Osondu explained her plan to Oga. They proceeded to discuss the details of the plan. It was not long before they agreed on exactly how they would achieve revenge against their common enemy. It would work. Akin Obilo would receive his just reward. He had to...

THIRTY-ONE

"It is praiseworthy to be brave and fearless, but sometimes it is better to be a coward. We often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruins where a brave man used to live."

A Just Cause

Government House was a sprawling mansion within a green landscape of flowers, hedges and beautiful trees all around it. It stood out against the backdrop of Elu-Elu hill--a famous, picturesque forest mountain that framed all of Umuahia. The building was the equivalent of a business convention center, and it generally functioned as a VIP area for visiting dignitaries. However, local oil company executives, government officials, and their many friends, usually occupied it.

The morning sun was now fully out, and the streets of Umuahia were filling up with market women on their way to sell their wares. Beggars begged outside the large gates of Government House, and women sold fresh-smelling *akara* to hungry workers on their way to another day of toiling for below-poverty-level wages.

The Government House gate-man let Abe's taxi into the gated compound and gave the driver a pass. Abe paid the driver, thanked him for his service, and bade him farewell.

Abe was then escorted by the gate-man into the main offices and led deep into the government building. Finally, they arrived at a conference room in the central courtyard, and the guard left Abe at the entrance. Abe walked in alone.

At the head of a sixty-seat, all-mahogany conference table sat Akin Obilo. On his left, was Mr. Green, and to his right was a Middle Eastern gentleman that Abe assumed was a representative of the Arab leadership of Western Petroleum. Other European and American Western Petroleum executives sat at different positions on the table. Chief Ugonna and his political supporters were also seated, and there were several other Middle Eastern men in white turbans standing at different points around the table. Three armed guards each were stationed at the room's two doors. There were a total of nineteen people in the meeting room, which was lavish in its decoration with food, bottles of expensive wine, and state-of-the-art conferencing equipment.

"Welcome to Government House, Abe," Akin Obilo boomed. "I trust you slept well?"

"Where is Ezra?" Abe demanded.

"I told you he is a stubborn one," Akin Obilo said to his friends, "Feisty, just like his father was."

At that moment, four armed guards came from behind Abe, and handcuffed him. They pushed him roughly into a chair at the opposite end of the conference table from Akin Obilo and his men.

"You see," Akin Obilo continued. "Years ago his father refused to join us in our alliance with Farouk's cartel, and threatened to expose us, so we got rid of him. Now, unbelievably, we are told by our friend Ezra, that this young man wants to do the same thing, just like his father."

The men looked at Abe as though in utter disbelief that he would have the guts to single-handedly stand against their multi-national conglomerate of oil-rich cartels.

"Bring him in," Akin Obilo commanded. The four guards went into an adjoining room, and brought out Ezra, who was immaculately dressed in a white suit. He refused to look Abe in the eye, as the guards held him.

"Your friend here will be getting on a plane to America this evening. He now has a new American visa and a few hundred dollars to spend--enough to get him started in the United States. He has told us all about your plans to expose us, so in gratitude, we have provided him with his hearts desire."

Akin Obilo stopped and lit a long, large cigar. "He tells me that he has a particular fascination for Amtrak trains, so we have arranged to get him a ride on one of those as well."

The men all around the table burst out laughing. Ezra held his head down in shame. A solitary tear made its way slowly down his cheek.

"Mr. Abuchi Osondu, this is your last chance!" Akin exploded abruptly, pounding his fist on the table for added effect. "I asked you nicely in Lagos, and you refused, so now, I am demanding! Leave these villagers alone and transfer your father's money to my account. If you do that, I'll let you go back to America with a few million. Refuse me again, and you'll die, just like your father!"

Abe eyed him for a long moment, and then his eyes moved around the room, touching all the eyes of Akin Obilo's cohorts individually. For a longer moment, he held his gaze on Ezra who for the first time looked back at Abe, pleading for understanding. Abe returned the nonverbal plea with a look of utter disgust. He then perused all the others--the Arabs, the Nigerians, and the Europeans from Western Petroleum. The entire room waited for his answer. For the first time in his life, Abe felt like he was part of something bigger than himself. That he was relevant. He knew his actions here and now would determine his future. And he resolved that he would control that future! He resolved that he would not be a failure!

After all, he was now a part of a just cause. A cause that was bigger than playing guitar and singing on the West bank in Minnesota. A cause that was stronger than any he had ever felt. A cause even greater than his fight against racism. A cause that made him feel like he belonged to something, to somewhere, to someone. A cause that gave him an identity. A cause that made him feel he was now the possessor and executor of his father's crown and mission. A cause that made him the true son of his father, both emotionally and spiritually.

He looked at Akin Obilo again and spat! A scream escaped his lips involuntarily.

"Over my dead body!"

THIRTY-TWO

"A man who does not lick his lips cannot blame the Harmattan for drying them."

War

"*Tknu n'ibe kwenu!*" Anyancho shouted, cutting through the noisy bunch, immediately arresting their attention.

Anyancho was chosen to give the introductions. He was the second-oldest man of Azuala, from the Amizi clan, and an excellent speaker. He always uncovered the important points on everyone's mind, even though in his eloquence, he frequently would wander off into the land of proverbs, taking longer than most men to actually arrive at his issues. Today was different though, and he made a mental vow to get straight to the point.

The small, mud-and-thatch meeting hut was packed and stuffy, for in attendance were all the elders, titled men, and some warrior heroes of Azuala. Its wooden door was firmly shut, and a sacrificial chicken was placed outside, hanging by the neck, in order to warn all intruders to stay away. At least one elder and one titled man from each of the seven clans was there, but Papa Umekwe, the oldest and most respected man in Azuala, was conspicuously absent.

"*Azuala Kwenu!*" Anyancho shouted again.

"Hey!" was the sharp response from every mouth, shaking the hut's structure with its collective force.

"*Azuala Kwenu!*"

"Hey!"

"Igbo kwenu-oooo!"

"Heyaaaa!" The men ceremoniously answered in unison, now waiting quietly for Anyancho's opening remarks. Anyancho had achieved his goal of quieting them down--now it was time to raise his issue.

"He who is angry, let anger kill him!"

"It is true." The men responded.

"We are not here out of senseless anger, but rather, out of quiet resolve. We are here because something abominable is about to happen in our land. Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, you can be sure that something is after its life. The last time a toad jumped in our land, we failed to respond, and the result was the loss of our illustrious son, James Osondu, and the burning of our entire village by the Oil Company and their cohorts."

He paused for a moment and looked around at the now-silent elders and titled men, allowing his words to sink in.

"Just the other day, the army, the politicians, and their oil company friends came to Azuala to insult us with Chief Ugonna's bid for re-election." He looked around the room, and pointed to Okeke the gorilla. "Okeke and some of our brave sons expelled them, but they returned the next day and wreaked vengeance on us at Papa Umekwe's compound. Now old man Umekwe is not here because of his injuries, and Osondu's son has been captured, at this very moment in the mouth of the lion, trying unselfishly to save us from total annihilation at the hands of our oppressors."

Okeke the gorilla was by now moved to such a passionate state, that he stood up, interrupting Anyancho, and began to call out loudly for war. Okeke was not given to much oratory prowess, but knew a fight coming when he saw one. Clearly livid, his harsh voice carried powerfully through the air, fading in and out of recognizable language amidst a series of guttural swallows. He was ready to die for his people.

"Okeke, please sit down!" Anyancho said. The time for war cries and human head-cutting will soon be here. For now, let us talk quietly as wise men."

Okeke sat down respectfully, anger at the situation consuming him, his adrenalin still boiling over. His face was not a pretty sight to see. He looked like he was ready to maul a wild animal with his clenched teeth, and eat it raw.

“Shall we sit and watch while our brave son is harassed or killed in Umuahia? Shall we sit and watch while the oppressors continue to oppress us? No! I say we should convene our warrior spirits and fight them back. If we must die, then so be it, at least it will be our choice, instead of the discretion of the oppressor. I may be an old man, but I have spoken.”

“And you have spoken the truth!” someone said from the back. The older group murmured in agreement as they sat. Okeke and the younger titled men all yelled in violent agreement, waving their fists in the air. Azuala’s men had never been this passionate about anything, not since the old, proud warrior days of their ancestors, way before the white man came to their land. Blood thirst was at a fever pitch.

Umezuruike stood up to speak.

“Elders and titled men of Azuala, I greet you. I am speaking today out of love for Papa Umekwe and Osondu’s son. Something must be done, and it must be done now. My only fear is how we do it. If you want to eat a toad, you ought to look for a fat and juicy one. So let us do this thing in such a manner as to create a lasting return for our investment of effort. If we fight now, we will be ridiculously outnumbered, and we will die. But if we approach them with diplomacy and common sense, we at least have a bargaining chance. The language of young men like Okeke may be ‘pull down and destroy’, but an old man speaks of conciliation. The exploiters have guns, and we have sticks. They have tanks, and we have bicycles. I am not saying we should beg like old women, but I am saying let us not fight like children against a grown man’s army.”

There was a murmur in the group. It was hard to tell which way people were swaying. After all, Umezuruike had spoken the truth as well. The Biafran war had taught the Igbo people that they were not as invincible as they might have once thought.

Iroabuchi, his rival, stood up, even before Umezuruike sat down, and began to speak.

“An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb. War is at hand, and yet my friend here is considering diplomacy. Yes, we can choose to beg or we can fight. But I ask you, did the oil companies and the government beg us when they came and took over our land? Of course not! They never begged us when they burnt our villages, and they didn’t beg us when they burnt Papa Umekwe’s hut to

the ground. Yes, Umezuruike can lead his army of beggars, but I say we let Okeke and his young men prepare us for war. We have no choice but to fight.”

Umezuruike had heard enough. For years he had held his temper and behaved in a civil and respectable manner when it came to Iroabuchi, but this was the last straw. All the recent events in Azuala were enough to make anyone angry, but this public insolence pushed him over the top. He could usually stomach it in Papa Umekwe’s hut, but he would not stand to be humiliated in front of all the respectable men of Azuala.

Through some fantastic maneuver, he managed to hurl his entire body at Iroabuchi, and began grappling him to the ground. Goatskins and tobacco snuff went flying all over the hut, as the two senior citizens exchanged blows. The crowd surrounded them and quickly intervened, separating the two old men.

“This is what the exploiters have done to us.” Anyancho said, as they dragged the warring old men back to their seats. “They divide us first, then they conquer. They are not fools. When brothers fight to the death, a stranger inherits their father’s estate. Our exploiters know that we are weakest when we fight among ourselves, and that has been their central strategy since they first laid foot on our land many years ago.”

Iroabuchi and Umezuruike were still dusting themselves off when their friend, Ndubuisi, got up to speak. He took a much-needed break from assaulting his nostrils with his tobacco snuff. Before he started, he absentmindedly broke wind, letting out a very unruly noise and a putrid smell, which everyone politely and respectfully ignored. Whatever Ndubuisi had to say, given his reputation for measured wisdom, especially in these serious times, would be given the full consideration it deserved.

“When suffering knocks on your door and you say there is no seat for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool. If I had known this wisdom in my younger days, I would have been a rich man. Whether we like it or not, the exploiters are here to stay. They will be here today, and back again tomorrow, for the oil and riches of our land are too attractive to them. We must therefore not fight blindly, but rather, let us go and focus our energy on saving that young man from America, for he, and people like him, are our greatest weapons.” At this point, Ndubuisi stood up and put his hand on his waist, as though asking a poignant question of the audience.

"Can you imagine the power we would have if all our illustrious sons and daughters scattered all over the world in Diaspora came home to help us?" People shook their heads. They hadn't thought about that, but it was a brilliant idea. Ndubuisi continued, fully inspired by the positive reception he was receiving. This was much better than tobacco snuff.

"If we do not fight an all-out war today, at least let us send people to fight a small battle to save Osondu's son, so we can continue the struggle - *with him and others like him on our side*. Our people say that he who declines the call of Ekpe today, in favor of sharpening his knife, will be more prepared to cut the head of a goat with one swipe tomorrow. We cannot afford to lose another Osondu."

Ndubuisi's words were powerful and succinct, and cut right through the middle of the controversy like a newly sharpened Ekpe knife. The group clapped, and murmured loudly in general agreement. Papa Anyancho stood up.

"So be it. Okeke, are you ready?"

"Yes, Papa Anyancho." Okeke stood up.

"Then let it be. We will proceed with one hand and one voice, and we will fight a small battle in support of our son, Osondu. When we get him back we will formulate a plan to win this war that has been declared on us. Okeke will assemble his warriors, and we will go and show those exploiters that wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own. We may be a backward civilization to them, but we have our own culture, our pride, and our dignity."

The men dispersed quietly. The agreement had been reached, and now there was work to do. Okeke marched off to prepare his men for battle.

Ndubuisi took the news of the war council meeting to Papa Umekwe's compound. Umezuruike and Iroabuchi both went home, feeling too insulted to be in each other's proximity any longer. Ndubuisi arrived at the compound to a very grim sight. Behind the smouldering ashes of Papa Umekwe's central hut, was a small gathering of people. The entire Umekwe family was convened in Udochi's hut, and women and children were sobbing profusely. The whisper in the village was clear. Papa Umekwe was dying.

The door of the dungeon slammed loudly behind him. The dark, musty environment had the smell of wooden furniture, papers, and old equipment. Once the door was locked, Abe heard the guard flip a switch outside, and a single, dim light in a corner came on instantly.

Abe found himself in what must have once been an office, but was now turned into a storage dungeon. There were old computers everywhere, gathering dust, with office storage furniture piled on top of each other, and papers lying around everywhere. To the left of him was a wooden adjoining door to another room, which he checked and found to be locked. There were no windows, no chairs, and the only place to sit down was on one of the storage boxes.

Abe was thankful that they hadn't searched him and found his card. He was also happy that he hadn't been beaten or hurt in any way, despite his passionate refusal to cooperate. All they had done was lock him up in this little dungeon. Either Akin Obilo was not into torture tactics, or he had some entirely different and horrible plan for Abe. Most of all, Abe was happy to have had his handcuffed removed.

He could still hear the voice of Akin Obilo, albeit faintly, laughing loudly in the distance, and wondered where it was coming from. He pressed his ear at different points in the wall and on the doors to see where he could hear the sounds the clearest. Not finding any louder spots, he finally looked above him and noticed a vent near the ceiling, which he figured must be the only source of air into the stuffy little room, and probably the source of the sound as well.

This gave him an idea.

He arranged three wooden storage boxes so that he could climb on top of them to listen in on the conversation down the hall. It was perfect. Once he got up there he discovered that the sounds were coming through the vent loud and clear. All he had to do now was put his listening device on this vent. Akin Obilo and his men were bound to say something that would help him and Mrs. Osondu gather solid evidence. He fixed the device in place. He then quickly came down from the boxes, and put them all back the way he had found them.

At that point, he heard a knock on the adjoining room door. He crawled up to the door and pressed his ear against it.

"Abe, its me, Ezra." Came the whispering voice on the other side. Abe wasn't sure what to do.

"Abe, please don't be angry with me."

Abe did not answer. The nerve of Ezra! To betray him and the entire people of Azuala, and then ask that he should not be angry! He had nothing to say to him.

"I know that you can not see things my way, but I wanted to let you know the true situation."

Abe still didn't answer, but sat on the floor, leaning against the wooden door.

"They told me that they had killed you! They told me that all I had to do was tell them about the villagers and their plans, and they would send me to America. I know it sounds flimsy, but I thought you were dead, and this seemed like my last chance to get into America. Please understand. Sometimes in life, we have to go with the direction of the flowing river. For me, all hope was lost, and I was just trying to survive--I am so very sorry, Abe."

Ezra was clearly sobbing on the other side, but Abe refused to dignify him with a response. Abe's mind was filled to the brim with resentment. *Even if I were dead, why betray the entire Azuala people? The nerve of the faithless, self-serving bastard!* He wished he had never set eyes on Ezra!

"Goodbye, Abe."

A door gently closed shut on the other side, and Ezra was gone. Abe imagined that he would probably be on a plane to New York in the next few hours. He would be headed back to America, legally this time, with all his stories and lies, only this time, shame and guilt would accompany him.

Abe was instantly sad, and a feeling of intense loneliness engulfed him. He was sad because his vision of Africa had suffered greatly at the hands of the two people he had been closest to. Ezra, who had been his 'friend', with his great, seemingly positive attitude, had now turned into little more than a self-serving traitor. Akin Obilo, the well-respected Nigerian intellectual and businessman, had turned into an international crook and terrorist.

But there was still hope. He was reminded of the beautiful Ifeoma, the wisdom of Papa Umekwe, the brave warrior Okeke, and other good villagers. His thoughts went out to the tragic madman Innocent, his honor-driven father, Oga the thief, and the mysterious, but lovely Mrs.

Osondu. Yes, there were plenty of good people, and lots of hope left, regardless of the bad eggs that had raped and pillaged this poor post-colonial country for as long as any one could remember.

Thirty-seven armed men traveled almost two hundred miles by back roads through the jungle from the east, and finally pulled into Umuahia. They abandoned their vehicles in nearby bushes at the bottom of Elu-elu Hill, and unloaded their heavy artillery to prepare for war. They had their orders. Their leader, the man with a wooden leg, marched in front of them, as they approached their observation post.

They prepared their guns and long distance grenade launchers.

One of the men knelt down and trained his gun at a guard at the entrance. Four scouts prepared to go there and prepare the way for the attack. Their leader took a long deserved puff of his tobacco snuff. The adrenalin in his veins was powerful, giving him a high much stronger than any snuff. Today was his day of vengeance. Today, his son's murderers would face death.

"Farouk, are you there?" Akin Obilo was practically shouting into the speakerphone. The scratchy radio voice of Farouk Omar replied in halting Arabian-English, from halfway around the world, somewhere in the Middle East. Akin Obilo was sitting in the large conference room with Chief Ugonna and Mr. Green.

"I am here." He said. "What is this I hear about a local insurgence in that Azuala village?"

"I have Chief Ugonna and Mr. Green here with me to explain it." Akin Obilo motioned to the men, giving them permission to speak.

Chief Ugonna moved closer to the speakerphone so he could be heard clearly. This was the first time he had actually spoken to the great Farouk Omar.

"It is a very strange thing, sir. A lost son of Osondu has returned to the village, and now our people think that they are warriors again. They seem to be planning to fight our expansion plans at every turn."

"Mr. Green, is this true?" Farouk asked.

“Yes, Farouk. The young man is now in our custody, and we are still deciding what to do with him. There is one issue, though. He brings to the table a significant amount of money.”

“What money?”

“His inheritance from his father, James Osondu, is about fifty million dollars. We could use that to bribe a lot of government officials here and make the way smoother for the expansion.”

Farouk was silent for a moment, in deep thought.

“Isn’t this the same James Osondu we eliminated several years ago?”

“Yes,” Akin Obilo chimed in.

“Then forget the fifty million. We don’t need the trouble or the wasted time. This is too big of a deal for us to play a game of petty thieves. This is an unnecessary distraction. Have that young man killed. Nothing must get in the way of our plans. I am already getting pressure from our gulf allies regarding the nuclear weapons. The sooner we consolidate our control of all the oil in that region, the sooner we will be able to buy what we need from the former Soviet states. Just get rid of him.”

The men all looked at each other.

“It is as good as done, Farouk.” Akin Obilo chimed in. He said this with a noticeable feeling of regret. In his own twisted way, he had actually grown fond of Abe Osondu. But more than that, he had grown fond of the idea of getting his hands on fifty million dollars.

THIRTY-THREE

"A boy sent by his father to steal does not go stealthily but breaks the door with his feet."

Freedom

It was well past noon as Okeke and his twenty-nine men gathered in Papa Anyancho's compound to make their final attack plans. Papa Anyancho had retired to the back of his hut, so as not to disturb the strategy session of the young warriors.

The men had applied their palm leaves and war paint, and had stripped down to their traditional wrappers over khaki shorts. All the men had dug up their father's or ancestor's war machetes and shields, for it had been decades since anyone had formally gone to war in Azuala.

Okeke looked at his men and remembered Umezuruike's comments. Yes, it would indeed be a challenge to charge against tanks with wooden spears, machetes, and shields. But they would do it anyway! The end was more important than the means. They would throw themselves at the enemy with Kamikaze bravery. Those who weren't crushed in the first wave of attacks would eventually get through the enemy's defense and strike a deadly blow. Such was the stubborn resolve and suicidal arrogance Okeke had instilled in his warriors. They were ready to die for Azuala.

The men were now fully prepared for battle, chewing intoxicating coca leaves for confidence, while chanting loudly and invoking the fearlessness they would need in the coming confrontation. They were proud Igbo warriors, ready to charge out to glorious victory or death with their spears and wooden shields.

A few of Okeke's men had pistols, from a stint here and there in the army or the police force, but no one had any respectable number of bullets. They agreed that they would have to conduct an ambush, for only with surprise on their side, could they prevail against such a formidable combined enemy as Western Petroleum, The Secret Society, and their Military Government cohorts. And they certainly had a surprise planned.

The idea of the surprise had come to them quite serendipitously through a messenger from Umuahia.

"What news do you bring to us, Ihemelandu?"

"I bring good news from a man named Ezra who is held captive at Government House."

Okeke's interest was peaked. "What does he say? How is Abe?"

"Ezra tells me that Abe is captive but unhurt. But more importantly, he wants you to know that you have help from a band of thirty-seven ambushers that are waiting for you on Elu-Elu hill. It is Oga's band of thieves!"

Okeke and his small group of warriors were very happy for this news, because the reputation of this particular army of men and their leader preceded them. They were the well-known Igbo version of Robin Hood's army. Wayward, fearless, common thieves who made famous careers out of robbing the rich and helping the poor.

"Ezra says that you must attack from the left side, since his research has shown it to be the most vulnerable, and since Oga's men are going to come in from the back."

Okeke gladly sent the messenger back to the band of men, with special instructions to prepare for a joint ambush.

Once the group was ready, they boarded a rickety *gwongworo* lorry from the neighboring Ndiorowe clan, which transported them to the southern outskirts of Umuahia, from whence they would complete the journey by foot.

Okeke was no longer as unsure of the mission as before. Now he had under his command, not only his own able-bodied Azuala men, but also

the collaboration of the band of thieves and their ruthless, mighty leader; the mysterious man with the wooden leg. They continued their march forward, confident and inspired, all thanks to the good insider information from Ezra.

Halfway around the world, it was about six in the evening in lower Manhattan, and the busy New York day was coming to an end for most workers. Shaniqua was already walking down the hallway, leaving the W.A.M! Entertainment Office, when she heard the phone ring. Trip McGee had also stayed late to review some important copyright information for *Danshiki*. Knowing he did not want to be disturbed, she ran back into the office and picked up the phone.

On the other line was Mrs. Osondu, calling from faraway Africa. She introduced herself, and asked to speak to Trip McGee. Shaniqua could not overcome her excitement.

"Abe is alive!" She screamed, as she ran into his office and handed him the phone.

Trip was truly overjoyed to hear the news. Abe may have always been a royal pain in the ass, but nothing had felt quite right without him, not even the phenomenal success they had achieved. He waved Shaniqua away, promising to update her in the morning.

Mrs. Osondu calmly and clearly explained the entire situation to Trip McGee, and told him to assure everyone that Abe would be all right. She also arranged, per Abe's instructions, to send top-secret information to him through a secure email, fax line, and Internet audio feed. She told him that he must immediately pass whatever he received to the CIA. She informed Trip McGee that the information would be key in bringing down one of the most threatening organizations in the world.

When Trip got off the phone, he wiped the accumulated sweat off his brow and put in a call to someone he knew that might know people in the CIA. Later that evening, before he left for the day, he called his public relations firm. He told them to get ready and stand by for a major publicity stunt and marketing blitz for *Danshiki*, and that details would follow later.

He did not call Joey or Shawn. No need to raise expectations. Besides, this whole thing needed to be a pleasant surprise, as opposed to an unfortunate end to a tragic story in case anything went wrong.

He left his office, strangely happier than he had ever been in his life. If all went well, this troublesome kid in far-away Africa would make him one of the richest men in the music industry. He struggled not to scream out loud in his growing excitement. What a wild, crazy situation he had stumbled upon when he met this young man Abe and his *Danshiki* band!

Back in Umuahia, Abe's makeshift prison door crashed open. Two guards entered, and demanded, at gunpoint, that he approach them with his hands up. They grabbed him roughly, and led him back into the conference room. Abe hoped that his recording device had done its magic, knowing that he would probably not get another chance to retrieve it.

Akin Obilo and his Secret Society friends were still sitting at the conference table, eating and drinking where Abe had left them. To his left was Chief Ugonna, and to his right, Mr. Green. Scattered around the room were the representatives of Farouk Omar.

"Abuchi Osondu!" Akin announced loudly, as Abe was dragged in. "Stubborn as a mule, just like his father."

Abe said nothing.

"Yes, I know you will not cooperate easily. I don't really expect you to. Let me tell you a little secret." Akin Obilo walked around the table. Once closer to Abe, and pulled up a chair near to him.

"I'm sorry to announce to you that your father was not a saint." Akin Obilo looked him in the eye, searching for the effect of his words. Abe did not respond, despite his strong interest in whatever Akin Obilo had to say about his father.

"No, far from it. In fact, I'm sure the Azuala peasants never told you that your father was once my business partner. We had great plans of making money and running governments, but he chickened out at the last minute. Yes! Your father, the hero of Azuala, was a simple coward."

Abe flinched a bit, but retained his posture and composure.

"Your father got cold feet once we hooked up with Farouk. Something about the oil exploitation and the Nukes was much for him. He had already pledged his money to our project and withdrew it at the last minute under some righteous pretext about honor and the love of mankind. If he could have stopped worrying about exploitation and colonial oppression for one minute, we would all have been happily

living on some remote Fiji island by now, with billions in our bank accounts. But in his cowardice, he chickened out.”

“So what the hell do you want from me?” Abe blurted out, trying to sound tough, and stalling for time.

“Good!” Akin Obilo proclaimed. “Now we’re making progress. I simply want the money your father pledged to us. Farouk’s orders are to eliminate you, but I want to give you one last chance. If you promise to cooperate with me regarding the money, I will simply let you escape, and we can blame it on our own carelessness.”

He pointed up into the sky, toward the direction of the window, but still kept his eyes trained on Abe.

“Your friend Ezra is probably on a plane to America as we speak. He is on his way to a better life because I keep my promises. I’ll keep this promise to let you go, but you must cooperate with me, otherwise I have no choice but to follow orders.”

Akin Obilo suddenly grabbed Abe roughly by the shirt collar. Abe could smell his alcohol-infested breath.

“So, What will it be?” He belched.

Abe looked beyond Akin Obilo, not sure if he should maintain his silence, or respond to buy more time. His eyes wandered to the window behind him. At that instant he was almost floored by what he saw! In the frame of the window behind Akin Obilo was the face of a man he thought he would never see again. It was the face of a man he had seen only a few days ago in the jungles of Benin.

It was the face of Ndu, son of Oga, and brother to the Innocent, the slain madman of Azuala.

Ndu stared back at him with a knowing look of recognition, and slowly made the sign for silence with his forefinger on puckered lips. He then made another series of gestures, pointing behind him as though he seemed to suggest that Abe should make a run for it, and that help was nearby. He then slowly bent down and disappeared from view under the windowsill.

Abe’s heart was by now thumping so viciously, he could feel it stretching his shirt taut with each beat. He knew now that help must be on the way, but how Ndu had gotten involved was totally beyond him. Under these new circumstances, he quickly surmised that stalling for time was the best thing to do.

“Ok,” he said, turning slowly to Akin Obilo, without revealing his anxiety. “I will work with you. I have a card here in my pocket that can unlock my father’s Swiss bank account.”

Akin Obilo looked at him with both amazement and distrust, and then pushed him aside and walked back to his seat. He waved his arm, motioning for a guard to get the card from Abe’s pockets.

The guard approached Abe cautiously. Abe sized up the room, and realized he would be quickly outnumbered if he tried to escape. But then he remembered that he had just seen Ndu. Surely his odds must be a bit better. He muttered a silent prayer under his breath, and tensed his muscles. This was it. This was that point between success and failure, between life and death.

Once the guard was close enough, Abe made his move. He grabbed the closest item he could find, which happened to be an open bottle of sparkling wine. He crashed it on the man’s head with all the force he could muster. The man’s knees buckled, and he fell immediately to the floor. In the wake of the ensuing confusion, Abe dashed madly for the closest window to his left. He could hear gunshots, and Akin Obilo barking orders. Then he heard the sharp whistle of bullets passing around him, barely missing their intended target.

Suddenly, something hit him in his left arm, penetrating the flesh, and sending a sharp, blinding signal of pain to his brain. He knew he had been hit, but his legs continued to push him toward the window.

At the window, he curled himself up in a ball, head bent down, just like in the movies. He hurled through the window effortlessly, and landed on the well-groomed grass outside, followed by thousands of pieces of glass and wood. He fell smoothly, like a cat, his body limp as it absorbed the impact of the fall. He began running as soon as his feet caught their balance, all in one move. The gunshots were still whizzing all around him, and by now the guards had started to follow him as he ran.

At that moment, an incredible explosion rocked the building behind him, hurling the few guards forward who had just come out of the window, and throwing some of them several feet into the air. They came down hard on the ground, and remained there, unconscious. Abe was also knocked forward, but lay unharmed. He took this explosion as a

lucky cue from his rescuers. Wasting no time, he dashed madly across the green plaza, toward safety and freedom in the Elu-elu hills.

Once they heard the explosion, the Azuala warriors all simultaneously charged the front gate. They took advantage of the confusion, and subdued the guards in one surprise attack. Okeke grabbed the first man he could, and twisted his head violently until it snapped. He dropped the limp man, and charged forward, leading his men deeper into the bowels of Government house. They slashed and stabbed whomever they saw, and made their way toward the main conference area. The guards were taken completely by surprise! Several of them dropped their weapons and fled for safety, having never seen the likes of these charging mad men of Azuala.

Sirens blared! Smoke poured out of the main building! The men in the hills were exchanging rounds of fire with other guards in the surrounding building complex. Some of the men from the hill had also run down, over the tall fence, and into the Government House compound. They overpowered the guards and broke into the building, shooting as they ran in.

The surprise was going exactly as planned. The military guards of Government house didn't stand a chance against the double-pronged attack from both sides.

Unlike the guards, Akin Obilo, Chief Ugonna, Mr. Green and the other meeting participants, had wasted no time being surprised. Immediately they heard the explosion, they dashed like scared chickens for their luxury bulletproof cars in the basement garage below. Akin Obilo was the first to get into his car and dash away, but the Chief and Mr. Green were not so lucky. Okeke's men had arrived at the entrance, and immediately arrested them as they tried to escape.

Akin Obilo drove furiously through the garage, destroying any and all obstacles in his way. This was one of the rare times he had actually driven his own car. Usually his trusted driver chauffeured him, but not this time. Those good old driving skills came back to him quickly as he found himself racing for his life.

He crashed through the garage gate and raced up and out of the tunnel, toward the back yard exit. He was almost sure he was free, but alas, that was not to be.

The man with the wooden leg took careful aim from Elu-elu hill, happy to have finally spotted his target. He could see that he had a clear shot with his grenade launcher pointed straight at the careening vehicle. He steadied his aim, and squeezed the trigger.

BOOM!

Akin Obilo's Mercedes S-600 went up in a ball of fire. Thick smoke and fire immediately exploded up to the heavens. Out of the car emerged a badly burned and wounded Akin Obilo, stumbling, clutching tightly at life, and trying to escape to dear freedom.

Oga, king of thieves, satisfied at his achievement, dropped his grenade launcher, and picked up his AK47. He raised his wooden leg on a rock for better positioning, and aimed carefully at the staggering man below. He smiled eerily, and swore under his breath as he pulled the trigger. The staccato sound of the machine gun echoed across the hills as several bullets found their target at the same time.

Down below at Government house, Akin Obilo slumped over, eyes wide open in shock. He was dead in an instant.

Abe was still hiding behind some thick bushes atop the Elu-elu hills. He looked down sadly at the burning ruins of Government House below him. He could sense that the worst danger had passed, but he was still trembling with fear.

"Abe!" a voice behind him screamed.

It was Ezra!

Abe tensed up and grabbed the nearest stick he could find. Ezra emerged from hiding in the nearby brush.

"Abe, you are alive! Thank God! I need to explain what happened. Please listen to me!" Ezra continued, walking close to Abe. Abe retreated as he approached.

"You wouldn't know this," Ezra pleaded, "But I helped to coordinate this attack. Oga was the man behind the ambushers that saved you. I made friends with someone at Government House who got me in touch with Oga. Once I learned of his plan, I sent word to your people to link them up with Oga's men."

"So what?" Abe retorted. "Do you think this absolves you of your betrayal?"

"Yes," Another voice said, as its owner came out of the bushes. It was Oga, king of thieves! Several other men came out of the bush as well, and Abe was now surrounded by a small army of warriors.

"Yes. It was all part of our plan," Oga continued. "We encouraged Ezra to keep feeding Akin Obilo with information. This way, he bought us time, and kept them confused for our surprise attack."

Abe let his stick drop to the floor and looked at Ezra.

"We all thought you were dead, Abe." Ezra said, a weak smile on his face.

"What about your big reward? What about the ticket and visa to America?" Abe said, still doubting his loyalty.

"All lies, my friend. Akin Obilo tortured all kinds of secrets and personal desires out of me, but he never gave me any ticket. As you can see, I am still here, with no hope of getting back to America. I may have been a coward, but I was never a traitor!"

Ezra approached Abe, hand held out. There was an awkward moment. Abe finally stretched out his hand, and Ezra took it.

But Ezra did not just shake his hand. He threw his little frame onto Abe and bear-hugged him with excitement. He let out little yelps of happiness like a dog that had finally been reunited with its master. Abe couldn't help but forgive him.

The man with the wooden leg was pleased, his vengeance complete. He picked up his now empty weapons, and stumbled away into the jungle. His band of thieves followed suit and they all bade Abe and Ezra goodbye as they left. Oga decided he ought to make a quick call on his GSM phone to Mrs. Osondu, and thank her for helping to coordinate the attack. No, better yet, he would visit her with his band of men, and thank her personally. Once they got to their vehicles, he barked out orders to head to Mrs. Osondu's mansion.

Yes, he was finally satisfied. His friend James Osondu and his own son Innocent had finally been avenged. Surely they would now rest in blissful peace.

THIRTY-FOUR

“Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own.”

Justice

It was early evening when the *gwongworo* lorry returned to the village, carrying with it, the glorious warrior heroes of Azuala and some very important prisoners of war. A celebration and a court hearing were planned that evening, and everyone in the village was energized. Even the late afternoon sun was still hanging precariously in the sky, refusing to retire for the day, as it shone down on a very festive and joyful Azuala village.

Chief Ugonna and Mr. Green, who had been captured from Government house, were the two prisoners of war that were scheduled to face the people of Azuala in a judgment ceremony that evening.

Yes, victory, no matter how fleeting, had come for the people of Azuala, and they fully intended to see their former oppressors in shame, in order to complete their satisfaction. The Igbo believe in swift and fair justice, administered by a council of elders in the presence of the entire village. Nothing would be hidden to anyone on this day of victory, as the two prisoners would be readied to face justice in front of those they had oppressed for so long.

Abe and Ezra rode behind the lorry in a separate taxi that had been chartered from Umuahia. Their entry into the village was indeed a sight to see. The village drummers celebrated their victorious return.

Boom-kiti-Boom-kiti Boom Boom!

Boom-kiti-Boom-kiti Boom Boom!

A large gathering of cheering villagers lined up along a mile's stretch of the Azuala pathway, and touched the gwongworo and the taxi as they crept by. The procession was moving at a crawling pace, unable to go any faster because of the sheer volume of people all over the place. One would have thought the ruler of an entire nation was paying them a state visit, if not for the dirty, rickety lorry and taxi that carried the subject of their admiration. Despite the poverty of the people, any ruler of their nation would surely be driving in a very expensive modern contraption that was more fitting of his post. The women and children screamed!

"Abuchi's back! Never hits the ground! Whoever this angers, let anger kill him! Who does it anger? It angers someone like Western Petroleum!"

Azu Abuchi! Erugu ala,

I-bobo, konko si konko,

Onye iwe na ewe,

Ya we gbuo ya,

O na ewe onye?

O na ewe onye di ka Western Petroleum!

Everyone came out to greet Abe, Ezra, and the warrior heroes of Azuala, for the news of their amazing victory had spread like wildfire across the seven clans of Azuala and beyond. Those who were not on the road itself had already begun to gather in the village plaza, where the celebration and judgment ceremony was scheduled to occur.

The lorry pulled into Papa Umekwe's compound amid heightened pomp and circumstance. Several village young men were already in the completion stages of rebuilding his destroyed central hut. Everyone in the village of Azuala was preparing for this major celebration of victory.

Abe was given a place to lie down and rest from the toils of the day, and was brought food and bathing water. Udochi, Ifeoma's mother, was being particularly nice to him, now that he was a certified hero of Azuala. She made sure she was seen as a great supporter, to diffuse the potential that someone would challenge her on the grounds that she had been previously unsupportive, and responsible for the unwarranted rumors about his connection to some unknown evil voodoo. As if to atone for her prior sins, she encouraged Ifeoma to take care of him while she prepared his bed. She had amazingly transformed herself into the most caring wife of Papa Umekwe.

Papa Umekwe, however, was still very ill; and lay sleeping when Abe arrived. No one knew what was going to happen to the poor embattled old man, but many feared that his days, indeed his final hours, were definitely numbered.

Okeke's men returned to Papa Umekwe's compound two hours later. They whisked Abe away to the Azuala plaza, where a massive village crowd had gathered for the victory celebration and judgment ceremony. The village elders had all gathered under a hastily prepared thatched roof tent, centrally located in the plaza. Abe sat among them while Okeke went off to prepare for the coming ceremony. Around them were the victorious warriors, who lined up in such a way as to create a circular space with their bodies where the ceremony would be held.

An Ekpe mask was brought from the Usaka clan, for they were the last to successfully cut off the head of the ceremonial *mpkei*, a male goat, with one swipe. Many jokes had been made about the fact that the Ariam clan, from where Papa Umekwe and the Osondu's hailed, hadn't successfully cut off a goat's head for decades. However, several elders had successfully argued that, in the spirit of altruism, they would give the Ariam clan another chance to redeem their honor tonight. After all, their son had delivered them today's victory against the enemy.

But before the ceremony began, Iroabuchi, a member of the neighboring Amizi clan, was already involved in a heated argument with Umezuruike and other elders.

"I am very unhappy about this goat situation." Iroabuchi complained. "We all know it is the turn of the Amizi clan to perform the head-cutting. Why must we give the Ariam clan yet another try?"

Umezuruike turned to him and passionately defended the other side of the argument, even though he wasn't an Ariam man.

"Iroabuchi, you are an old, senile man. Why do you care so much who cuts a goat's head?" Some elders laughed.

"I care because the goat cares. If you were bringing an epileptic goat as they did in the last ceremony to trick us, I wouldn't care so much. But any fully sane goat deserves to die at the hands of the appropriate clan. This thing you people have commandeered is shameful."

The elders laughed at Iroabuchi's comment. The Amizi clan had complained that the reason they couldn't successfully cut the goat's head in one swipe the last time was because it was shaking from epileptic feats, and the Ekpe missed through no fault of his.

The elders continued in this way, enjoying their jokes in good faith. Justice would be theirs tonight! They would all be united and satisfied in their victory, regardless of which clan performed the Ekpe.

Evening had turned to night, and the flames from a large bonfire in the middle of the open circular space now provided the only light in the plaza. The time had arrived, and the two prisoners were brought forward, hands tied behind their backs, into the center of the space.

The drummers began beating their instruments, and the spirit of the celebration was released into the night sky.

Keti-keti-ke-Boom-ke-ke!

Keti-keti-ke-Boom-ke-ke!

Warrior dancers circled the fire, possessed with the joy of conquest and success. Chief Ugonna and Mr. Green observed with wide-eyed apprehension as the dancers circled them. Their day of judgment had indeed come, and it was to be carried out by the same people they had dominated and ruled over for so long.

A black stretch limousine pulled into the south end of the Azuala plaza. Mrs. Osondu had arrived. Everyone knew this, though very few Azuala villagers had ever set eyes on her. The crowd parted as her black beast of a car navigated to a spot where she could see and hear the proceedings. Understandably, this was one of the rare occasions that anyone would ever see her in the village. Only an important occasion such as this would justify a visit from the reclusive Mrs. Osondu.

The Usaka goat was dragged into the center, amidst cheers from the crowd. Everyone in the plaza began to shout and chant in unison, as the male goat was prepared for the slaughter. It was tied to a stake in the ground very close to Mr. Green's head, and the look in his eyes betrayed the fear he felt. Not being very conversant with Igbo customs, he wasn't sure if he or the goat was going to be slaughtered tonight. The goat kicked and struggled against the noose around its neck, almost kicking Mr. Green in the face. The crowd jeered and shouted as they watched him cower as far as he could from the goat. The people enjoyed every minute of the spectacle!

Finally, the Ekpe masked dancer ran into the center of the circle. It was obvious that Okeke had been chosen to attempt to cut off the goat's head. Because of his height and muscular build, everyone knew he was the one despite the mask. He danced around the prisoners and the goat, shaking his breasts and upper torso in the manner of victorious warriors. He waved his sharpened machete viscously in the air. He was truly a proud sight to see. All the spirits of war and Ekpe must have descended upon him, as he feverishly danced to the beat of the drums and responded appropriately in his dance steps to each chant coming from the crowd.

Keti-keti-ke-Boom-ke-ke!

Keti-keti-ke-Boom-ke-ke!

Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks! The crowd fell immediately quiet. After a long moment, he jumped up in the air in one mighty move and came down with his knife on the unsuspecting goat's neck. In a flash,

the goat's head was sliced off! The dismembered head flew straight into the face of poor Mr. Green! He turned red and purple with emotion. Blood and gore now accompanied the sweat that poured down his face. Mr. Green soiled his pants!

The crowd cheered! Okeke had finally done Ariam proud by successfully cutting the goat's head in one clean swoop.

Okeke took off his Ekpe mask and tossed it aside,. Then he addressing the crowd:

"Azuala Kwe'nu!"

"Hey!" The people responded.

"It is the truth that we are here to speak tonight!"

"Tonight, tonight!" The crowd roared in unison.

"If anyone speaks a lie here!"

"Tonight, tonight!"

"May his head fall off like this goat's head!"

"Tonight, tonight!"

"May Amadioha, god of thunder, punish him!"

"Tonight, tonight!"

"May he have no more children!"

"May his clan never cut off another goat's head!"

The crowd laughed, and they all cheered as he danced away. Their victory was complete. Okeke and the warriors of Azuala had made them proud on the battlefield. Now it was time for judgment.

Papa Anyancho stood up to begin the opening speech. He walked into the center of the circle next to the prisoners and the slain goat. He raised his hand, calling for silence, and began.

"Azuala Kwe'nu!" he shouted, with a passion unusual for his years.

"Hey!" The crowd roared back in the customary fashion, shaking the ground and the tall Iroko trees of the plaza with the force of their response.

"Azuala Kwe'nu!"

"Hey!"

"Azuala Kwe'zuo nu-ooooo!"

"Hey-aaaaaa!"

The night fell silent. Now it was time for the business of judgment. Papa Anyancho began.

"My good people of Azuala. We are here today because we have won a battle, and must pass judgment on our prisoners. But let us be cautious.

We may have won a battle, but not the entire war. Our people say that until the hunted bush rat is allowed to speak freely, the hunter will always be viewed in a positive light. Today is the day when we, the bush rats, can speak freely to our hunters. I will invite our elders to prosecute this trial. Since Papa Umekwe is not here, Ndubuisi will lead the process, and we will know today the fate of these two oppressors. I have spoken.”

Ndubuisi stood up and approached the center as Papa Anyancho sat down. He wiped the sweat from his brow and addressed Chief Ugonna, whose head was bowed in fear and shame.

“Ugonna, *mma* Igbo! You are no longer a titled man in our eyes. In fact, we disown you! You have abandoned your Igbo heritage in pursuit of worldly pleasures. You have once been king, but today, you will listen humbly to the accusations against you. Who wants to begin?”

An elder, Ukonu, of Ndiorowe stood up.

“Let me start. This man, Ugonna, is like the deceitful tortoise that followed the birds to heaven during a time of famine. God had promised the birds a great feast if they would fly to heaven. The birds had been kind enough to lend tortoise wings, but he betrayed their trust when they arrived in God’s house. God asked everyone to pick a title, and he gave himself the title ‘*All of you*’. So when God arrived with the food, tortoise asked him whom the feast was for. Of course, God answered, ‘All of you’, and tortoise took it upon himself to consume all the food that had been provided, leaving all the birds hungry and destitute. Like the tortoise, Chief Ugonna should face judgment for eating the entire food of Azuala by himself!”

Ukonu sat down. “I have spoken.”

Ndubuisi took over from there. “Ukonu. Your story is very appropriate. We all know that the birds went hungry, as we also have been hungry due to the exploitation against us *by our own people*. The white man came and appointed fools like Ugonna as our leaders, and in turn the leaders exploited and betrayed us.” Chief Ugonna held his head down even lower in shame.

“We also know that the tortoise grew fat while he was eating and his greed ultimately led to his punishment. The birds seized his wings and he fell all the way to the ground. In a similar fashion, we will today remove Ugonna’s titles and riches, burn his compound, and make him languish in the forest jail where he belongs. Judgment day is here! Take him away!”

The crowd cheered as Chief Ugonna was dragged away in disgrace. His compound would be burned to the ground that very evening, and he would be held captive in the Forest-with-no-name.

Ndubuisi turned his attention to the other accused, the white man, Mr. Green, who had watched all this with growing dread. He had wet himself already during the goat head-cutting ceremony. He trembled now, not sure what was coming next.

“What shall we do with this man?” Ndubuisi asked. “What shall we do with those who have oppressed, exploited, and dominated us for so long? Even in this limited forum, how can we respond to what this man and his Oil Company have done to us?”

A small, frail voice in the back answered. Everyone turned around in amazement at the old man who had spoken.

Unbelievably, it was Papa Umekwe!

Ifeoma and Udochi were by his side. He must have awakened and dragged himself to the plaza, not wanting to miss this event even if it killed him. Ifeoma and Udochi helped him, holding him up by both hands. The crowd was silent as he slowly and painfully walked through their ranks. Not a single eye was dry by the time he had made his way successfully to the center. People looked at him as one would look at a man returning from the grave.

Ezra took over from the women and held him upright. Papa Umekwe wiped his brow and waved a tired hand in the direction of Mr. Green. Once he was ready, Ezra left him, and he remained standing on his own strength.

“This man is like the lizard,” he began, speaking carefully in a quiet voice. “The lizard came to visit the rat during the rainy season. He asked the rat if he could rest in a dry place and eat some food. The rat, in his kindness, served him food and he finished it. The rat then offered him more food and he finished it as well, and they continued in this manner until all the food in the house was gone. The rat then gave him all his food ingredients and asked him to watch while more food was cooked, promising that he would share it with the lizard when it was ready. After that, the rat decided to brave the rain and left to take care of some business in the courthouse, leaving the lizard alone to watch the soup. The lizard tasted the soup to see if there was enough salt, and liked it, so he decided to taste it again. He tried again, and liked the taste a second

time, so he proceeded to full blown consumption until the entire pot was empty.

"When the rat returned and realized that his visitor had completely eaten him out of all his food and supplies, he lost his temper. Even though he was shivering cold and weakened from the rain, he ran into the house to get his club. He was in no shape to fight after being out in the rain. Knowing a fight was coming, the smart lizard also ran out into the rain and found a gun.

"The rat hit the lizard, "*kpim!*" The lizard shot the rat "*boom!*" The rat died instantly, of course, because his weakness from the rain subdued him, and because a gun will always kill before a club. A rat should never play in the rain with a lizard. I have spoken."

Papa Umekwe sat down, exhausted from his speech.

Umezuruike stood up to back up Papa Umekwe's story.

"Papa Umekwe speaks a true word!"

People everywhere murmured in sad unison.

"The white man came here and we offered him our oil. At first, we were friends, but then, he built his entire international empire on the fuel from that oil, and became dependent on us, refusing to leave. Now, none of his cars, engines, and airplanes can survive without our oil!

We allowed him to stay because we are a peaceful people, but instead, he abused the privilege, just like the lizard, and exploited us, leaving us poor and destitute as he profited from the riches of our land. *What shall we do with this man?* What shall we do with a lizard that can survive the rain when we, the rat, cannot? What shall we do with a lizard that has a gun, when all we have is a club?"

The crowd hissed in disgust and murmured in sadness. Papa Umekwe had indeed hit the goat on the head with his story. Umezuruike sat down, and Iroabuchi stood up, taking his turn at the center.

"This may be one of the few times I must say I fully agree with my friend, Umezuruike here."

The crowd laughed. The rivalry between these two elders was as old as the hills of Azuala.

"Shall we fight with our clubs and die like the rat? Shall we strike at an enemy we cannot defeat, or shall we run? I say we shall do neither, and that there must be something in between. But this is where my wisdom ends. Our proverb says that a child who has washed his hands can eat with kings. I hereby invite Osondu's son to speak, for his hands

have today been washed extra clean.” He sat down, and the people waited to see if anyone else would stand up to speak. No one else did, so Abe stood up.

He stood up and looked around him at the eager faces of the Azuala villagers. The elders agreed unanimously with Iroabuchi’s invitation for him to speak. It was time to hear the voice of their hero, the young Osondu. Abe was passionate, fully geared up, and ready to voice his observations. After all he had been through, he actually felt like he did have few words to say, and wasn’t in the least bit shy or nervous. All the troubles he had gone through during his visit had prepared him well for what he was about to say. He stood up and addressed the entire village of Azuala.

“My people. Thank you for receiving me with open hands. In America, there was only one African proverb that I knew, and that was the one where they say: it takes an entire village to raise a child. Your love and kindness has shown me how true that statement really is. I thank you for your boundless hospitality during my stay.”

“Well said!” someone shouted.

Abe continued. “I have only one thing to say. I propose that we free this man, and let him go back to his friends and testify about the kindness and civilization of our people. Let us show him mercy where he has shown us evil and suffering. If we keep attacking each other, an eye for an eye, one day everyone will be blind.”

The crowd clapped and murmured at the wisdom of the young Osondu. Their love for this Azuala son increased in leaps and bounds. They returned to silence so that he could continue.

“I say let’s release him and send him back to his people, and let’s fight this thing in a court of his peers. I am going to donate the bulk of my father’s financial estate to this cause, and I appoint Okeke and Papa Umekwe as the protectors of my interests when I return to America.”

The crowd screamed! They knew that he was talking about a donation that was in the millions of dollars. This was truly a night of joy!

“I ask only one thing.” Abe continued. “Let us hire the best lawyers and fight this battle the correct way. No terrorism, no more kamikaze jungle justice. Let us have dialog, not war. Let us leave a legacy that is better than the neo-colonial mess the white man has left for us. Let’s turn this mess into a message!”

The elders praised and clapped at his words and the entire crowd cheered.

"If I have learnt one thing in my travel to my homeland, it is the fact of my own ignorance regarding the true meaning of legacy. I have asked myself many questions regarding this subject. I have asked myself, is it purely financial? Is it all about this vast wealth my father has left for me? Or is it really all about the people he has influenced during his lifetime? Is a man's legacy all about wealth? Is it money, or is it the imprint that a man leaves on the imagination of those he leaves behind? I have learned that it is not about money at all, for a man dies, and cannot benefit further from his toil and wealth. I have learned that it is about leaving a positive influence and helping others even after one is gone. My father did this, and I will devote my life to doing the same! From now on, this is my life's purpose!"

The crowd went mad with excitement. Papa Umekwe could not contain his joy. His weak heart was beating and pulsating with every beautiful word that escaped the mouth of this young Osondu. He could already feel his illness leaving him as he absorbed the wonderful truth he was receiving. The crowd quieted down as Abe continued:

"I have asked myself many questions about legacy, not just at a personal level, but also at a societal level. What legacy has the white man left for us? Are we better off now than when he arrived in the colonial days? Or are we exploited and destitute? What legacy have our own leaders left for us, people like Chief Ugonna? Have they helped their fellow man, or have they instead joined each other in secret societies and governments to exploit us further? Is there no responsibility and expectation that one societal generation should leave a good legacy for the next? Why do they pillage and steal as though there will be no tomorrow? Why do they rob and kill as though there will be no generation to follow them when they are gone?

"I have also considered my own country, America, and I have asked myself, is there a similarity in the way the black man there has responded to his own slavery and exploitation by the white man? The African American may have achieved a superficial freedom from slavery, but is he truly free from himself? My biggest question is this: Will the African descendant--the world over--ever be free from himself?

"These are the questions I have asked about the true importance of legacy, and this is why I am donating my wealth to this cause.

“My purpose is to prove that Legacy is not about money, but about positively influencing and helping others. It is about individuals as well as nations leaving something behind for the next generation. Not just money, but also something honorable. Not exploitation, but freedom. My goal is to show that the African all over the world, can choose dialogue over rebellion, responsibility over blame, and above all, must free himself from all forms of self-pity and self-exploitation.”

Abe sat down amidst a maddening noise that rose from the Azuala plaza, escaped high above the Iroko trees, over the forests, and cascaded far away into the night sky. Surely the heavens must have heard the applause. Mr. Green was taken away, eventually to be released unharmed. His life had been saved! The celebration and judgment were finally over, and the villagers began to leave.

The black limousine that had parked at the entrance of the plaza revved up its motors and prepared to leave. Mrs. Osondu and a companion, Oga, both got in, and waved goodbye to Abe. Not a single eye was dry in the Azuala plaza. Not since James Osondu was alive had they felt the emotions they felt today. Yes, hope had returned, and was alive and well once again in the poor little village of Azuala. As Mrs. Osondu and Oga sped away in the limousine, Oga wiped the tears from his eyes, and said in his gruff voice:

“I never thought in my wildest dreams that Abuchi Osondu would turn out like this.”

Mrs. Osondu agreed. She had tears in her eyes as well. Her mission of so many years was finally complete. Her beloved husband had been avenged.

And yes—Abuchi Osondu had turned out just fine...

THIRTY-FIVE

"Even though he has visited the ends of the earth, a traveler, Agaracha, must one day return."

Home

The 500 bar was packed. It was new band night again in Old Lake, Minnesota. The *Danshiki* band had graciously accepted a request to play there again, but this time, as a featured band. Except for keeping the thick security detail, Abe had insisted that they keep it simple and play without the big entourage of musicians and roadies that usually followed them. Shawn and Joey were happy to oblige, and they all agreed that it would be fun to go back to where it all began, just like the old days. The only people who accompanied them were Ezra and their manager, Trip McGee.

As they drove to Old Lake in Trip's limousine, they had the radio turned to National Talk Radio, his favorite station. Once again, the announcers were talking about the big story in the music industry. It was the success story of the decade. The story of the young man, who had traveled to Africa a poor orphan, and returned to America, suddenly rich from the creative works of his own hands. The story about a young man, who had gone to find his heritage, but became the leader of a people, and left a selfless legacy of prosperity behind. The story of the young man, who had donated most of his wealth to help his African brethren, only to be serendipitously rewarded when he returned to America.

All the Talk Radio stations and Cable News channels talked about Abe, for he had become an instant national celebrity. They also talked about the story of his friend Ezra, who had finally earned legal permanent residency in America. They talked about Ezra's hilarious country-wide victory celebration tour on an Amtrak train. They also talked about the story of the powerful evidence that had been sent through Abe from the heart of Africa, straight to the CIA, which was instrumental in bringing down an entire oil conglomerate with greedy plans for world domination.

They talked about all these things, but one thing more than any other was of interest to the solemn listeners in the limousine. The announcer talked about how Abe, the lead singer and star attraction of the decade's top new band, had decided, for some unknown reason, that he would take an indefinite leave of absence from the music industry after one last gig at the Old Lake 500 bar.

The word on the street was that he intended to return to complete his legal studies at the University of Minnesota. The radio blared Abe's farewell "I have a Purpose" speech which he delivered to his fans at a concert:

"I have a dream. But more importantly, today my friends, I tell you, I have a purpose. No longer will I gallivant about the world like a chicken with its head cut off! My newfound purpose is to use these talents and gifts that God has given, to spend these last few hours, days, and years, to enlighten my fellow man and fight against our human inequalities the world over. I will educate myself, and I will join those who want a better tomorrow. From the huts of Azuala, to the suburban homes in America, we will join our voices and create a better world where we can all co-exist as one. I will use this music, this legal system, and every fiber of my being to join the chorus of that man who first said: 'I have a dream!' This, my friends, is my Purpose! Yes, I have a dream, but before it is fulfilled, I must seize this calling, and today, I tell you, not only have I recognized my purpose, today, I have decided to BE that purpose!"

Abe relaxed and smiled as the story unfolded. He thought about Africa. He thought about the beautiful people of Azuala. A warm feeling and a smile came to him, and he thought about Ifeoma. *Yes! Tomorrow*

he would give Professor Rafferty a call and enroll to finish his law degree. After that, who knows? He relaxed and smiled again.

He allowed the warm feelings in his heart to take over, and he sighed. He remembered his old fears of failure, his fear that he had no identity, his fears of political marginalization, and he smiled. All the various forms of fear he had were now a distant memory in the wake of the powerful, universally human lessons he had learned in Africa. For once, he had seen human nature at work, he had learned about people, regardless of their color and race. Most of all, he had learned about himself.

Fear of failure was the last emotion on his mind. Fear of acceptance or racial segregation didn't mean a thing to him any more. He was finally free!

Abe closed his eyes. He wondered if Ifeoma was at this very moment cooking a pot of hot *Okra* soup for Papa Umekwe. He felt as warm as the soup in his heart, and thought some more about Ifeoma. He felt goose pimples. Instinctively he glanced up and noticed Ezra who was by now fast asleep on the other side of the stretch limousine. He smiled. *Ezra, the immigration expert!* A strange, affectionate little idea came into his mind. He wondered if maybe Ezra might know a thing or two...about the best strategy to bring a certain young Nigerian lady to America...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pele Raymond Ugboajah is an author, professional speaker, consultant, and principal of InspiroCom, a business consultancy firm.

The first son of Professor Frank Ugboajah and Dr. Sabina Ofoegbu, his earlier years were spent in Nigeria, where he gained a keen appreciation for the wisdom, proverbs, and poetry of the Igbo people. In his spare time, he is a multi-talented artist, songwriter, and music producer, with credits such as the EMI album, “Lovers Again” by legendary crooner Alexander O’Neal.

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