

00:00AM

PROLOGUE

Everyday begins with an act of courage and hope: getting out of bed – Mason Cooley.

I almost didn't come to work today.

Work is at 69 Enwe street, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, a tech-business hub called Hubitz.

And in this one storey structure, I operate in the capacity of a content developer; among other side activities because the company had to retrench some less important staffs. The SMT decided I was important, good for them and me, and here I am, at work and at my desk...developing content.

I tugged the drapes by my desk so I could look at the deserted street below; this was a norm for me, I was inexorably reminding myself that it hadn't always been like this.

Nobody had thought it would get this bad. When the political juggernauts and nuts were going crazy in 2015, nobody had thought it would be this bad. Yet, right before our eyes, it had steadily deteriorated.

It was a miracle that in December, 23, 2018, I still had a job; the pay was a laugh, but I survived on it. As the only tech hub still standing in the state, most tech related projects in government or private enterprises, came to us; but like I said, the economy had so sapped the value of the pay.

I didn't really understand why the private enterprises were bent on enticing a dead public, I wasn't questioning it though, they kept us in jobs and I was thankful...briefly.

I hate my job. No, scratch that, I didn't hate my job; I just didn't give a shit about it any longer. The excitement of creating something new with words had long since dried up, evaporated in the face of the hardship that had befallen the country.

A maximum population of the big cities had migrated to the villages. So the towns were left with criminals, their thugs, middle class workers like us and a handful of cops and soldiers. I refused to add the wealthy because their percentage was so little and unfelt, it seemed as though they didn't exist.

"Meems," I turned away from the dry street below and faced one of my bosses.

"Yes," I sat up and that was as much as I did to show I was eager to work, because I definitely wasn't eager to work.

"I need this typed ASAP," he said and dropped an arranged pile of papers, which I instantly deduced as hours of typing. I nodded, but he was already walking away. He didn't need to see me nod, it was already assumed that I'd do this, I mean, isn't this why I'm paid?

One would think he was rude, but I didn't, I understood that we were under staffed and therefore constantly on a race against time.

While I pulled up my MS Word, I recalled what one of my other bosses had said, "Twenty four hours isn't enough any longer," he'd lamented with his permanent smile.

And speaking of the devil, he approached my desk, and of course, with his smile in tow. The guy couldn't help being nice, and extremely smart as his brain did carry some of the company's weight.

"Hello, lovely Meems," he greeted, increasing the watt of his smile. My reply was to shake my head and flash him a rueful smile.

“How may I help you?” I asked lightly.

“Just some researches, I need them in a few minutes,” he explained with a hopeful look.

“Right, I’ll get on it immediately,” I said, taking the single sheet of paper from him.

“Thanks, Meems,” he threw me another smile before walking away.

These made up the cache of those side activities apart from content development which I did for the company. I ran my eyes down the list and sure enough, they were all tech concepts, no surprise there.

It was mindless work anyway, meaning that when I typed in the search and waited for the results, my mind zoned out and played with an array of unrelated issues...like what I was called.

Meems wasn’t my name but an identifier.

I think it’s right to point out that I hated my name, obviously, that’s why I stopped using it. It was my opinion that it affected my attitude to life adversely.

And so, after quite a nasty breakup, from the arse holes of men, I walked into my office and announced, that from thence I sincerely wished, only to be addressed as Meems.

There had been shocked silence at this; no jokes were made because, despite the sterile environment of our work place, we were a family. This meant they all knew about the distaste I had for my name, long story short, I’m now identified as Meems; it has no meaning, which is the whole idea.

The first search was easy to find, I downloaded several documents on the topic and saved it in a folder; then I typed in the second search.

This meant my mind zoned out while I scored through millions of web results.

Images of the present outlook of the city flashed through my mind; images that concisely reflected the present outlook of the whole country.

The city looked like a grave yard and the harmattan added to the desolate picture. Harsh wind blew across town, raising dust and debris, freely flinging them in a mad waltz on the deserted streets.

Cars barely traversed town, people walked or were lucky to own bicycles, like I did.

It wasn't so much the hardship that had befallen the country as the people's attitudes. They moved around almost catatonic, empty of thoughts and feelings; dead with their eyes open, we had given up.

What was there to fight for, I wondered. Even though work kept coming in at the office, hope had long since been lost; we waited for the inevitability of extinction.

Churches had gone out of business as their messages and words no longer held sway with the masses. And so, gradually they became useless, attendance tapered until it ceased. Thugs and homeless people swooped in and carted away the fancy furnishings found in churches, leaving it empty and presently dilapidated.

Since Uyo had been a city with churches at every corner, it looked as though a special war had been waged against the houses of God. It looked as though a message had been sent by the human race, because the Almighty had abandoned us, with Him out of the way, the church fell.

And with the fall of the church, morality went on sabbatical.

The fabric that held social norms and values had weakened and was at its last threads, threatening the emergence of the ape era. Men would revolve (already it was beginning) into animals with no conscience and no justice.

The city would become a jungle; it already was, I have learnt to be in my house not later than 6:00pm. Evil comes out to play after this time,

crimes couldn't be curbed and the few security men left were only interested in preserving their own lives.

Survival of the fittest was fast becoming popular.

A frown marred my brow as I read something totally unrelated to what I'd searched.

"How did I get here?" I muttered and looked at the browsing bar and the address, it was the same with the name of the site. It said Patheos, and underneath it was written – *hosting the conversation on Faith*.

I shook my head, "No one cares about faith in these times," I murmured and clicked an arrow to take me back a page. After a while and the page was still there, I realized that I had no internet access on my laptop.

I sighed wearily, obviously I was stuck with Patheos for however long it took the internet to right itself; it could be minutes or hours. I sighed again, I was about to switch to MS Word when my eyes caught a sentence.

For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we did not see, we wait for it with patience...

It was a bible verse from Romans and the thought of a bible almost made me chortle. As the churches were gone, so were the bibles, some had even gone the extra mile to burn it openly; the people were too far gone, there was no hope.

With a dismissive snort, I went back to MS Word and began typing. I was soon engrossed in my work, the tingling I had felt in my stomach a few minutes ago had been ignored and assumed a hunger pang. It never occurred to me to wonder how I had gotten to that site.

In fact, just before I'd switched to MS Word, I'd checked for Search Engine Optimized words in my search and none of them fit any words in Patheos. I'd shrugged and chucked it up to the strange machinations of the World Wide Web.

~CHAPTER 1~

Where there's no vision, there's no hope - George Washington Carver

11:58pm

It was an 'hp' Pro Book 4515.

An archaic thing when compared to the new generation laptops produced by companies like Apple and such. The battery was weak and non existence because it only came on if plugged in power; it was a box...at least it looked and felt like one when I logged it to work everyday.

One would wonder why I still used such an outdated laptop when I worked at a tech hub. I lived every day with the fear of its imminent crash; I refused to think of my state of mind when that finally happened.

As a budding insomniac and a bit more than plump babe of thirty, I lay sprawled on my mattress, on the floor, in my room, staring at the glowing numbers of my electronic wrist watch.

Obviously, my mind had zoned out and I casually percolated the fact that another Christmas would pass unnoticed and uncelebrated. Not that I had anything planned, it was just one of those random thoughts that sometimes popped in my head.

The glowing numbers on my electronic wrist watch silently changed to four zeros, indicating a new day, the 24th of December, 2018; same shit, different day, I thought.

That was when it begun.

Once upon a time, we'd had electricity that would last at least two hours in a day. In those times, I'd gotten used to keeping my laptop on my side stool, so I could reach it easily, seeing as I spent a lot of time in bed.

It was on the side stool, when it begun.

My laptop whirred to life, as though someone had turned it on. This was impossible because it would never come on without being plugged in power.

Weird, I thought and sat up slowly.

My eyes were riveted on the laptop, fixedly and, funny enough, I wasn't horror movie scene scared but scared that the time had come for my laptop to crash...and it was doing it in style, apparently.

But then, how did a laptop turn on when the flip was still closed? That question started my heart in heavy thumps, now the horror movie scene scared was creeping in.

As a Nigerian, at this point- midnight, being as superstitious as the rest of the country, I should have been on my way to Malaysia by now, using the speed of Jerry when being pursued by his nemesis, Tom.

But no, surprisingly and quite stupidly as my brain kept screaming, I reached for my whirring laptop and flipped it open. A white person has apparently taken over my body.

It looked like something out of matrix; figures, strange letters and numbers rolled green on my screen. It was senseless but yet it made sense.

I was staring at a message, clouded in instructions. I've never seen these instructions before but it felt like déjà vu, my brain felt numbed with the consciousness that I already had these instructions; now I was only being reminded of them.

A tiny part of my mind that remained reasonable despite present circumstances, wondered how this could be. I was clearly staring at a bunch of rolling numbers and figures that shouldn't mean anything to me. I mean, I wasn't that tech savvy, and I doubted even the tech savvy guys in my office could cypher this.

But it felt like second nature to me, a bunch of strange numbers and figures were instantly deduced into words in my brain; it seemed like a special message scripted personally to me.

And in all of this, I was conscious of the hot light, the blue fire burning in the pit of my stomach. It had begun as a tingle and had slowly bludgeoned into a raging heat.

I didn't know what this meant, I didn't know how I was supposed to accomplish what I'd just been asked, no, directed to do. But I knew I slept at some vague point.

I was conscious of my satisfyingly guttural snore, the type that emanates from deep sleep and the languid change of sleeping position on my mattress.

~*****~

Hope will never be silent – Harvey Milk

6:00 am

My mind woke up first before my eyes.

The strange dream was foremost in my consciousness. Weird, I could recall everything clearly, the message, the instructions and the danger.

That wasn't funny, my heart pounded double time, and then as a certified human being, I sort to deny the truth and turned. I must say that it is both good and bad that the truth has no tongue; good because it gives us great chances to deny obvious truths and bad because it enables us waste precious time in courts.

My laptop lay innocently where I'd left it last night, on the side stool.

The relief was so huge I was instantly pressed. I lay there for a while with a smile on my face, waiting for my racing heart to calm. When it did, a yawn thundered from the recess of my body and plowed out loudly, hand in hand with concentrated morning breath.

It was a satisfying one and it invariably kicked in the stretching instinct. My limbs straightened and shuddered and it was finally time to find a toilet.

Unlike previous days, I actually felt rested and raving with energy. This was as opposed to my usual morning lethargy; where I'd struggle up from the bed, conscious of every jiggle on my fleshy body and promising myself that I'd try some simple exercises one of these days.

Deep down, I knew it'd never happen, when it came to exercises I was habitually lazy.

I approached my door dressed in a sheer cotton knee length pajama bottom and a matching top. I'd purchased this night wear years ago, it was my favorite and assuredly, I've worn it to an inch of its life.

As it was six am and blowing dry and frigid harmattan air, I was sure nobody would venture to the toilets this early.

It is only fair that I describe where I live.

It is a humongous apartment building with four stories containing twelve tiny rooms on each floor. Three toilets and bathroom graced each floor to be shared by twelve tenants, not counting kids, spouses and siblings. It was a kind of building one was wont to find in China.

These styles of building had cropped up over a year after the recession. Retrenched workers were in need of extremely cheap accommodation and the building owners gained from an abundance of tenants; it was a win-win situation.

Except the facilities of course; we had water from rusted pipes once a week, so we had to preserve in gallons and buckets. The toilet basins must have been bought from the black market, because they looked very used and the bathrooms...

Those were just square rooms with holes in the cemented ground. But nobody was complaining.

The corridor that led to the toilet was still dark. I made my way down the silence to the toilet. Surprisingly, it was occupied. Without wasting time, I shifted to the adjoining bathroom, which also was occupied.

The pressure on my bladder increased. I couldn't go to the other two toilets or bathrooms on my floor, the fourth floor by the way, because, apartments were assigned their own facilities.

I knocked again on the bathroom, a bit impatiently.

"I'm through, I'm just waiting for the water to sink," the lady explained.

"I can do that," I immediately offered and she instantly agreed as I heard the bathroom bolt shift.

"Thank you," she said in a sigh and hurried off.

I understood why she was saying thank you. While the toilet bowls were old, the bathroom had not been landscaped to slant, therefore water drained with difficulty. One had to wait and then use a broom to direct the water to the drain.

Shaking my head, I hurried into the bathroom; the water was almost completely drained, so I had just a few minutes of ridiculous dancing before finally relieving my bladder.

"Aaah," I sighed in relief. The pee lazily slid and turned around where I squatted.

"Where is it?"

I heard the whisper, but thought people had begun waking up and a conversation was probably occurring in the corridor.

Shaking my shapely behind to get off rivulet of remnant pee, my buttocks actually brushed a very hairy, very human thing behind me.

A shout got stuck in my throat, I turned as well as pulled up my pajama bottom and was faced with a man...a very hairy man, and it stood out because of his fair skin.

I didn't know all the tenants in my humongous apartment building but I'm sure I've never seen this guy before. Additionally, I wasn't getting a good vibe from him even though he looked pretty harmless and had a benign smile.

While I stared at him with a tentative smile, because he was smiling, my mind zoned off thinking, wondering whether I had locked the bathroom door or not. And if not, why hadn't I heard the door open.

This man was dangerous, my head was suddenly ringing with warning bells; as in, I could actually hear, no, feel the loud chiming of warning bells in my head, it was deafening...strange.

"Where is it? Give it to me," he whispered, his voice was whispery and dry. He extended his hand but came no further.

I shifted backwards and then moved sideways to his left, I could sight the door, all that remained was sidling by him to it.

Every move I made was like a picture in my head...an image of how it should be; strange.

"I don't know what you're asking me," I managed to choke out, shifting again to his left.

I noticed that he'd not approached me. I realized I knew what he was asking me for; and I understood why he refused to approach me, I was standing in my urine and for some unknown reason, it repelled him.

It was a small room and I luckily was close to the broom. I picked it from the wall behind me without taking my eyes off him. I soaked the whole body of the broom, apart from the handle, in my urine. Not my fault, disgusting though it was, but I was just following the images in my head.

His eyes widened but I gave him no time, I sprinkled him with concentrated morning urine and he staggered backwards, using his arm to cover his face. And without wasting time, I fled all the way to my room.

Panic seized me, I was shuddering. I understood the danger, yet I sought to understand why I was in danger in the first place. And in doing so, I roamed my room in a tizzy.

What is going on?

You know what is going on. It has begun, yet you disbelief. Grab the message box and run!

This voice I knew not where it came from, but it was in my head. I was quite suddenly convinced that I was mad. Yet, I approached my laptop, which I understood was the message box.

Was I communicating with aliens?

This thought only increased my panic. The voice said to grab it and run, but to where? And why was I running; had the dream been real?

I gasped and flipped open my laptop and there it was. As real as day, the figures and numbers were still rolling, creating new words I'd not seen in the night.

My eyes bulged and I was quite lucky that broken glass hadn't imbedded in them, for then I'd be blind.

Another man broke through my glass window, right into my room.

I lived on the last floor, how had he managed to dive into my window? I was about to check that possibility out when he dived at me, his shoulder slamming into the soft of my belly and flinging me backwards into my bag of cloths.

Self preservation kicked in, I shoved him off with my new found strength and lunged for the laptop. Slamming it close, I rolled on the bed, landed on my feet and raced for the door.

Mr. Diver just did what he was good at, he dived, grabbed my ankles and I went down unceremoniously. I can't say why I wasn't screaming, at least help would have arrived, right?

Na.

The voice had just replied my thought, and it actually sounded amused; AMUSED! In my head, a voice in my head sounded casual and amused while some man tried to kill me...strange.

This dude was serious and silent, while I breathed loud and groaned in my effort to get away from him. He slowly crawled up my leg, reached out and was about to grab my pajama top when I surged onto my knees. His hand slid and got hooked in the waist of my pajama bottom, I was sure I could feel one of his fingers in the crack of my buttocks.

Disgusting, I thought and wriggled to get his hand off; but it must have shaken free a bulky pocket of fart. And I, without reserve, let it lose.

It was loud, thunderously so and it stank like a skunk. The dude let me go instantly and gagged breathlessly on the floor of my room. I didn't look back, laptop smashed on my braless chest...or bosom, I raced out with a wide grin, my fart had just saved my life.

Stairs...

Yep, on it murphy, I thought as the smile disappeared and fear took over. Confusion was my companion as I raced down the stairs, yet my flashing eyes still detected the rushing up movement, two men were coming up the stairs.

I just knew they weren't good people, so I reversed immediately and ran along the corridor of the third floor. One advantage of this humongous apartment building I just discovered, was the many stair cases one could use.

Surprisingly though, the same guys from the other stair case were still approaching up this one. How was that even possible?

In desperation I flew into a tenant's room and he was having breakfast. I expected him to lift his face in shock but the man remained catatonic.

Surprise, surprise, two dark men were already waiting in there for me.

These ones wasted no time, they attacked.

Cornering me to a wall, I screamed at the tenant to help me, there was no reaction; and I realized why the voice in my head had replied negative to help.

These men were like specters. They clawed at the laptop wrapped tightly in my arms but their touches were like wisps...air but shocked like electricity.

The other two arrived from the stairs and I was faced with four guys, all looking determined, ferocious and very, very quiet.

Where they like dumb?

Devil's agents

OH MY GOD!

My eyes widened and my panic sky rocketed, this wasn't a joke. Fear brought out the fight in me, I ploughed through them, they grabbed my weak night wear and clawed at my fingers to let go the laptop; I spasmed every time they touched me, electricity spiked through my veins.

Doggedly, I held on; fell down when I was pushed and got angry, as in, really pissed. The laptop came off my body and I used it as a batting ram, I smashed it into the face and head of the closest dude...continuously, until he fell.

The same was meted out to the others, I rushed off the floor and should have run out the room, but I stopped by the tenant's table, he'd been having quite a sumptuous meal before he was paused.

"Why didn't you help when I called?" I asked stupidly even though I wasn't expecting an answer. I looked down his plate, found three pieces of goat liver, I love liver which is the only excuse I could come up with for shoving all of it into my mouth before racing out.

Don't judge, one must eat where ever in these times.

Over the balcony

What? No! I thought and raced to the stairs...they were every where.

Jump over the balcony

I reversed and approached another side of the stairs, same thing, in fact they seemed more; yet I ignored my head voice, fear taking hold of me.

Just believe...

“Not happening, murphy,” I vocalized in a shaky voice.

Yet, they sound of many steps running up the stairs, both stairs, sounded like the approach of doom. I began crying, without realizing what I was doing, I took four steps backwards and raced towards the balcony, closing my eyes in the last minute while I flung myself over it...three stories down.

I felt weightless, my stomach lurched frightfully into my throat, I was sure I was going to die; the laptop remained tightly grasped in my folded arms.

I listened to hear screams of shocked people, but the rush of air in my ear must have blocked it, because I heard nothing else. I began feeling my weight again and I knew I was close...

I landed, quite painfully on the roof of a car. A CAR!

Nobody owned a car in the whole of that humongous apartment building. Where did this one come from? I thought as I realized I'd not settled. The force of collision bounced my body like a plastic doll; my weight was totally of no help at this point as I hurtled over the roof of the car.

I shut my eyes and braced myself for the rough landing on the hard ground. But I hurtled right into the arms of the last man on earth.

Let's just say, I would have preferred the hard ground; especially, but not limited to the fact that I was completely naked under my flimsy pajamas.

~CHAPTER 2~

Hope lies in dreams, in imagination, and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality – Jonas Salk

6:39 am

Who would have thought it?

He certainly wouldn't have.

It was unbelievable, especially as the day had begun as usual and as boring as possible. No strange dreams, nothing. He'd woken up, said his prayers even though that was out of fashion these days and prepared himself for work.

Nothing in the day had indicated that in the forty minutes since waking up, he'd have the woman of his dreams in his arms.

As in, literally, he'd dreamt about her for years; and had been seeking her friendship for that long. And as literal as can be explained, she had fallen into his arms. He looked down and saw her cowering, and shaking, her arm wound tight about an archaic laptop.

And as a certified man, not minding the strangeness of the situation, he was quick to notice the heavy curve of the side of her breast, pressed on his chest. His right forearm was under her thighs but wedged against the underside of her bottom, his left arm, wound about her waist.

Gabriel curbed his base instincts and looked down at the woman; his woman.

“Hey,” he said slowly, concern laced his deep voice.

She whimpered fearfully, “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she kept whispering, one of her arms rounding his neck and holding on tightly, her eyes were equally tightly shut.

Despite her snide thoughts just moments ago, Meems had never been so grateful for a guy she'd actively hated and his car. She wasn't sure her heart would ever beat at a normal pace again; seeing as since she'd woken up, things were happening to keep it racing.

Meems tried to calm her breath, and in the process she inhaled the warm scent of deodorant mingled with man scent. The heat in her stomach roared and spread through every part of her body.

What now, she thought and raised her head to look at the man that had saved her life. The warm gaze of concern was so intense her breath got stuck in her throat; in an alternate universe, this moment would be called love at first sight.

But the snag here was, she'd been seeing him for years and as a rich kid, which she knew wasn't his fault, still, she'd actively expressed her distaste for him and his wealth on behalf of all the poor people in Uyo and in extension, Africa.

"Are you okay?" he asked, and she shivered in shameless pleasure as his voice rumbled through his body, vibrating directly in her core.

Meems stared at him and swallowed.

"You just fell from three stories," he said with a combination of worry and consternation.

Right, she thought, waking from her stupor. In the short while she'd been staring into his eyes, she'd forgotten that satan's minions were after her.

Gabriel said this and looked up to be sure he'd not just imagined the scary sight of her falling...not falling, he recalled, she'd jumped over the balcony.

What would make a woman do that?

Just then he felt it and stiffened reflexively, his arms tightening protectively around her.

The balcony was empty of humans but there was a heavy pressure, something definitely evil pressed down from up there. He didn't know what it was, but his instinct at the moment was to flee.

Meems followed his gaze and gasped in blatant terror, her eyes widening so much she was sure they were saucers.

They were everywhere, and they crawled like bugs down the building wall, obviously towards her. She jerked, an indication that she wished to be dropped, but he didn't.

As though understanding the need to flee, he tightened his arm around her and shoved her into his Fore Runner through the already opened door of the driver's side.

Meems did the rest, she scooted to the passenger's side and watched as Gabriel effectively reversed the car, raising dust as he braked and jerked forward with a speed that'd be considered lawless if there were any laws.

~*****~

Hope is independent of the apparatus of logic – Norman Cousins

“WHAT IS GOING ON?” he asked in a near shout.

Would he believe me if I told him?

Yeah

Hey there, how have you been? I sarcastically asked the voice in my head.

“Excuse me, what?” Gabriel asked, his gaze when it settled on me was confused.

I didn't realize I'd spoken out loud, now he'd think I'm mad. I think I'm mad. When and if I explained my day to him, he'd think I'm insane. Besides, I don't want to converse with the enemy.

You mean rich kid

Not talking to you.

“Will you stop whispering,” he said in exasperation, while still driving and looking behind through his rear view mirror; my eyes hadn’t left the side mirror on the passenger’s side.

Tell him and save time

“I’ve been chased by those men since this morning...”

“Wait, what men?”

My eyes finally left the side mirror, to stare at him impatiently.

“You did notice the men on the wall, right?”

“What men?” he asked in a hard voice. His expression was reminiscent of a person who was angry for being accused wrongly.

“But...but you were looking up, and they...oh God, there were crawling like bugs,” I squeezed my face in disgust.

But that of Gabriel was disbelieving, “Bugs,” he said for clarification. “I don’t understand.”

I told you he wouldn’t, I whispered to my head voice with relish that I’d been right.

Give him a chance

He’s a rich kid, they aren’t always smart.

“Is that what you think?” Gabriel joined the conversation in a snit. “Who are you even talking to?” he was frowning.

“A voice in my head,” I replied with a smile, hoping to shock him. I was disappointed, he just nodded, faced the road and looked grim.

“Am I the topic of conversation?” he asked a moment later.

I turned and studied his very handsome profile. “Sort of, you did come up,” I said casually.

Even though I was expecting to see the minions appear suddenly, either behind or in front of us, as in the movies, I felt extremely safe with him. No, I wasn’t going to analyze why this was so, but would actively enjoy it.

Gabriel sighed wearily, his lips twitched in a rueful smile.

I was conversant with that smile, it was the same one everyday, all year round, I got when I snapped and refused his request to be friends. He probably thought I was pulling his legs or just being difficult as was my usual reaction to him.

“What’s with the laptop?”

“The men from the balcony want it and they seem ready to kill for it,” I announced.

“What’s in it?” he asked without the importance I accorded the situation, and it made me pissed.

“Do you think this is a joke?” I snapped and unbidden tears clouded my eyes. “I just flew over a balcony for crying out loud!”

“Am I laughing? I just don’t understand what’s going on,” he snapped back.

“You’ll never believe me,” I griped, wiping my tears and feeling angry at my loss of control.

“Try me,” he said.

“You won’t get it,” I snapped.

“Because I’m a dumb rich kid?”

When he put it that way, it sounded bad, but I wasn’t backing down, “Something like that.”

Silence reigned in the car, then he surprised me, “What does the voice in your head say?”

“What?” I was shocked.

“What does the voice in your head say?” he insisted.

You’ve wasted enough time

“It defends you,” I grumbled unhappily.

“There you go,” he said and flashed me a grin so boyish I almost smiled back; he was so adorable.

I shook my head and ordered myself to focus. “Right, but first, I need a change of clothes,” I said, not knowing how that was going to happen but I demanded it anyway.

You are impossible!

The voice actually sounded pissed, I smiled. If I’m going to be doing what I don’t understand under duress, it would be on my own terms; that’s with clothes.

~CHAPTER 3~

Courage is like love, it must have hope for nourishment –
Napoleon Bonaparte

8:11 am

Gabriel silently reiterated that the day hadn't given any indication he'd be embroiled in weirdness and most importantly, with the woman of his dreams.

He'd known her for years, in his dreams they were already married. And so, this conviction made him pursue her with vigor.

She in turn rejected him just as vigorously.

Every morning, he positioned himself on her path to work and always offered her a ride. She'd been affronted that he'd even speak to her and now he knew she regarded him as a rich kid and hated him for that.

This knowledge didn't curb his excitement in having had her in his arms. He was yet to know her name and he swore to himself that he'd know more about her by the end of the day.

But at the moment, strangeness shrouded her and he wasn't a stranger to strangeness; usually though, it gave some sort of warning, a harbinger of its occurrence. Not this one, no bell had dinged to announce this day. And he couldn't forget the strange pressure he'd felt coming from the building.

Was that the moment men were crawling down like bugs? He'd know soon enough; he actively ignored how sinister the whole situation felt.

He sighed, paused in his path and scanned the market named after the village, Afaha. It used to be popular and packed on a normal market day, now only a handful of traders marked the dry and extremely sandy market space with hollow looking empty stalls.

One could find anything in Afaha market, and he knew this because his mother had dragged him along as a young adult. Consequently, he'd learned to bicker and purchase things like any consummate house wife.

His dream woman needed clothes and undies and he knew the woman to help. The problem was, he was having difficulty breathing after he'd heard the size of her bra; it was good though that he didn't need much concentration to meander through the almost deserted market.

Forty-two double D, she'd said under her breath, extremely embarrassed at having to give him this information. If only she knew, her embarrassment was fickle, because from then, his eyes just kept unconsciously returning to her chest.

Gabriel's mind wouldn't stop creating scenarios which had him buried in between her twin bulbs of paradise. He had a break when he finally reached his mother's customer and purchased the undies.

The woman's face, weathered with hardship, didn't register any surprise. He knew that she knew that even if his mother was on the plump side, her bra size definitely wasn't as large as what he'd requested.

She collected her money and then helped him select a free sized, draw-string jean and a t-shirt, but then got confused when he couldn't find anybody selling shoes.

The woman informed him that the people he saw in the market were those still trying to sell off their old stock, or people who dealt in stolen merchandize.

Gabriel nodded in understanding and thanked her before leaving; she asked him to make sure he greeted his mother for her, of course he nodded in acquiesce. He'd known that woman for a long time and he'd known that no matter the situation her goods were always sold out due to its good quality and fair price.

This nugget of information pointed to the fact that his mother's customer obviously dealt in stolen merchandize. Right, he thought, to every man

his own, the economy certainly was to blame. But there was no way he was relaying this news to his woman, he didn't know if she was squeamish, but he wasn't willing to find out. Nobody will be comfortable wearing possibly stolen clothes, at least without first washing them.

When he got to the car, he discovered she'd been whispering again, apparently conversing with the voice in her head.

"I couldn't find shoes," he announced and she jerked in a start, looking frightened.

"You scared me," she murmured when she found out it was him. Her arm still held the laptop as she nodded to his information about shoes.

"Sorry," Gabriel apologized and handed the cellophane to her.

Now the awkward moment arrived when she'd have to change. Meems swallowed her embarrassment and stepped out of the car, only to climb into the back seat.

Awkward silence reigned as she pulled out the clothes; Gabriel cleared his throat and turned, backing the steering wheel as he stared off into the bush beside the car.

"I thought I'd dreamt it, but it had happened. My laptop was closed but it turned itself on, which was strange, because it's an old device with a faulty battery, there was no way it could come on without power."

This was the beginning of her weird story. A story that sounded vaguely familiar as she told it; familiar like a movie he'd watched or a book he'd read...or a familiar dream. And strangely, like a long forgotten story, he knew the next step in the story before she told him.

"I felt the pressure," he informed her when she spoke about the crawling men.

“That was why you shoved me in your car and fled,” she finally understood why he’d acted alert while claiming he’d not seen the crawling men.

Her eyes feasted on the broadness of his shoulders as he studied his shoe. She was completely dressed now with no shoes, but that wasn’t the main issue presently.

At that moment, she realized that Gabriel had actually caught the whole of her one hundred and five pounds, if not more, in his arms.

It occurred to her that he was her dream man. She’d always had this fantasy that her husband would be able to carry her over the threshold, to bed or just for a romantically fun spin.

He could carry her!

Focus!

Meems ignored the voice and furtively studied the bulge of his muscles in his navy blue long sleeve shirt. She was tingling all through when she realized he possessed the light skin complexion she so favored in a man.

Not the right time

It was a warning.

Meems ignored it again and stepped out of the car with the intention of actually studying his face; her heart began pounding but not in fear. In excitement, of course he was handsome with his expressive eyes and thick eye brows and crew cut and chin beard, shaved low and neat.

Gabriel looked up and found her studying him, their eyes held and the connection was electric. They both felt it, the air crackled with undeniable intensity.

“It fits,” Gabriel said gruffly and straightened, his heart beating so fast, he was tempted to reach up and pat his chest to calm it down.

Oh God, not now

The voice sounded frustrated but she didn't care, this was new, she'd never felt anything like it before. The fire in the pit of her stomach she'd associated with the message box, was now an inferno in her veins.

It was exhilarating; it made her feel that anything was possible.

Meems looked down at her clothes unseeingly when he commented on them. The bra was perfect, the shirt too and she was grateful that the jean was attractively snug about the hips; her feminine vanity had suddenly emerged.

"Thanks," she whispered and contained her smile, she actually wanted to grin.

"I have an extra pair of trainers in the boot of my car," he still sounded gruff, so he cleared his throat and went to the back of the car.

"So," he called out casually from the boot of his car as he reached for the shoes. "What's your name?"

There was a pause of silence where Gabriel refused to retract him self from the boot of his car. He waited with bated breath as he wondered if she'd reply or wave him off with snide words as she usually did.

"I'm identified as Meems," she said, sounding defensive.

Her choice of words and tone of voice immediately worried him. He retracted his body instantly and faced her.

"Identified?"

"I dumped my name."

"Why?"

"It was of no use to me."

"Right, I hope it fits," he said as though she'd just not been weird, the sizzling connection had evaporated. She didn't want it to but not even that strange decadence would make her say her name; as far as she was concerned, it was an abomination.

Gabriel handed over the shoes and wondered if this was worse than the snide remarks she usually gave him. Trying to be positive, he shrugged, at least he had something to call her.

So what now? Meems desolately thought as she tied the laces on the second shoe.

Ibesikpo

“Ibesikpo,” Gabriel blurted out, totally shocking himself and her...and Meems.

She must have spoken aloud again. “What...how did you know to say that?” she choked in her speed to speak.

Gabriel shrugged, “How do you mean? My cousin lives there and I think he can help us,” he explained.

“Your cousin...the voice in my head just mentioned Ibesikpo and you said the same thing just seconds apart,” she seemed freaked out.

“It’s a coincidence,” he said and waved her into the car.

“A coincidence,” she said in a blatantly disbelieving tone, but still climbed into the car, the shoe felt comfortable.

“The shoe good?” he asked as he turned the ignition.

“Yes,” she replied breathlessly, laptop back in her arm. “How...?”

“You had breakfast?” he cut her off again.

“I haven’t had the time,” she replied sarcastically because she knew he was interrupting her on purpose.

Gabriel grinned at her frustration and her heart skipped at the beautiful picture he made. But then she had to know how he knew the word in her head.

In due time

“Seriously, how...?”

“We’ll eat on the way,” he informed her and drove without looking at her.

“You’re doing that on purpose,” she accused.

“And I can do it all day, baby.”

The gravely voice he used in calling her baby melted her limbs. She’d have done anything he asked just so he’d call her baby again and in the exact sexy tone.

“Oh well,” she sighed and stared off for a while, for about twenty minutes.

“What does your cousin know?” she asked in a whisper unexpectedly.

Gabriel smiled and knew he’d been had; she’d patiently waited to sneak in her question. He didn’t want to call her out on it though, he liked that she was that good, that smart, it thoroughly tickled his fancy. He couldn’t wait for future years of doing this, and with that thought, he answered her in a pleased tone.

“Everything.”

~CHAPTER 4~

The world is bad, but not without hope – Friedrich Durrenmatt

11:43 am

Gabriel's cousin was on the wrong side of the law.

Since there were barely laws these days, the alternative sentence would be – Gabriel's cousin was a bad man.

Uto, as Gabriel addressed him, lived in a fenced round palace complete with a small school of rough looking thugs.

His looks were a far cry from Gabriel's handsomeness, in fact, there was no resemblance vaguely alluding they were related.

The guy was a poster child for bad. I know there have been academic arguments about looks not necessarily being a reflection of a person's character; but standing in that richly furnished hall, which was Uto's sitting room, I had to agree that his looks so fit his person.

Gabriel had given me a low down about his cousin. The house he lived in was actually the palace of the paramount ruler which he'd commandeered.

He was involved in arms dealing, with politicians being his major customers. He was also a pimp, controlling prostitutes both old and as young as ten.

I had grimaced at that information but it didn't stop Gabriel, he continued, and told me that the prostitution ring was actually doing well, seeing as his cache of women and girls came from the environs of Ibesikpo.

The girls were either kidnapped or came willingly. But willingly was mostly the case because the economy had necessitated survival.

From Gabriel's little story, his cousin was just a regular crime boss; his fingers dipped in everything bad. So, I wondered how he was supposed to help me.

Patience

I'm trying, I consciously thought, it wouldn't do to unconsciously speak out my conversation with the head voice while waiting in Uto's palace.

"Long time, cousin," he said, grinning and looking like the consummate host.

"You could say that," Gabriel replied and looked up like I did at that moment to find a stream of thugs trickling into the sitting room.

My heart lurched and once again I wondered if we'd done the right thing by coming here. No offence, but Uto looked like one that would rather work hand in hand with the devil than save a person in trouble.

His eyes then flicked to me and slowly, very slowly examined my body. My skin crawled, it felt like a thousand worms were languorously creeping on me. I tried to swallow my fear and in the end, I shifted uncomfortably, a bit closer to Gabriel.

As though in understanding of my discomfort, he placed his hand on my knee, and miraculously, the crawling sensation stopped. And momentarily, Uto's eyes snapped to Gabriel's, it wasn't a friendly or familial look.

Could he...

Yes

Oh God, I thought, Gabriel's cousin was really bad news. How do I tell Gabriel of this now? I worried and consequently, I bit my lower lips.

Uto's eyes snapped to me again and a gleam instantly lighted in them.

"I could do that for you, sweetheart," he murmured and slowly licked his disgustingly heavy lips.

“Uto...,” Gabriel’s tone carried a warning, his hand on my knee tightening enough to cause pain.

“Ah, cousin, I see you’ve found yourself a keeper,” he commented, yet didn’t look at him, but maintained his gaze on me.

I was frozen on his luxurious leather seat which had once belonged to the paramount ruler; I looked like a squirrel caught in the glare of headlights.

“That’s not the issue,” Gabriel said with a raised eye brow.

And even though he hadn’t mentioned it, obviously to curb any fears I might develop, I realized Gabriel and his cousin weren’t best of friends. The tension in the room emanating from both of them was intensely suffocating.

“And what is the issue, cousin?” this time their relationship sounded sardonic in his tone.

As a fast learner and a damned good observer, I had also gleaned that in an effort to intimidate Gabriel, Uto had called in his thugs. The mean looking men sat or stood around, all of them displaying varied weapons, all deadly; there was no way we were leaving here without a fight.

That’s true

Oh God, I lamented fearfully and twisted the handle on the knapsack Gabriel had provided for the laptop.

My eyes glanced sideways at Gabriel when he didn’t answer immediately. My heart plummeted when I noticed his uncertainty; we were so dead.

“She saw the Prophecy, Uto,” he finally said in a curiously compassionate tone, my eyes glanced sideways again.

What prophecy, I wondered, what was he talking about? But there was no way I was asking that question out loud at that moment, I wanted to remain as quiet as a mouse, maybe, just maybe I’d be forgotten.

After the slight silence that ensued, Uto burst into laughter. It was loud, robust and extremely sarcastic.

“You’re still on that, cousin?”

“I’m serious, Uto.”

“Yes, as always,” he chuckled. “I recall your seriousness landed you in a rehab years ago,” he said this pointedly.

I should have controlled my reflex but I didn’t, my neck snapped sideways, bringing my shocked gaze to Gabriel, he didn’t return it.

“I see you didn’t tell her,” Uto scoffed and leaned back on the couch opposite us and proceeded to light a wrap of marijuana; MARIJUANA in a sitting room!

Confusion permeated my mind. I didn’t know what to focus on; a surprise, seeing as I was an expert in multi-tasking, but not at that moment. The facts were too much to mull over, they were too shocking to take in and I struggled to breathe as the cloying smell of marijuana and smoke filled the parlor.

Apparently, Gabriel knew more than he had let on about my situation. And nobody had believed him in some time past and had ended up in rehab, which I was sure was mental.

Was I depending on a crazy person?

No

That was comforting then, I thought sarcastically.

I wondered why I knew so much, yet seemed to know nothing at all. I didn’t know whether to be angry with Gabriel for bringing me to Uto’s palatial den, blind, without knowing all the facts; I swallowed my anger, conscientiously preserving it for when we left this place alive...if we left this place alive.

“Uto, you have to believe me, it’s true,” Gabriel pleaded.

“I believed you then, but like I’d advised then, cousin, let it go. You landed in rehab because you hadn’t listened to me. I was wise to hide my knowledge.”

“You saw it too; you know this is no joke.”

“But I’m laughing cousin.”

“Why Uto? I get it that we were young then and afraid of being stigmatized, what’s holding you back now?” Gabriel actually sounded angry and threatening, and the quiet thugs only had to shift in their stance, exposing their weapons, a message for Gabriel to calm his temper.

Uto stared at Gabriel like one would a naïve kid, “You were always so good; always wanting to save the world. I guess that’s why you became a cop,” he sneered.

HE WAS A COP?!

Was there anything I knew about this guy? How could I have imagined he was my dream man? Anger rolled in my chest, clamoring to get out.

In the past, I would have given him the benefit of the doubt, *patiently* waiting for an explanation that might never come. In the past, this oversight, his oversight, wouldn’t have been an issue; but it was a big issue now, this was life and death.

“Uto...”

“Like you said, we aren’t kids any longer. And I don’t live in the dream world like you obviously still do. I deal with the harsh reality of life. Of sweat, of blood, of tentative agreements and betrayals and ultimately, of death!” he ended vehemently.

“I do not deal in dreams, cousin. I have a chosen path.”

“What are you saying?” Gabriel asked impatiently, and it was a good question. Because, apart from the fact that terror was about to press

urine out of me, I really needed to understand what Uto's rant involving blood and death meant for us.

"Even your father hadn't believed you..."

"This is all history, Uto," Gabriel interrupted harshly.

"...then, but I guess the madness had grabbed him too," Uto continued as though his cousin hadn't spoken.

"Wait..."

"So I guess you are your father's son after all."

"What are you saying? You know my father was against those dreams being spoken of and there's no point bringing him into this conversation," Gabriel looked really angry.

Uto laughed in his face, "Oh cousin," he said on a heave. "I'm going to tell you something that you're ignorant about. Your father believed in those dreams later, I don't know why, maybe he'd had his own," he said and shrugged.

"I also don't know why he'd not told his family, but I knew because, well, I know things. Anyway, your dad took things a little further and involved his former army buddies, last I heard, there was a sort of bunker built in the forest bordering the Ikot Abasi beach."

My mental image viewer was instantly activated at the mention of the beach. It was so sudden and so clear it felt like I was there; I could even perceive the green foliage surrounding me.

Terror grasped my heart in a tight fist, my heart rose and fell and I was on the verge of having a major freak out when the vision vanished. My eyes scanned the room, fearfully wondering if anyone had noticed my reaction.

None

Oh thank God.

“Fantastic story, Uto, very fantastic,” Gabriel was being sarcastic. “You didn’t have to go that far, you could have just insisted on not being interested and it would have been fine.”

“Get up, babe,” he ordered me, grabbing my arm anyway and pulling me up with him.

Uto laughed again and this time it sounded sinister, my intestines twisted, he really was going to fuck us up.

“Why would I tell tall tales, cousin? What do I have to lose? Nothing,” he answered his own question. And as casually as possible, he stood, which meant, his army of thugs stood too.

Oh we were so dead.

Not necessarily

Not necessarily?! Are you serious right now? How is ‘not necessarily’ comforting? I thought all this questions with bulging, terrified eyes.

“Whatever, we’ll just be on our way then,” Gabriel tried to sound reasonable, because he’d also recognized the danger we were currently facing.

Uto scoffed, “You’ll just be on your way? Just like that?” he chuckled, it seemed the concept of us leaving had cracked a well of humor in him.

“I just gave you the address to the next step of your journey and you want to just leave.”

“I get it, Uto, you aren’t interested, there’s no need to be crass about it,” Gabriel said and looked grim. “Besides, the story isn’t true.”

It is true, I thought, but didn’t know how to inform him. Besides, I was still angry at him...somewhere under the pile of terror in my stomach anyway.

“Believe what you will, cousin, but I can’t let you leave,” he said it so calmly it might have been a joke.

“I’m sorry I bothered you, but you can’t hold us against our will,” Gabriel pointed out, his hand never leaving my arm.

“Oh yes, I can,” he said with so much unreserved glee. “There’s only two of you,” he pointed at us and then waved at his army, “I have a legion,” he whispered sinisterly.

“But I just want to leave.”

“If I let you leave, you’ll destroy everything.”

“But we want to save it!” Gabriel exclaimed, his expression said his cousin’s comment was preposterous.

“Exactly.”

“What?”

“You save it, you’ll destroy all of this,” his hand once again waved to encompass the room.

While we stood, dumb founded, trying to understand what he’d just said, Uto struck unexpectedly with lightening fast movements, grabbing a hand of the knapsack and dragged.

Instinctively, my hand tightened on its hold and I equally dragged the bag.

Before any of his thugs or Gabriel could react, an arrow, yes, A **FREAKING ARROW** penetrated Uto’s neck from the left side and busted through on the right.

Blood splashed on me and my mouth opened in a silent scream. I couldn’t move, I watched him until he fell backwards. I watched him until Gabriel plowed me to the ground the same moment an object whistled by my face.

“Are you okay?”

~CHAPTER 5~

Extreme hopes are born from extreme misery - Bertrand Russell

1:58 pm

Was I okay?

Would anyone be okay?

I just watched a man die with an arrow through his neck.

Curiously though, I was conscious of hunger pangs, the bread and soft drink we'd had for breakfast must have digested.

That could happen to anybody who'd just been through the exhausting conversation we'd just had with Uto.

The very dead Uto.

I was conscious of my mind zoning out, presently I wondered why I'd not felt any pain when Gabriel had ploughed me to the ground.

"Baby, hey, Meems...baby, don't zone out on me," he whispered urgently, shaking me.

I first frowned because I wondered how he'd known I'd zoned out. And then my lips twitched, he'd called me baby again.

"Jesus, Meems, not the time," Gabriel said, he leaned over me and struggled to unstuck something from something I was lying on.

I wasn't totally zoned out because I lifted myself then to enable him pull out whatever he'd been trying to get, it helped, then I went to lie back again but he wouldn't let me.

I frowned and that's when I saw the gun in his hand.

"You need to snap out of it, babe," he said tersely. Then in an act of pure impatience, he slapped me...hard.

I reacted to the sting of the slap like an ear unblocking after being water logged for a while, in other words, I snapped out of my shock.

I snapped out of it right into action. I struggled up, the knapsack still tightly held in my hand. I snapped and my ear opened, all this while, gun shots were sounding loudly around me and I heard them now.

Gabriel had ploughed us into a corridor off the sitting room, and when I stumbled backward in my haste to stand, my leg hit a dead weight. He steadied me, while I turned and saw the arrow imbedded the body of one of Uto's thugs.

My body jerked, my breath hitched, I was about to scream and Gabriel obviously knew this because he slammed his large palm over my mouth. I had no choice but to swallow my scream. I have to say, swallowing a loud scream isn't fun.

I hyperventilated, my eyes bulging out of their sockets as I stared at Gabriel, my terror was obvious.

"Babe, please, you need to get a hold of yourself," he whispered urgently.

How was I supposed to do that with a bloodied dead body wedged against my Achilles heel? I continued hyperventilating; tears brimmed and fell from my eyes.

This made Gabriel look frustrated, I watched him even through the tears, breathe deep and curb his issues, something I needed to emulate. Then he used his hand holding the gun to pull me into a hug, leaving his mouth close to my ear.

"Baby, I know you're scared," he began slowly, "I am too, but we need to help each other. Those things, the devil's minions, they are here and they are making quick work of Uto's men, with arrows," he added as an after thought.

My eyes widened.

“I’m hoping this corridor leads to another door which will take us outside...”

My vehement nod interrupted him.

“Will you scream?”

No, I shook my head.

He slowly pulled his hand from my mouth; his eyes conveyed his concern for me. His hand slid to my cheek and cupped it tenderly, his eyes staring deeply into mine.

“We’ll be fine,” he encouraged and as unexpectedly as a fart that comes with a sudden laugh, he swooped down and kissed me; it was fast, hard and alluringly wet.

I could feel my brain rolling in my head. I hadn’t recovered from that, oh so lovely kiss when he dragged me by my wrist into the recess of Uto’s palace.

I have no idea how he found his way, but in a matter of minutes we were outside. I hefted the knapsack over a shoulder and was surprised to feel it suddenly being wrenched from behind.

I screamed without even knowing the danger, Gabriel turned, he forcefully pulled me to him and in consequence the fellow dragging my bag. I saw his arm swipe an arc over my head and I heard the loud blast of the gun.

I shouldn’t have looked but I did, Gabriel had shot the guy in the face; as in, right in the spot between the eyes at close range, and since he’d done it twice, the ridge of his nose was destroyed. He’d certainly need plastic surgery in the after life.

I gagged at the sight, Gabriel dragged me along, and we started running. The sound of the gun shot had ceased every other sound, and then the familiar sound of running footsteps emerged in the silence.

Gabriel had his key out and beeped the locks of his car, we separated and flew to our separate doors, wrenching them open and jumping in. The ignition fired up and just as he was about to jerk forward, the back glass shattered.

We both instinctively lowered our heads, Gabriel silently, I with a squeal. He tightened his jaw determinedly, looked back and reversed on speed, the distance was short when I heard and felt him hit a bump and climb over it.

He had hit one of the minions I supposed, my eyes slid fearfully to study his profile, he was a different person entirely. I was seeing a warrior totally invested in protecting a future he believed in; he was scary at that moment.

“Seatbelt, babe,” he directed curtly.

I did as I was told and realized why I needed a seatbelt in the second it took to engage it. Gabriel pressed down on his accelerator, the needle of the speedometer swayed drunkenly to 200; my stomach lurched anxiously.

Without flinching, I must have flinched for both of us, Gabriel rammed his car through the gate. The Fore Runner took off one side of the gate from its hinges and we were road bound again.

~CHAPTER 6~

If it weren't for hopes, the heart would break – Thomas Fuller

2:28 pm

We'd been driving for thirty minutes without a word.

I'm guessing we needed time to percolate what had just happened.

For me, I fixed my eyes on the side view mirror, having set it to reflect the back and continued to wonder how the minions had found us even out of town.

I imagined Gabriel was thinking of how true his cousin's story about his dad had been. It then occurred to me that I should tell him.

"It's true," I said, not turning to look at him. "Uto's story is true."

He didn't answer immediately, "I know."

"You do?" I turned then to gaze at his grim profile. "How?"

"He's been travelling a lot and has barely been home," he ground out angrily.

I supposed he had a right to be angry at his dad. From the story, he obviously had made Gabriel feel insane and had turned around and believed what he'd insisted be disbelieved. As a human being, Gabriel might not be smarting about being called crazy or treated as one, but, he'd be pissed because his dad hadn't called him to say he'd been right all along.

"So, what are we going to do now?" I asked quietly.

"We are going to find the bunker," he ground out again, his hand tightening on the steering.

“So, you know where it is?” He’d better know, because I didn’t, one picture didn’t make a map.

“I don’t.”

His reply was curt, I didn’t want to sound like an insistent five year old but there was no helping it.

“So, how are we getting there, if you don’t know the way?”

His hand tightened again, he was really angry. “My dad should have something in his study.”

“Should, like you aren’t sure?” he was taking us back into the mouth of the beast, in Uyo, on a whim?

Gabriel groaned as though controlling himself, “Babe,” was the only thing he said and his tone was warning, plus he called me babe. The effect was always the same, it melted my limbs and gave me gushy feelings in my stomach.

“It’s okay,” I sighed in mock exasperation and leaned back tiredly on the seat, leaving him to his thoughts. I hoped he was right.

He’s on point

~*****~

Hope is patience with the lamp lit - Tertullian

2:49 pm

In 2016, Ifa and its neighboring villages had basically been virgin lands; this meant that people were just beginning to buy and develop lands at the time, consequently expanding the Uyo metropolis.

His father had joined the rush and had gotten several different plots of land. And when the recession had necessitated cheap apartment

buildings, a friend had advised his dad to build the humongous apartment buildings which had begun trending.

Gabriel had followed in his father's footsteps and had ended up building where Meems lived. He had not been proud of the house because he believed he would have done better, but with the extreme rise in prices and the unavailability of bathroom and toilet fixings, his contractor had forced him to purchase fairly used ones from defunct hotels.

He had no idea how that had been managed; he'd only paid and ascertained that the fixed toilets and bathrooms in his building were working.

Though the streets were free, in fact deserted, hitting Uto's gate off its hinges had taken a toll on his car. He'd spent a long time on the road before getting into their neighborhood. He'd have to take his father's Infiniti when going to Ikot Abasi, the tank was always full; in fact all their tanks never lacked fuel, his father had affiliations with the high and mighty in government. That was one of the reasons he'd shut him up about the dreams, it would have been a scandal.

Shaking his head, he refused to think in that line.

Due to his work, it had been convenient to stay at his parent's home, even though he had a different apartment at the back, separate from his parents' building. But the house was situated in the same neighborhood as his cheap apartment building.

It had also made it easy to confirm everyday that Meems wasn't a figment of his imagination like he'd once been made to believe about the other dreams. Even though she'd continuously rebuffed him, he'd been happy to just hear her snide remarks, see her ride away on her bicycle and he'd be ready for the day.

Although, when he'd arrived the building this morning, he could have parked outside the gate, seeing as he'd not wanted to waste time in his meeting with the caretaker. But he'd driven in and had been in time to save Meems.

He wondered what her real name was and he wondered what would have made her not want her name. He could have checked the tenants' register for her name but he'd held onto a romantic hope that she'd tell him at some point.

Her lips were imprinted on his and all he could think as an explanation for his strange behavior, that instinctive kiss, was that it was a moment of madness. The allotted five minutes every human is expected to have; now he wondered if the five minutes were given yearly, monthly or hopefully daily, Gabriel was sure to make use of all of them kissing Meems.

It wasn't a time for fanciful thoughts; he needed his head in the game. He wanted to remain angry at his father, but a deep seated conviction in his gut alluded to his father knowing about today; which meant he might have left clues in his office for him to follow.

Gabriel refused to entertain the possibility of this being wrong. As his dreams those times had encouraged, faith was the key.

Meems first instinct as they entered her neighborhood was to slide down the seat and hide; after everything that had happened, she expected people to give her strange looks.

But on second thought, she realized that the citizenry of Uyo were unaware of the higher war fought on their behalf. She recalled the catatonic tenant who'd hadn't been conscious of the four men attacking a lady. She recalled that no one had seen her jump the balcony...except Gabriel.

She turned to give him a side glance, he didn't look overly angry any more, just plain determined. She realized that he was here, right now, helping her because it was pre-arranged, destiny, fate.

Meems hadn't noticed they'd stopped until Gabriel jumped out of the car and moved swiftly to open the high gate of his home. She couldn't deny the excitement burning in her belly at having to see his space, where he lived.

As he pushed the obviously heavy gate to the side, his muscles rippled in his shirt and unconsciously, her mouth watered at the sight. She was instantly reminded of the kiss he'd given her and consequently her imagination flashed a very graphic picture of her being pressed against him skin to skin.

It wasn't an imagination, it was a vision.

She knew this because she could feel the heat emanating from his hard flesh as her palm caressed his contoured back. Moist, hot moist pooled heavily in between her legs as he grasped her breast, gave it a contemplative look before latching on fiercely on her nipple.

Her mouth dropped open in a silent gasp as he laved, licked and bit her nipple. He looked up then, his eyes looking heavy and dark with desire, then he chuckled, it was a very manly chuckle, almost arrogant in tone because of her intense reaction when his fingers focused on rolling her clits. She arched her waist to feel his fingers more deeply and...

“Are you going to come out of the car soon?”

Gabriel's voice was like cold water thrown in her face. She jerked and swiveled to face him, he had obviously driven in, parked the car, locked the gate and was about to go inside when he noticed she'd not move.

How could she? She'd been busy enjoying a future she wasn't even sure would happen.

Gabriel stared at her with impatience. He wanted to get started in his father's study. If he had left clues or a message, he probably won't have left it in the open and so time was of the essence.

“I...yes...of course,” she mumbled and stumbled out of the car.

He frowned at her strange behavior, not that the whole day had been normal in the least, but Meems presently looked shell shocked, like she'd seen a ghost.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he led her into the house.

She turned and looked at him fixedly for a while, like she was trying to figure out who he was. Her eyes dropped to his mouth and then quickly swiveled away with a guilty expression.

Gabriel frowned at her behavior; he would have wanted to find out but at that moment he could only allow one thing on his mind and it wasn't kissing Meems.

Finally, she nodded and followed him through the cool interior of the house.

~CHAPTER 7~

Hope is the dream of waking man – Pliny the Elder

5:17 pm

I woke up with a start.

Having not even realized that I had fallen asleep, I squinted at the dim room with disillusion, it took a while for my brain to recall all that had happened.

I stretched, remembering that I'd been watching TV when the tiredness had hit me in waves, nothing could have stopped my sleep. A look at the wall clock told me I'd slept for about two hours; I was rested but not entirely.

Where was Gabriel, anyway?

This thought shifted and something else nagged in the periphery of my mind; something had woken me up.

After less than a minute of trying to think what could have woken me, I gave up and flung my feet to the tiled floor. I was in a small parlor across the hall from Gabriel's father's study, the dim lighting had been comforting and the TV had been an attraction too.

Gabriel had pointed me to the kitchen and told me to get something to eat; I did just that. Their fridge was stocked, mainly with fruits; they must be health nuts, I'd thought and went for a cucumber.

The chilled fruit was heavenly and since we needed to eat food, the type to sustain energy for wherever this ordeal was headed, I went through the two refrigerators in the kitchen.

I hit gold in the second one. I'm going to assume it was his mum, as this was their house, but someone had prepared two trays of boiled yam and fishmeal sauce, and then stuck a note on one.

The note had Gabriel's name and it instructed him to use the microwave. I pulled out both trays and they had the same meal and amount, not that it mattered. It occurred to me that I was in a wealthy person's home; it occurred to me that people still lived like royalty even in this hard climes.

And it also occurred to me that I wasn't having my usual apoplectic fury whenever I sighted a rich folk. This was the reaction I normally had whenever Gabriel appeared like clock work, every morning on my path to work.

But none of it mattered because we had to eat. I'd gone ahead and microwaved the food...

A loud thump interrupted my thoughts. I listened, my eyes moving unseeingly while concentrating on my hearing, nothing; I shrugged it off and continued reminiscing.

I had delivered Gabriel's personal plate and found him scattering through papers in a carton. My offer to help had been rejected and while I'd been eating, I wondered if there was a possibility that the tag-less tray of food had been prepared for me.

It wasn't far-fetched seeing as the day had been full of strange surprises.

My reminiscing ended with me silently reiterating that the meal had been superb; I'd not eaten such in years.

Stretching, I scooted to the edge of the leather couch and pulled on Gabriel's shoes. As I was just tying the laces on the second foot the thump came again, and this time it wasn't once, this time I was sure it was a struggle.

With my heart in my throat, I surged off the seat, my eyes landed first on the knapsack, I grabbed it and hung both straps on my shoulders. The next step was finding a weapon. Breathlessly, I looked around the room for something to grab, something deadly to use.

I wasn't expecting to find anything, but there it was. Like the food in the fridge, the long, thin sword glimmered against the wall. I raced to it and picked it by the hilt. This had also been prepared, because there was no way a sword this sharp would be left leaning against the wall without its sheath.

Silently, I sent up a prayer of thanks and rushed out the door and right to that of the study. The voices paused me, where the minions talking now?

I leaned close and listened, holding my gushing breath and trying not to make a sound.

"I will stop you," I heard and frowned. The voice sounded gurgled, like the person talked with water in his throat, but that was impossible.

"You can't," Gabriel replied breathlessly and a blow landed on someone, I don't know who but I winced all the same.

"I'm going to kill you and then her and then I'll live forever."

The hand holding the Japanese looking sword shook as I waited for Gabriel's reply, but it didn't come. I leaned closer, my ears flat against the door and I heard the choking sound...

"Die now," the gurgled voice directed and I went mad.

I bust through the door with a war cry, swinging the sword in an upward arc...

Uto...yes, UTO! Complete with arrow imbedded in his throat as he'd died, had Gabriel on the table, steadily squeezing the life out of him.

My eyes swept the room and saw everything, Gabriel's mottled face, the scattered room and finally, the red, evil eyes of an undead Uto.

I didn't hesitate, I swung the sword down, it made an oddly comforting whistling sound as it went through the air and into, then through Uto's head, right in the middle.

It didn't stop.

The downward momentum sliced him through. It felt like I had sliced through butter, the sword came out under him, from in between his legs, covered in blood.

The surprise that had appeared on his face when he'd turned at my war cry remained on his face. It was not a good sight. His body remained together for a second or two and then slowly disintegrated, falling sideways.

The arrow in his throat had also been equally divided, a glance at the bloody meat of his body, showed the stick of the arrow, bloodied and designed with slimy looking worms.

I took a step back, then another; my mind had gone numb and was in the process of zoning out when Gabriel moved. He clattered down from the desk, his neck red with weals from being strangled, he staggered towards me.

"Baby, don't look," he said in a husky voice, barely hearable. He proceeded to hug my shaking body, walking with me out of the room.

"I killed...I..."

"Shh, don't worry about it. You just saved my life, thank you," he said, still in that gruff whisper.

My hand rose on its own accord, it took a while for my mind to register its intent. I wanted to touch Gabriel's face but I couldn't because I found, I was still holding the sword.

Dropping it with disgust, I threw my hands about his neck and hugged him.

"I'm so glad you are alive," I whispered, my heart filled with gratitude. I couldn't do this on my own, I needed him and I suddenly regretted all those years I'd been rude to him.

"I'm sorry, Gabriel," I muttered into his shoulder. He kissed the side of my head and nodded, I felt the movement on my cheek.

“We need to go, babe,” he said and retracted his body from mine, I didn’t like that, but there was nothing I could do.

“Did you find it?” I whispered, his whispering was making me whisper back.

He swallowed with difficulty, obviously in pain before replying, “Yes... there’s a map and he’d made a video in his computer.”

Gabriel was moving, he pushed me away from the open door of the study and then reached for the discarded sword. He went into the study and returned carrying the sword, now in a brown, leather sheath and a map.

It wasn’t a printed map but one drawn with a biro. His light gray chinos trouser was torn at the knee, his blue shirt had been untucked from the belt and hung unbuttoned and askew, but he was still handsome.

“Grab water from the fridge, babe,” he directed and still followed me to the kitchen anyway and then we made our way to the sitting room.

And like I’d thought, someone must have known that today would happen, there was a bottle, clearly labeled ‘Honey’ and without prompting I knew that it was there for him to drink.

I pulled my arm from his grasp and went to the table, he followed.

“You have to drink this,” I said and his eyebrow went up in a silent question.

“For your throat, baby,” I said and started, my eyes flew to his and he seemed startled too that I’d called him that. I tensed and my heart hammered against my chest, then he grinned, quite broadly and collected the bottle from my lax hand.

He drank it on his way to the car. Another car, way bigger and more compact than the other one we’d used all day. He flung the sword into the back seat before striding to the gate to open it.

We were about to venture into the wild again.

~CHAPTER 8~

Hope is risk that must be run – Georges Bernanos

8:52 pm

The Infiniti QX-4 SUV ate up the miles effortlessly but there were some parts of the road where he had to slow down to a crawl because of the gorging erosions that had destroyed the road.

Darkness had fallen quickly and he noticed how tensed Meems was, she didn't talk to him except to pass him the bottle of honey every thirty minutes. It wasn't a cure but it soothed his throat and he was swallowing with some ease now.

"Hey," Gabriel said and reached for her hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. "We are okay," he said, glancing at her face, the glow from the dash board illuminated her fear.

She didn't reply but squeezed his hand back. Gabriel wasn't comfortable with that, Meems had never been a silent person, at least to him; she'd always been very vocal.

"He apologized about not telling me," Gabriel said and was glad to see Meems turn to him, her eyes didn't seem so dead any more. He was referring to his father and the video he'd saved in his computer.

"He did?" she whispered and had a small smile for him.

He smiled back. He enjoyed the fact that they could converse with minimum words and they'd still understand each other.

"So, he knew about today," she said, it was a statement of fact and she was confirming it to herself.

But he answered her any way, "Yes."

Then because he also wanted to stamp down on his own terror, seeing as they were driving on a deserted stretch of road made them prime targets for any kind of attack; he continued talking.

“We have to get the laptop to the bunker before midnight.”

“Then what will happen?” she asked.

“I don’t know, babe, but I know we’ll make it. We’ve already made good time into Ikot Abasi and we are only forty-five minutes from the beach. With the map it shouldn’t be too difficult to find the bunker.”

Maybe he shouldn’t have sounded so confident, for suddenly, light loomed from the darkness behind them. When Gabriel looked in the rearview mirror, a Mack truck was hurtling towards their SUV at top speed.

“Shit,” he muttered and pressed down on the accelerator. None of them were disillusioned to think that this may be just a random speeding trailer on the streets of Ikot Abasi.

To prove this, Gabriel swerved sharply into a side street and the trailer did the same with loud groans of skidding tires on the coal tar; it was confirmed.

Meems whimpered in her seat, her eyes never leaving the side mirror, when it finally did, she held tight to the bag and proclaimed in a loud whisper, “We are going to die.”

“Don’t say that, babe,” Gabriel shouted desperately but didn’t slow down. No matter how fast he went, the truck seemed to be coming even faster.

She looked at him sadly, “You can’t outride that thing.”

“Babe,” he called warningly, his eyes rotating from the road to the rearview mirror to Meems.

“It’s determined to kill us,” she continued in a sad whisper.

“Don’t give up like...” the trailer pressed down on its horn and it was deafening. Gabriel had a bad feeling that whoever was driving that monster knew that he’d been about to encourage Meems with hopeful words and he was stopping that.

Meems began to cry in earnest, she didn’t understand why she’d been chosen to go through this. She wasn’t a bad person and hadn’t lived the wild life, in fact, her life had always been boring, it was work home and vice versa.

Why was this happening to her? Why had she dragged this innocent man into her issue?

She turned to Gabriel and the horn ceased suddenly. “Maybe you should drop me and save yourself,” she suggested in the silence.

“No, babe, you must...” and the horn blasted again. Gabriel determinedly reached out and held her hand and that was when it happened.

His foot must have slacked on the accelerator, or the trailer must have gained more speed; it didn’t matter, because the trailer slammed forcibly on the back of the SUV and sent it into an insane spin on the road.

It didn’t stop, while the Infiniti spun, the trailer raved close and with surprising finesse, hit the bumper of the SUV and the vehicle tipped and rolled over the side of the road.

It was a steeped hill with a lush forest at the valley, the SUV hurtled in the air for a second before landing gracelessly in an explosion of splintering glass and steel. The momentum ended in a destroyed heap at the base of a giant tree.

The trailer didn’t even stop by the road, it continued on, the sound fading as it rumbled into the town of Ikot Abasi; its job had been done.

~*****~

When we have lost everything, including hope, life becomes a disgrace and death a duty – W.C. Fields

10:13 pm

I don't know when it had been begun, but suddenly, I was overwhelmed with a heavy cloak of doubt.

The accident was a blur to me, the only thing I could consciously remember was the terror I'd felt as the car went in the air. I don't know what happened after that, I don't know how long I'd been out, but I woke up in a cocoon of foliage.

A normal person would be wondering how she'd survived such a crash. I knew the extent of the crash because I wasn't lying far off from it. The Infiniti was a rumpled mass of steel, fiber and aluminum with shattered glass sprinkled around it.

I should have been in there, crushed into a pulp, because I'd been wearing a seatbelt. But I'm lying here, flung clear through from the carnage; I should be ecstatic right now, but I'm not. Nope, I'm not interested in anything any longer.

“Meems?” I heard Gabriel's worried voice. “Baby?” It sounded as though he was on the verge of hysteria.

At the back of my mind, somewhere, there was this nagging feeling that I should be grateful that he was alive, that we were alive. But I couldn't get past the surge of intense anger that filled my heart at the sound of his voice.

I turned with the intent of getting myself up, but pain shot through my body like lightening. I couldn't help the groan that escaped my throat even if I'd tried and the sound got Gabriel trashing through the bush to where I lay.

“Oh, thank God, thank God,” he murmured as he slid into a kneeling position beside me. “Baby, oh God, are you okay? Where does it hurt?” he asked, his phone’s torch illuminating my face.

“Get that light out of my face,” I growled and then swiped his hand away forcefully for good measure.

Gabriel was momentarily silent, and I could feel his muscle tense as he knelt beside me. His breath hitched and I was sure his heartbeat raced. I also knew that he knew that something wasn’t the same with me.

“I found the laptop,” he ventured tentatively, like he was testing me to know the extent of my illness.

Even though I knew this, I couldn’t help myself, I felt like someone, a force was prodding me to be mean and not care, so I answered.

“Good for you; you can keep it,” I sneered sarcastically.

He reached out, intending to touch me but I surged up and punched him in the face. I don’t know how strong I could have become when I’d just been in an accident, but the blow sent him a few feet backward.

“Don’t you dare touch me,” I railed and struggled to my feet, weaving in place and looking about the bush, hoping a direction would just pop up.

It did, and on second thought, “On second thought, Gabriel,” I drew out his name in eerie sarcasm. “I’ll take the message box,” and then I grabbed the bag and continued into the bush without looking back.

I heard him muttering behind me. It wasn’t my business if he’d snapped and gone crazy. From here on, it was all man for himself.

I was contemplating whether to go left or right, when he grabbed me from behind. “You’re going the wrong way, babe,” he growled in my ear. The sound sent a spark of light into my heart. Like a flash, I felt the heat of hope, of possibilities and then it was gone.

Fury took control, “Get off me, you fucking maniac!” I snapped and heaved his arm off my shoulders. “Who’s your baby, eh? Have I sucked

on your tits before, or maybe the tits of your wife? Are you married, Gabriel?" I drew out his name in that eerie way again and smiled in the semi darkness of the bush.

He was muttering again instead of answering my question and I suddenly became impatient and turned from him stamping through the thick foliage of the bush. That corner of my brain with the nagging thought so out of reach kept sending faint signals that what I'd just said to Gabriel was insane.

It was also advising that I don't run.

"I'm not running away," I screamed to shut out the faint voice, while trashing crazily through the bush, trying to get away from Gabriel and his mutterings.

Suddenly I stopped, my eyes glazed and I could feel them getting red with fury. I turned on Gabriel who barely had time to break his rush towards me; I glared at him.

"STOP MUTTERING!" I roared in a voice so thick and deep, even my insane mind was sure it wasn't mine. The faint voice mentioned a possession and all I did at the thought was roar in derisive laughter.

Gabriel wouldn't stop muttering. I faced him again, my heart pumping unusually with insane anger as I matched towards him.

"Babe..."

"I said, I'm not your baby," I shouted in a voice that was more of mine. "If I really was your baby, would you have lied to me?" I asked, I could feel the normalcy of my voice. The anger wasn't so ferocious any longer, just hot enough to recall all that had pissed me about him over time.

"You fucking rich kids think you can just use anybody to do your whims," I sneered at him after stopping in front of him. "It escaped your mind to tell me about your dreams. I had to hear it from your crazy cousin, who by the way is burning in hell, because of that blessed

sword,” I don’t know how I knew this but I was quite sure of what I was saying.

“Stop muttering for a second,” I pleaded in a very girly, very vulnerable voice. “Did I tell you my name is Patience?” But he wouldn’t stop, that damned guy, even after I’d told him the information he most coveted, he wouldn’t just stop; the anger was back.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were a cop? Why didn’t you tell me you weren’t in good terms with your cousin? He could have killed us in his house, you lied to me!” I roared but he just continued muttering and looking straight into my eyes, then I started crying.

Even to my ears, I sounded so pitiful and it must have tricked Gabriel into stopping his bothersome mutterings.

“Babe?” he called uncertainly and then tentatively came close and reached for me.

He wasn’t expecting it, I slammed the smooth stone I’d grabbed earlier on the side of his head. He gasped, his knees weakened and he dropped before me.

Gabriel looked stunned that I’d done this to him, “Babe…” his hand still reached out, and in his eyes I saw love, concern…love.

For some unknown reason, this angered me, “I’M NOT YOUR BABY!” I sneered in a shout and slammed him again with the stone. I stood there and watched his eyes roll into his head, then he dropped heavily, taking a good portion of the bush with him.

Something, someone, a presence… a dark presence prodded me to run. I was conscious that Gabriel wouldn’t be out for long and I needed to be far away from him when he did.

I had a new mission, throwing the message box into the middle of the Ikot Abasi river; I was reliably informed that the beach wasn’t far off, so, I started running.

~CHAPTER 9~

At the end of the day, we must go forward with hope and not backward by fear and division – Jesse Jackson

11:15 pm

The glittering light had woken him up from his faint, but when he opened his eyes, everywhere was dark. He could hear nocturnal sounds all around him and he was conscious of the prickling nature of the foliage he was lying on; he was still in the forest.

Gabriel's hand crept to his head and he gingerly prodded the tender area where Meems, no, not Meems, what had possessed Meems had hit him. It was sticky with his blood and it made his head pound painfully.

Suddenly, he recalled the image that had woken him up, the sword, the one the possession had called 'blessed', the same that had cut Uto in two.

The sword had been suspended above ground and had continually swirled, making a whistling sound as it cut through air.

It had reflected a bright light that had affected his eyes, and he recalled trying to block it out with his arm. The light had increased and the fierceness of it had not only affected his eyes but had sent a sharp pain to his brain which had then caused his surge into reality.

He knew what he had to do, but he was suddenly feeling very tired. Gabriel closed his eyes and thought he could rest for a few minutes; he was almost asleep when he heard the growl.

Suddenly he was wide awake, "Shit," he muttered and turned, crawling on his hands and knees back to the wreckage that was once his father's car.

What had he been thinking wanting to rest a bit? He had to save Meems and that laptop had to get to the bunker. He wished there was a way to

reach his dad and maybe request for assistance; that's assuming his father was even at the bunker.

It could be some other team was at the bunker. He knew the army was involved from the video his father had created on his computer.

Well, there was no time to wonder about the army team or his dad, he was here alone and he had a lady to save. And there was a pack of dogs growling and following his scent through the forest, he needed to escape those first.

He still had no idea how they'd survived the accident, but he was grateful to God all the same and believed that no matter what happened today, the Almighty has always been the everlasting victor.

And just then he sighted the sword. It lay not far away from the still smoking wreckage, and he could only see it because, the torch light on his phone which had fallen and wedged against some shrubs when Meems had first punched him, reflected off the steel.

Gabriel grinned and raced with a grimace of pain towards the sword. He grabbed the hilt and was in time to swipe it out and against the neck of the first flying dog.

Its blood splashed and a bit of it warmed his skin where it splattered.

There was no time to wonder where the mammoth number of dogs had come from, he took deep breaths instead and focused his eyes on the circling pack of wild, evil canines.

~*****~

Three grand essentials of happiness in this life are something to do, something to love and something to hope for – Joseph Addison

11:20 pm

I arrived at the beach and the white sand made it seemed more lit than the thick forest I'd just stumbled out from.

My t-shirt wasn't enough to curb the sharp cold rolling from the river. I shivered and waited at the edge of the forest to catch my breath. The presence shoved me forward, I stumbled into the sand and valiantly waded through it towards the water.

For some unknown reason I began crying.

A part of me knew this wasn't right but I couldn't do anything about it.

I'd just brushed tears from my eyes and looked up to find a line of men thirty feet in front of me. I paused in my stride and looked, I was instantly aware that these men, dressed in jeans and untucked, black dress shirts were the minions that had been after me the whole day.

The line of men seemed as long as the edge of the water, forming a barricade as they weaved from side to side, in a fluid airy movement, humming deep in their throat.

The droning sound they were making and their slow and fluid side to side movement was hypnotizing. I was numb, I stared with my mouth open and the wind blew wisps of my hair into my mouth.

I had no idea when my top bun had loosened, I only knew that my hair blew wildly around my ears and face. Then instead of running the other way, which would have been normal, seeing as these guys had been after me all day, I started towards them.

It felt like I'd been hooked by a fishing line and now I was being reeled in. I was barely conscious of stopping to pull off Gabriel's shoes...GABRIEL, the name rang a light bell in my mind, like a faraway dream, a wisp, an elusive memory.

My feet enjoyed the fine texture of the beach sand as I reached the human barricade. A space opened up in the barricade and I didn't have to pause in my stride, I shuffled through and was finally at the water edge.

Its coolness lapped at my toes as I slowly pulled off the bag straps from my shoulders, then I reached for the hem of my t-shirt and pulled it over my head.

“Patience!”

I started as my name was shouted. The voice came with light, with memories of happy times, a time I had loved my name...a time I had been proud of my name.

“Patience!”

I turned from the hypnotizing roll of the water and tried to see over the shoulders of the minions.

He raced down from the edge of the forest, brandishing the steel sword which seemed to reflect its own light.

Gabriel

Yes Gabriel, I remembered him as a confused smile came to my cold lips. I frowned, I should know him, but my memory was still elusive. He obviously knew me because he was shouting my name, but what was with the sword, did he want to kill me?

This thought made me step backward and I was ankle deep in the water. My eyes caught the bag and suddenly I recalled what I had been about to do. I grabbed the bag and unzipped it, quaintly forgetting about the man flying down from the forest.

I hummed as I pulled out the message box and flung the bag aside.

“Don’t do it, Patience!” he shouted, almost reaching the minion barricade.

His voice was like static in my head, it seemed to be interrupting another transmission; a transmission that wanted the message box in the water, a dark transmission.

I looked up in time to see him flying in the air, the sword raised over his head...

In that moment, time slowed, my mind image took over. It was in another time, a forgotten century, his name was still Gabriel... a protector; my protector.

A sense of déjà vu stole over me, this had happened before, him coming to my rescue with his flaming sword. In that era he'd not been wearing a chinos trouser and dress shirt, but a golden armor of war.

His hair had been long, reaching to his shoulders and swept into a pony tail. His skin had been tanner than mine and my hair had been so long it'd reached to my waist; even then, I'd still been robust in size. And the fate of that world, at least part of it, had rested on our shoulders.

Could he save me?

My hand reached to touch my hair and it wasn't silky, it was my normal, very Nigerian hair. It must have been one of those dreams, I thought and looked up in time to see him bury his sword deep in the throat of one of the minions.

He was alone and the minions were surrounding him as calmly as they'd been weaving and still humming. He couldn't win this, I decided and went on my knees in the water, promptly forgetting about him again.

The act of kneeling in water wasn't in despair, I only needed to rest. I held the message box in the crook of my arm and reached for the lid to open it.

My hand froze, conflicting voices sounded in my head. Which one do I listen to, I wondered. Should I open the message box or just fling it in the middle of the sea?

"Patience...baby!" his voice reached me, I turned and our eyes met while he sliced through another throat, his shirt was soaked with blood.

Was it from an injury on his person?

I wondered this and was seized with concern for him that didn't last long; the conflicting voices wouldn't let me know what to think.

Groaning in frustration, I went with my natural inclination, if this was a message box, I needed to know what the message was, so I flipped the lid open.

Instantly, my eyes glued on the screen. Finally, familiar ground, I thought. I was beginning to feel the heat in the pit of my stomach, I was recalling what I'd set out to do, I was rising from the water to do just that...

With my gaze hooked on the screen, I didn't see the minion approach me, I looked up as he pushed. He obviously had supernatural strength, because the push threw me together with the message box, into the air and smack dab in the water.

Belatedly, I realized all the things I'd done wrong. As the message box sparked and sunk, I especially regretted hitting Gabriel over the head. I recalled everything clearly, even the message from the message box.

But it was of no use now because I was steadily swallowing water. Yes, the greatest irony ever, I couldn't swim. Shore seemed far away, my limbs grew heavy and weak, my head went down into the water longer than it stayed up...I cried and gave up.

~CHAPTER 10~

A little more persistence, a little more effort and what seemed hopeless failure may turn to glorious success – Elbert Hubbard

11:39 pm

“Patience!” Gabriel shouted, his heart in his throat...his heart had just disappeared below water.

He made short work of tearing off the man’s neck, tendon and all and was quite glad at that moment to see his dad running down to the water front with troops of soldiers.

Nothing was said, there was no need. With varying degrees of war cries they joined the fray, while Gabriel took off to the water and jumped in with no second thought.

How could she have been thrown that far?

He wondered this as he came up for air, his heart throbbing terribly in exertion and fear that the water had swept her away.

“Patience!”

“Baby,” this one was a cry of despair tearing from his throat.

He sucked in air and dove into the water again, swimming forward, his eyes scanning the dark under water. Then he saw her, the white bra was a beacon that called out to him.

Like a flash, he quickened his tired limbs and grabbed her sinking weight under her armpit, his legs paddling over time to get them to air. His chest burned with the need for oxygen, especially because of the extra exertion in pulling her up; his muscles were threatening to have a pull when he finally surfaced with her.

Gabriel's concern was totally for her. He supported her head and kept it above water.

"Baby," he called and cough in his speed to suck in air. He was beginning to be desperate when he saw the life buoy floating towards him. He looked up and saw his dad and some men at the edge, they'd tied a rope on the buoy and all he had to do was hang on and be dragged to shore.

Despite the fact that his muscles screamed in fatigue, he carried Meems considerable weight to the sand which had no atom of dead bodies on it. He wasn't concerned with the terrifying fact that he'd just fought and killed an uncountable number of men and their bodies were no where to be found.

Gabriel was only concerned for Meems, who didn't seem to be breathing.

"Patience...Meems...Baby," the names tore from his throat like desperate cries. He was bent over her, hand over hand, pumping her chest and blowing in her mouth, but nothing was happening.

Someone tried to grab him, someone tried to stop his desperate attempt to bring back the love of his life. He flung his hand and caught his dad in the jaw, the man roared in anger.

"Son, let your mother help her!"

His mother?

That penetrated instantly and he looked up to find his mother, calmly kneeling beside Meems.

"Mom, ca...ca...can you save her?" he was shivering in cold and fear.

She smiled at him and put a leaf under Meems' nose. It took seconds, she sneezed and coughed and sputtered, water shooting out of her mouth.

Gabriel helped her into a sitting position and hugged her tight, not minding that she was still spewing water from her mouth and coughing.

“You’re choking her, boy,” his father, ever the army man, snapped and pulled him off.

“We have less than twenty minutes more,” he said to his son.

Gabriel helped Meems up and supported her with an arm around her waist, his expression was both guilty and forlorn.

“I didn’t save the laptop,” he confessed while his mother considerably threw a scarf about Meems’ shoulder, it didn’t totally cover her, but at least, her chest wasn’t left bare for his father’s men to stare.

“The laptop; who cares about the laptop? She’s the message boy,” he told his flummoxed son and hit him on the back.

“What of the bunker?” he asked with a frown and just then, a crested van drove recklessly into view.

It stopped and some geeky looking guys jumped out. He felt Meems gasp and he looked at her with concern. She looked pleasantly shocked.

“Babe...” he growled, his voice gruff with suspicion.

“My bosses,” she whispered, “I work in a tech-business hub and these are my bosses,” she told him.

Gabriel looked up at the rag-tag group of six or seven guys, all looking too cheerful for comfort, especially in view of present circumstances.

Various degrees of greeting for Meems floated in the air as they strode towards their group. He heard three ‘sweethearts’, two ‘darlings’ and a lot of ‘Meems love’, all from guys. This wasn’t good so his arm tightened protectively around her shoulder.

They reached and they all fucking wanted a turn to hug her! Not happening, Gabriel thought.

“Hey, we just want to say hi,” one of the guys said belligerently when Gabriel shoved Meems behind him and scowled at them.

“A handshake would do, she isn’t properly dressed,” he growled and they all just then realized that his shirt was soaked with blood and it wasn’t his.

“No harm done, man. We understand,” one of the guys came forward and shook his hand, his eyes caught the wedding band on his left hand and he discovered, later on, that the guy was his name sake.

“He’s the protector,” one of them said in realization.

“I’m a detective now,” Gabriel answered.

“Still in the protection business,” someone muttered and they all laughed. They really were a cheerful lot, it was quite annoying and he wondered why they’d been graced with their unserious presence.

“What are you guys doing here?” Meems asked in an awed voice, which did nothing to reduce his increasing angst at a bunch of guys that she knew better than him, clearly, he was jealous.

“They are the bunker child, and we need to hurry,” Gabriel’s father said and herded the motley crew to the van.

Gabriel didn’t understand his father until he saw what was in the van, the thing was wired like what he assumed NSA looked like.

“To answer your question, Meems,” one of the tech guys began, “We’ve been in communication with all the hubs in the country and this broadcast is set to begin nationwide. In one word, we’ve synchronized this entire exercise. Whatever you put down on that laptop, is going to appear on every device without the use of data. In fact, we’ll be making the video form of it for TV and voice recording for radio and that’s why we’re here.”

Meems smiled and willing sat in front of a laptop that was way better than hers. She didn't say a word and everybody watched in awe as her fingers flew on the keys, and words appeared on the screen.

Gabriel fully understood then the connection of everything that had happened. Meems bosses were an integral part of the overall plan and he felt guilty for thinking they were unserious. At that moment he actually appreciated their weird humor as it made him smile a couple of times and relaxed his tense muscles.

Everybody had roles, someone, was on a Skype call to a lot of people, young people, at the same time. Others just fiddled away with their laptops as Meems continued typing, looking lost to their presence.

It was complete.

Meems stopped typing, turned to him and fell face forward; Gabriel was quick to catch her.

She felt dizzy and wondered what was happening to her now. Would she die?

Relax, you're okay.

She smiled then, her head voice hadn't left her. Then she sighed and lost consciousness.

00:00 am...the message

I place no hope in my strength, nor in my works: but all my confidence is in God my Protector, who never abandons those who have put all their hope and thought in Him – Francois Rabelais

Faith rests in understanding.

The understanding that God never leaves His children desolate; that He'd never forsake them, that His thoughts are good for them.

But Hope...

Hope is the will, the staunch decision to stand by the understanding created by faith; the WILL to overlook and stand strong despite present circumstances.

Nigeria where is your hope?

Your faith lies buried, like trickles of water running deep under the earth, waiting to be dredged. But where is your hope?

Faith teaches, prescribes, and directs how the Creator works, saves and wins our battles.

But Hope...

It stirs up the mind that it may be **STRONG**, **BOLD** and **COURAGEOUS**, that it may suffer and **ENDURE** adversity, waiting for better things.

You have forgotten the teachings, the prescriptions and the directions, **WAKE UP!** Time to be strong. You have let your mind go into hiding, you have allowed it to be timid in the face of difficulty.

Not anymore – Do not be afraid...be courageous!

Faith has taught us to cling to the WORD and the PROMISE of the thing promised.

But Hope...

It looks upon the THING promised in the word.

We know the promise of the thing promised, it's there, though buried, but it's there. We need hope to reach for the THING promised.

Nigeria, allow your FAITH to HOPE!

Faith is the beginning of life before all tribulation.

But Hope...

Hope proceeds from tribulation.

Your faith is buried and forgotten because it flourished before the problems.

Now is time to AWAKEN hope! This is your salvation – Hope is the recall of faithful words; words of DELIVERANCE, words of God.

Faith though forgotten, taught and judged and fought against errors of heresies, judging spirits, doctrines, DOUBTS.

But Hope...

...is the general or CAPTAIN of the field, BATTLING against tribulation, the gross, impatience, heaviness of spirit, weakness, DESPERATION and blasphemy. And it WAITS for good things EVEN IN THE MIDST of evils.

Hardship had conquered your faith and buried it in times past. Doubt in God and His word crept in and spread DEPRESSION OF THE MIND and will. The devil labored to extinguish your faith with wiles and lies.

But Hope...

Feel that bubbling STRENGTH awakening in the pit of your stomach. FEEL it, ACKNOWLEDGE it, USE it!

That is hope!

Allow it to WRESTLE and TAKE HOLD on the things revealed by faith. Allow it to use the KNOWLEDGE of faith to OVERCOME the devil which warred against faith.

After this sure VICTORY, you, dear Nigerians, will bask in the brilliance of PEACE and JOY as God made it to be.

~*****~

Hope is like the sun, which, as we journey towards it, casts the shadow of our burden behind us - Samuel Smiles.

THE COUNTRY WAS SHOCKED out of their numbness with the broadcast. It had never been done before, but the tech geeks had pulled it off with Hubitz at the helm.

Hubitz was trending, the idea of voice recording, their main option which had turned out best. Different spoken word artists had been commissioned and in different languages too.

Internet based speakers had been strategically planted on every street corner. An almost impossible feat, but Gabriel's dad had made it possible, he wouldn't say, though, who his sponsor or partner was.

But it was generally agreed that only an act of God had accomplished such a feat successfully.

The positive effect wasn't immediate, but faces were bright again, brains were sparking and hope flowed eternal.

~EPILOGUE~

Hope is the pillar that holds up the world – Pliny the Elder

Anyone who doesn't believe in miracles is not a realist – David Ben-Gurion

11:05 am – December 25th, 2018.

I woke up disoriented.

The whole of my body hurt, so I tried to recall what I might have done to cause such pain, and it came flooding back.

I jerked as waves of terror rolled through me. I shouldn't be sleeping; I should be awake and alert, ready for whatever.

But as I tried to get up, not even recognizing the room I was in, an arm tightened around the softness of my belly. My eyes widened and slowly followed the sinewy muscle, from my stomach, upward and finally...

Sigh

Though his visage was boyish in sleep and he was the most handsome man in that moment, I regretted hitting him with those stones. I know I wasn't to blame, but it meant I hadn't been strong enough to resist the devil.

"Stop it," he suddenly said. I started when I heard his gruff whisper and looked to see his warm, brown eyes staring softly at me.

"I'm sorry," I said, our eyes not looking away.

"For staring?" he asked with a twitch of his lips.

I turned in his arms and fully faced him, my eyes were serious, "For this," I touched the bandage on the side of his head.

Gabriel's arm tightened, bringing me flush against him. My very soft chest was smashed against his quite hard one. I breathed deeply to try and control my racing heart, but I needn't have worried because his heart raced alongside mine.

"Patience, what happened?"

Few words but I understood his question and I didn't want to talk about it. It probably had shown on my face or he'd known from the weird sixth sense thing we had going, all he did was shake me gently.

"Tell me," his eyes and voice were so warm with concern I blurted out my stupid past.

"I was just superstitious. Now that I think about it, I feel foolish," I mumbled.

"Don't say that, babe," he gently shook me again and smiled.

"I believed that my name influenced my behavior. I really could persevere a lot of rubbish from friends and especially from...boyfriends. They practically walked over me and I did nothing about it," I shrugged then, "It made me feel better to be called Meems."

"Meems was free; she could do anything without worrying that she'd offend anyone. I could sass anyone..."

"Which would be me," Gabriel said in a matter of fact tone, and my heart skipped.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he grinned then, "I enjoyed our morning sessions. Though yesterday's own was the best, we skipped the small talk."

I couldn't help myself, I giggled uncontrollably and he joined me, and it turned into a full guffaw.

"It's wedding first before the honey moon," Gabriel's father called through the door.

My eyes widened in consternation. Oh my God! I was so ashamed right now.

“I believe this is my apartment, dad,” Gabriel called out and I tapped his arm urgently to stop him from saying anything. I would have preferred he not say anything until his father left.

The older man chuckled good naturedly, “Your mom says you should feed her, so bring her over to the big house.”

“Okay,” Gabriel replied.

“Don’t let him, no matter how nice he begs, Patience,” Gabriel’s father called out again.

My eyes widened together with my mouth this time. I gasped and couldn’t get a word out, Gabriel was silently laughing at my embarrassment.

“You hear?” the man insisted.

“Seriously, dad, you want me to talk to mom?” Gabriel asked but grinned and pulled me close, I buried my face in his neck.

“Patience?” the man called again, obviously waiting for my reply.

“O...o...okay sir,” I finally stammered.

“Good,” he grumbled and began walking away from the closed door.

“I’m definitely talking to mom,” Gabriel called out and laughed at my fallen face.

“Come on, you have to get used to it.”

“Why?” I asked wondering what we were doing.

“Oh, by the way, you want to get married, say today?” Gabriel asked so casually I was struck dumb.

“Why?” I asked again in shock.

“Because we’ve been dating in my dreams,” he replied and brought his face close to mine.

“Dating...dreams?”

“Three years, I’ve been dreaming about you,” he softly confessed, and my heart soared in exhilaration.

“So, marry me, today?”

“No,” I blurted with a slight frown, and wondered, who does that?

You will

Fat chance, I thought, as I watched Gabriel recover from his blanched expression and swooped down to softly coax a response from me, with his lips on mine.

Glorious

I went plaint in his arms, he turned me over and climbed over me, resting his hands on the bed, on both sides on my head. He leaned in and I arched up to meet him, but his warm lips landed on my eyelids and then slowly blazed a trail to my neck and then lower...

His breath fanned my naked chest and hardened the nipples to pebbles. I waited with bated breath for the would be satisfying wet connection of his mouth on them.

Gabriel just kissed the soft sides of my bosom and I groaned, frowned and gave him a pointed stare to get on with it already.

“Marry me...”

“Moot point, Gabriel. Could you continue,” I snapped breathlessly, still arching up and offering the delectable me.

“I respect my dad’s wishes. Besides, I want this to be right.”

“This is right,” I exclaimed with wide, convincing eyes and he laughed, his chest rumbling on mine.

“Babe,” it was a warning.

“Alright, alright, let’s do it,” I capitulated in exasperation. “But can I have a happy ending,” I pleaded in a really small voice with a coy look.

Gabriel laughed so hard he coughed. “Oh God, baby, I love you,” he said earnestly.

I hummed pleurably, “I love you, too,” and reached up to kiss his Adam’s apple.

It should have ended there but I dropped a wet one on his jaw and then the corner of his lips. Gabriel growled and took over. From then on things got pretty hot and heavy, until the banging began on the door.

“Gabriel, let the girl out!” his mother shouted from the door and I could hear his father murmur too.

My God, the embarrassment.

“This is my apartment!” Gabriel shouted, but still kissed me quick and hard on the lips.

“It’s our house,” his father retorted.

“I’m moving out,” he threatened.

“Okay,” his parents replied without hesitation and we couldn’t help our selves, we laughed, so hard we coughed...I might have even farted, but who cares.

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