



# WAR

...FOR SURVIVAL, FOR REVENGE, FOR LOVE...



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## **DESCRIPTION**

How can one break out of a prison, built in between two quarrelling countries about to war, in the middle of a crocodile infested swamp? Laika could not stand for the casual way the Senate wished to wipe from existence the bad decision called Marshland. After over ten years, there were innocent children birthed in the uni-sex prison, she couldn't let them be decimated by the bomb expected from the other side. So, she commandeers a warship and it's a long night and day of trying to stay alive. She started a war before the war.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

God always comes first for me. Without Him, I have no muse. My family, my editorial team, my readers.

## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to **Sataaya Africa**.

War was first published in **Satayaa Africa 2017 Anthology: Through the Maze** as 'Wars'.

The call for that collection gave me the idea for this story and readers gave me the push to continue it into a novel.

*It was for survival at first, then the hope of revenge, but love herded it the whole time.*

*...love for one man*

*...love for innocence*

*...love for humanity.*

**WAR**

In 2030, the exponential escalation of crime clogged the prisons with criminals, both deserving and undeserving. The justice system, warped as ever, scraped off the death penalty, but now it needed a place to send heinous criminals...and so Marshland was created, male and female prisoners dumped on an island.

Laika gazed at the huge fence dividing Marshland from Nigeria, army men stood guard there, in addition to the vast, crocodile infested muddy water separating them; escape was impossible. She turned on the parapet to stare at the opposite side; the Cameroon Mountain could be seen at night in its lighted glory...Marshland Island stood between two quarrelling countries.

Their only communication with Nigeria was the lone warship that transported distress materials to them once in six months; barring that, Marshland prisoners were left to their devices.

Inhaling the morning air, Laika reminded herself that she wasn't a criminal but an unfortunate victim of a warped system.

"Babe."

Laika swivelled to face the most handsome man she'd ever seen, as a free citizen or prisoner. Zuka always made her heart thump. Despite being the best fighter among the females in Marshland, Zuka, with just a glance, reduced her to a stuttering, eye batting female whose only urge was spreading her legs for him...it was pathetic; but she couldn't help herself, not when he called her 'babe' in that deep, sexy voice.

If only Zuka was the governor - head prisoner who ruled and maintained law in Marshland, instead of the despicable Buga, Laika silently griped.

Zuka grinned, his black lips parting to reveal pearly white teeth.

"Has your imaginations changed about Marshland creation?" Zuka asked, smiling at the chubby woman, who was almost as tall as his six feet; a woman that he'd have married if their paths had crossed differently, away from Marshland or if Buga hadn't declared interest at making her his second 'Marshland' wife.

"Uh?" she stuttered; eyes wide.

Zuka chuckled, she was so adorable and that was despite the fact that she was lethal with any weapon or random object.

The dead martial master- former governor of Marshland, had trained both of them to be his lieutenants to police the prisoners. But Buga had secretly garnered a following of 680 prisoners out of the total number of 906, not counting children. They'd staged a coup, killing the martial master and automatically making Buga the governor.

Zuka moved closer to stand over her, silhouetting their figures in the rising sun.

Laika held herself back from flinging her arms over his shoulders; instead she licked her lips, hoping to control her sensual urges.

Zuka's eyes darted to her plump lips, feeling the heat of desire rise to his throat, he badly wanted to kiss her; but even the walls were Buga's spies.

"No...no, it hasn't changed," she replied. "The senate, faced with the overflow of prisons after abolishing the death penalty and the problem of crocodile infestation, killed two birds with one stone. They built a town in the middle of the marsh, fencing off the country and leaving a perfect island prison with hungry crocodiles."

"Very hungry crocodiles," Zuka joked and she chuckled, the small sound travelled warmly through his heart to his belly.

"And Buga uses them as capital punishment for detractors of his dictatorship," she added.

"True; speaking of Buga, he wants to see you," Zuka reported regrettably.

Those words remained a source of fear to her; fear that Buga would soon declare her his second 'Marshland' wife. Laika detested him for killing martial master, his misuse of Marshland resources and she'd have killed him but for his numerous guards.

It turned out Buga wanted her as an emissary to the senate, to plead for increase in Marshland resources.

So the warship made an august travel across the muddy water; hours later, she stood before Senate with several armed guards, as though she posed a threat to the senators.

Senate refused to increase Marshland funds because Nigeria prepared for eminent war.

While Laika waited to be led back to the warship, she eavesdropped on a whispered conversation- *the Cameroon army planned to strike Nigeria through Marshland and the senate knew this plan but would do nothing to stop it; the Nigerian army would only defend the country after Marshland had been decimated.*

The senate was once again killing birds with a stone. Ten year old Marshland didn't just have criminals anymore, innocent children were involved.

Laika stoically stood on the deck of the warship as it returned her to Marshland. The only chance of survival was her capability to kill these armed men, commandeer the warship and transport almost a thousand prisoners from Marshland to safety, before daybreak - destruction day.

Slowly, taking deep breaths, Laika turned to the first armed man...war begun.

**SEIZURE**

The war started in her mind first.

Laika took count of the soldiers on board the warship. As a single female prisoner, she got only five escorts, one ship steerer and the captain who was so fat he could barely fit in the door to his cabin; she counted six in all, as she couldn't regard the captain as hostile.

She took stock of weapons at her disposal and for the first time, the clogging stench of the crocodile filled muddy water was her strongest ally. It was a stench so vile that one would regard the smell of a dead rat in a damp, stuffy house as potpourri. She noticed that the armed guard beside her started twitching his nose as the ship made its torturous way through the college of crocodiles and possibly decayed bodies thrown into the marsh for as long as Marshland existed; bodies that the crocodiles apparently refused to devour, so pieces of human body parts floated around stinking up the place.

The stench was her distraction.

Then she had to find a way to kill without destroying their uniforms, especially that of the captain, she was going to wear that; and whoever else would be on board after the rescue would need to pretend they were soldiers to be able to return into the walls of Nigeria.

While the soldier beside her gagged, covering his nose, Laika casually reached behind and pulled off the piece of rubber holding her natural dreadlocks. She flipped the long locks which now had some brown highlights at the tips from washing with caustic soap, pulling them up to the top of her head. She bound it with the rubber and allowed the locks swing down to the top of her back.

Then she slowly folded the long sleeves of the usual brown, khaki Marshland prison uniform; a detestable colour and design of clothing that the government never failed to send out every six months in all sizes. It was the only clothing on Marshland, trousers and long sleeve shirts of the same hue; it had become the identity of Marshland. Laika felt it depicted the dirtiness, the marshy quality of the land and of course the government's opinion about the people.

They were outcasts whom nothing good was expected. People who deserved to be killed for no just cause. Sixty five percent of the prisoners in Marshland, excluding children, were innocent people, victims of a heinously corrupt system; they were people sent there for trying to be honest, for being witnesses to real crimes, for wanting to contest political positions, for being heirs to billions wanted by some other powerful, greedy person, for plain being an accused person's child like she'd been.

Maybe this war between the countries would provide an opportunity to get justice and retrieve her inheritance. But that would only be possible if she succeeded to commandeer the ship, evict Marshland people and return within the walls of Nigeria before day break.

"I'd like to ease myself," Laika asked politely after folding the sleeves of her brown khaki shirt to the elbow, exposing the crude tattoos on her inner arms.

The soldier could barely breathe at this point. He couldn't even lift his hand from his nose, he used his rifle to point out the door that would take her below deck.

Laika looked behind, she'd been left with only this army man on deck, the rest had retreated below deck to avoid the stench; this was probably this soldier's turn to stand on deck with her.

"Go there!" he commanded with widened eyes, his words muffled by his hand over his nose and mouth. Laika nodded, scanned the upper deck to make sure they were still alone before flinging her arm in a swift, measured arc, perfectly landing her knifed hand on his windpipe.

He choked, stumbling forward and Laika swiped his gun from his hand while shoving him over the railing into the waiting jaws of bored crocodiles. His shouts were carried off with the wind as crocodiles tore him to shreds in seconds.

She didn't spare the dead soldier a glance, cocked his gun and was about to go below deck when his radio crackled, it was loud enough to be heard above the howling wind as rain clouds gathered. The radio had apparently fallen when she shoved him overboard; she picked it up, fixed the earpiece in her ear and arranged the mouthpiece close to her lips.

"Have you choked to death yet?" the voice squawked through the two way radio and Laika could hear laughter at his question in the background. She'd been right to assume it was the dead soldier's turn to stand guard on deck while the others escaped the stench.

"Almost," Laika replied, muffling her voice with her hand over her nose and mouth.

Laughter crackled through the radio, "Maybe you should seduce the big breasted Amazon, it might make your duty less smelly," more laughter filtered through.

"I'll try," she replied and began moving towards the door.

"You're too skinny for that Marshland whore anyway," was the reply and Laika felt nothing at the insult. Having spent over seven years at Marshland, one became immune to petty insults.

Laika quietly went down the stairs into the lower deck, it was dimly lit, which was good. She went down the corridor that would lead to the steering room, she peeped through the glass and saw the lone steerer at the controls; he seemed engrossed.

She left him and returned to the steps she'd just descended from. It was a big ship but for this operation, the soldiers used only a couple of the cabins. One of them was the one bearing 'Captain' with music filtering through and the other cabin had a net door which she'd peeped and seen the other four soldiers sitting round a table, smoking and playing cards and probably still laughing on the joke on their colleague.

Making a swift decision, she returned to the Captain's cabin three doors away, she dropped the rifle, opened her shirt to reveal her just insulted bosom and barged into the captain's cabin, shocking the man from wiping his giant buttocks with a towel; he'd been showering apparently. Her eyes quickly found his discarded uniform, perfect, she thought.

"Oh dear God, sorry captain, I thought it was the toilet," she exclaimed and pretended to be flustered while flipping her shirt over her bosom but not really covering anything, and then she wouldn't look away from the man's flabby gut and the almost nonexistent length of his manhood.

“So sorry, Captain,” she kept saying but didn’t turn away, the man was greatly affected by her almost naked chest. So she smiled shyly, batted her eye lashes and said, “You’re pretty impressive, Captain.”

“Call me General,” the man said in his guttural voice while he wheezed, unhealthy fat had clogged his airways.

“Oh my, General,” she grinned, her fingers slowly caressed down the swell of her breasts as she moved towards him and the idiot actually dropped his towel.

Laika wanted to cringe at the almost childlike appearance of his manhood, but she widened her eyes in awe, “Wow, General,” she said breathlessly and hurried over, reaching out and touching his huge belly and slowly caressing down...

Her eyes caught the used fork on the table, she looked up and he’d shut his eyes in expectation of pleasure. Grimacing lightly, she touched him and he wheezed and toppled into a chair. She didn’t let go, he flung his head back and moaned while her right hand grabbed the fork and stabbed him continuously in the neck, one of the softest, capital parts of the body.

He toppled from the chair and gurgled as he struggled to breathe to stay alive. Blood was everywhere, even on her chest; she had busted his arteries and was sure he’d be dead in seconds. She left him there and went into the bathroom to wash off the blood. As expected, he was dead when she returned; she silently pulled on his army uniform.

Maybe it had been for vanity but the General had worn trousers two sizes smaller than him. It had been a comical sight when she’d seen him on deck but now, it was beneficial because it fit, though it proofed to be a bit snug around the hips.

Black combat trousers, black vest crisscrossed with deep green leather which was almost black and black combat boots. Laika admired herself in the mirror and checked the galley attached to the Captain’s quarters for knives, which she found in abundance; apparently the Captain had a passion for knives, she wondered what he used them for as she picked out four light weighted ones.

When she stepped out of the cabin into the corridor, one of the soldiers had discovered the gun she dropped there. He was looking at it quizzically, probably wondering what it was doing in front of the captain’s cabin.

He turned to her and she casually shoved the first knife into his neck and watched him topple over. The noise attracted another of the soldiers, he peeped from the open glass door, half of his body still in the cabin, she flung the second knife as she ran towards him, it stuck in his neck.

He hadn’t yet landed on the ground when she flew over him into the room in time to let loose the remaining knives while those sitting soldiers scrambled for their guns.

Adrenaline pumped through her veins as she breathed deeply and grabbed an automatic handgun and made her way back to the control room.

With all the beeps and squawks from the controls, the soldier in there was unaware of what had happened, he didn’t even turn when she’d softly opened the door. It was a huge room with screens and dials and buttons on a dash board. One of the screens showed that they were approaching Marshland.



Laika walked up to him and put her arm with the gun over his shoulder, allowing the gun to rest on his vested chest.

“I think it’s going to rain,” she said casually, not even looking at the soldier who’d gone as still as stone.

## EVACUATION

She stood on the deck of the ship as it slowly berthed at the walls of Marshland. A rope was let down from the parapet as opposed to the walkway, only let down when resources had to be transferred from the ship into Marshland.

Laika had undressed the soldiers, even the guy in the control room, which she had tied up on his chair in only his under shorts. She had parked up all the uniforms and boots in a large duffel. She heaved it over her shoulder and began climbing the ladder with the conviction of meeting Zuka at the top.

She wanted to grin when she saw that she'd been right but Zuka immediately looked down her cloths, questions shone in his eyes.

“War. Cameroon is bombing this place in the morning and Nigeria isn't going to do anything,” Laika explained urgently, dropping the duffel at his feet.

“What...?”

“I commandeered the ship, we have less than an hour to evacuate everybody before the soldiers at the wall suspect foul play.”

“But, Laika...”

“Hey,” she closed the gap between them, looking up into his eyes, she touched him, not caring if people saw them, “I need you on my side tonight. We can't just die for something we know nothing about even if we are criminals. There are kids here that were unfortunate to be born in Marshland; they don't deserve to die in a blast from another country.”

Zuka reached up and tenderly held her cheeks, he kissed her. For the first time since he'd led eyes on her seven years ago, he did what he'd been fantasizing about. But it didn't last, there was no time to enjoy the warmth of her softness against his body.

“What do you need?” he asked, standing straight and ready to help anyway he could.

“Get dressed in a uniform. Give the remaining to people you trust and as surreptitiously as possible, get the children and willing women into the warship...”

“What about Buga?” he asked in trepidation.

Laika was past being scared. She pulled out the pistol from the duffel and cocked it, “I'm going to talk to him.”

“Talk...”

“Hurry, Zuka,” she whispered urgently, she ignored his concerned expression and leaned in for a fierce kiss before racing towards the stairs that would lead her down to Buga's quarters.

As expected, the riffraffs who claimed to be Buga's security and therefore bullied other prisoners because of their perceived importance, stood by his door. They straightened their stance from the lax position when they saw her hurrying forward.

"Hey, sweetness," their self made leader said in a mocking tone which caused laughter among his crew. "You finally..."

Laika didn't slow down; she used that momentum to slam her knee into his groin causing the rest of the crew to instinctively shift away from the damage, especially when her gun came into view. While the idiot groaned, she kicked open the door to Buga's chambers and was shocked to hear him bark from his ragged mattress.

"Another step and she gets it!"

Laika went still. Her eyes surveyed the situation. The 'she' Buga referred to was the fourteen year old daughter of the murdered martial master, Kapi, currently dressed in a woman's lingerie five sizes bigger than her. Tears tracked down her skinny cheeks and the anger in Laika rose so much it felt like her nose were emitting smoke, her hands shook from the furious intensity. It was clear what Buga was about to do, or had he done it already, Laika worried while her eyes ran down the child's body, checking for bruises or blood stains anywhere near her privates.

"This is disgusting even for you, Buga," she spat and raised the gun, aiming it at his head. But like the coward he was, he slithered behind the child, holding her hostage with a knife to her neck and managing to make her a target knowing Laika wouldn't shoot the daughter of her former master.

"Don't be jealous, dear Laika," he chuckled sickly, "She was only warming the bed for your return."

"She's a child!"

"Not really, her breasts have sprouted and I got bored of her," Buga pointed his left hand towards a corner of his chambers.

Laika refused to follow the direction of his hand, rather, her peripheral vision picked up the leg of a body and a pool of blood slowly soaking into the rough cement floor. Apparently, Buga had killed his Marshland wife. She hated to imagine herself filling that detestable position on her return, but she would have done it in a blink just to save Kapi.

A ruckus erupted at the door of Buga's chambers but none of them looked away from their present standoff. Soon enough, the door busted in and Zuka was shoved in at gun point. He had already dressed in one of the uniforms and a glance at his direction showed who the betrayer was; apparently, Simon had joined Buga while she'd been gone.

Simon had on the uniform but must have turned on Zuka the moment he got the chance, which would be the moment he got his hands on one of the guns commandeered from the ship. Her eyes met that of Zuka for a split moment and as though he had actually opened his mouth to speak, she gleaned that the rest of the arsenal was still unknown and safe, except the one Simon held to Zuka's head and the one she currently pointed at Buga.

"You stupid bitch!"

Laika didn't flinch when a spray of spittle cooled her cheek from the smelly mouth of the guard she had kneed in the groin earlier.

"You aren't so tough now..."

"Shut up, Romeh," Buga snapped still hiding behind the child. "So, sweetheart, you care to explain what's going on?" he asked in a tone that would have sounded reasonable but with Buga, reasoning was just impossible.

She had shifted from the door when Zuka had been shoved in so she stood in the centre of the room while her eyes swivelled from Buga's hand at the child's neck to Simon who held a small handgun; she wasn't sure he even knew how to use it but there was no need risking it.

Time was essential at this point.

"Why are all of you wearing the Nigerian army uniform?"

"Your Excellency, they were going to overthrow you, Sir," Simon replied, grinning at his perceived importance, especially as Romeh slapped his shoulder in acknowledgement of his bravery.

"Is that so?"

"They need to be punished, your Excellency," Romeh added causing a ripple of excitement among the gathered crew.

Laika realized then that the perceived fear of Buga and his merciless brutality was what kept him as the governor of Marshland; no one would want to go against him, but standing there in his chambers, she experienced firsthand how totally idiotic his crew was. No one was thinking how they'd get the gun from her, everyone wanted the entertainment of a punishment, one that Buga made an event and regularly used in intimidating the inhabitants of Marshland.

"She gets it, Laika, she gets it if you don't drop that gun and then Zuka would...or maybe Zuka should get it first," his tone was that of contemplation.

Time was running out. Her heart had been on steady acceleration from the moment she had seen the child in Buga's bed. But now, her heart hammered for the time slipping away, it hammered for the several things that could go wrong, things that were worse than the present situation. For one, the only survivor in the warship could have managed to untie himself and radio the wall for backup and the entire rescue mission would have been a flipping waste of time.

"Drop it, Laika," Buga snapped.

"Don't do it," Zuka spoke for the first time since he's been shoved through the door.

Simon smashed the butt of the handgun on his head and he staggered forward but didn't fall. He didn't deign to look at Simon but his eyes pierced the air to fix on hers, and then he shook his head.

Apparently their telepathy had long since disconnected, Laika thought. If it hadn't, Zuka would have been able to read her thoughts and the plan she mentally crafted as she slowly put the gun on the ground and kicked it away from her with her hands held in the air.

Zuka sighed in resignation and blatant disappointment.

Romeh rushed over, obviously intending to slap her or something to show power, but she raised her eyebrows threateningly and Romeh slowed his steps, stopped and asked, “What should we do, Sir?”

“Let the girl go, Buga,” Laika said and to her surprise, Buga shoved the girl off the bed, Laika flinched as she fell and obviously bruised her arm on the rough floor, but smart girl that she was, she got up and fled the room.

“Tell me, dear Laika,” he murmured like a kind grandfather would, “How many others are in this scheme to overthrow me?”

She could have told him everything wasn’t really about him. And then she would have told him it was a rescue mission, but the present plan in her head looked better than the initial one.

“Just me and Zuka now,” she replied as she watched him crawl down from his bed, his scrawny legs barely balancing his fat upper body. His gravelly breathing suggested a great collection of phlegm in his throat while his shifty eyes were the windows of an evil soul.

“Because Simon grew some sense,” he completed the obvious.

Buga marched to where she stood, his large stomach preceding him and slapped her quite hard. Laika’s neck snapped to the side at the force of his blow, her ear rang and she blinked to stop the tears that already dripped down her cheeks. She shook her head at Zuka who strained, heaving to come to her defence.

“You can no longer be my Marchland wife. Zuka will be flogged and then killed when I’m tired of watching him suffer,” he declared with authority and his riffraff crew jubilated as he turned and walked to his discarded shirt on the floor, he pulled it on over a really dirty pair of undershorts.

“What about her?” Romeh asked in a tone that suggested he would do something if his master didn’t.

Buga sighed as though in regret, “Take her to the latrine,” he declared and laughed when Zuka rushed to do something, but Simon relished hitting him with the gun again, this time he lost consciousness.

Laika wished she could’ve shared her thoughts with him. She wished she could cradle his head in her lap and made sure he was okay. Her eyes lingered on him as she was shoved out of the room.

## LATRINE

It was worse than what a real latrine should be. It wasn't an outhouse but part of the building, built over the part of the marsh populated by crocodiles. It wasn't like it was a natural destination, but the crocodiles had in their animal intelligence realized that there was always food coming from the big hole in the floor of the 'latrine'.

It had been originally built as a mini store, but Buga in his evil ingenuity carved a large round hole in the four by four room with barely any space for a foot hold. The idea was to see how long a person would survive before debilitating fear made them slip through the ever crumbling hole and into the waiting jaws of hungry crocs.

And the stench...

Laika felt it was actually the inability of people to bear the smell that made them jump into the waiting jaws of death rather than the fear of the crumbling, ever widening hole and the lack of handholds on the wall.

Romeh gave her lip the whole walk to the latrine. He took every slight opportunity to prod and shove her and Laika used it to stumble and appear defeated, deep down she hoped her appeared weak state would desist them from checking her body and finding out that she had knives hidden in the leather folds of her vest.

Simon had the decency to look slightly guilty but didn't dare stop Romeh from being mean to her. Without preamble, she was shoved into the latrine, Laika had to brace herself, her heart thumping as she jumped onto the opposite ledge, barely able to contain the full length of her boot.

Quickly, she pulled out a small Swiss army knife and stabbed the rough cement wall, the force crumbled more cement beneath her feet. Her breath came in great pants, so she stood on the tip of her toes and tried to calm her breathing, then she proceeded to stab the wall, swiftly creating a sort of handhold for herself.

Breathing deep was impossible with the stench wafting up through the hole. Laika slowly shifted her left hand which had been laying flat on the wall while she created a handhold, she passed it carefully in the small space in front her until she fitted all four fingers in the hole she had created. It was then she slowly, tentatively turned her body to back the wall.

Pebbles of stones and cement kept falling into the muddy water from beneath her boot and Laika swallowed hard when she saw the forms of crocodiles swirling in wild excitement at the possibility of a feast; a flash of lightening illuminated their deadly fangs. Fear threatened to entirely block her bated breath which wasn't much coupled with the stench of the marsh, made worse by the mad swirls of the crocs. The plan that had formed in her head didn't seem so smart as she stared at the yawning jaws of the animals; granted, there was a piece of land that bordered the marsh, she'd thought to hang down from the hole in the ground and swing her weight onto the land...that was looking increasingly impossible.

The marshal master had once told her not to always rush off with the plan in her head no matter how perfect it seemed at the time. But she wouldn't have hijacked the ship if she had followed that advice. A

glance at the borrowed wrist watch on her left wrist showed her it had been an hour since she'd returned, it felt more like a whole day and she was suddenly tired, frustrated and quite frankly hungry.

Laika knew she couldn't swing from the ledge as she'd earlier thought, she hadn't envisaged the widened hole and therefore the lack of handhold to swing from. She could have just shot Buga, but she hadn't wanted to risk hitting the child he'd held as shield. She bit her lower lip and tried not to entertain the heat of tears that threatened to fall from her eyes. Cameroon planned to bomb Marshland, there will be a war and she had yet to figure out how they would survive in a war torn Nigeria even after escaping Marshland. Maybe it was of no use; maybe it would be merciful if they died from the bomb. Maybe she could just...

"Laika?" a whisper at the door of the latrine made her almost slip. With her heart in her throat, she croaked a reply at the female voice.

"Oh, thank God," the whisper came again in undiluted relief. "It's Mary," she whispered in reply to her next question while scraping the wooden door, Laika assumed she was picking the lock, a preposterous idea since no one had ever dared such a thing when Buga commanded a person locked in the latrine.

The heavy wooden door swung open and Laika came face to face with the jolly woman whom she and Zuka had joked about in their stolen conversations. Mary was the kind of woman who couldn't say 'No' to guys and it resulted in her gaggle of children. Laika had no idea why Mary had been sent to Marshland but the reality was that many were innocent and many had nothing else to make their stay bearable than sex.

"Why are you here?" Laika whispered in shock at the sight of the older woman. "Where's everybody?" she was cautious, Simon or Romeh could be standing there to push her right back into the latrine and it would be a free fall to her death.

"Everybody...well, everybody but my children are watching the flogging at the courtyard," she reported, her breasts heaved while sweat dripped down her temple. She must have ran to her rescue or it could be from terror, it didn't matter, Laika was just grateful.

"Move back, Mary," she advised as she braced herself preparing for the jump. More cement broke off beneath her, it was as though the crumbling ledge sort to drag her back.

Laika shove the knife back into the leather fold, took a deep, foul breathe and shoved off the wall. Mary shrieked unconsciously as she landed on her stomach, her body half out of the door while her legs dangled over the ledge, loosening more stones from the crumbling ledge. She could hear the excited growls of the crocodiles as they probably piled over each other in their frenzy to snap at the meal literally dangling before them.

"Help me," Laika snapped in a croak as the breath had been knocked off her when she'd landed and she couldn't understand why Mary only stared at her struggling to crawl over.

"Oh," Mary, big breasted and probably the shortest person in Marshland, rushed over and pulled her through the door. Laika took a minute to catch her breath and just be grateful for small mercies.

"I have the weapons," Mary whispered conspiratorially, her eyes swivelling left and right on the empty corridor. Laika could clearly see the nervousness and terror that shivered through her body.

“How come?” she asked as she pulled herself to her feet and slam shot the latrine.

“I heard Zuka telling Simon and I saw him betray him. But...but...please don’t be angry, I believed I was doing the right thing...”

“Mary, continue,” Laika snapped, her stride were so wide Mary was practically jogging to keep up. Her heartbeat slowed when lightening revealed the ship was still anchored on Marshland.

“I stole the bag from where Zuka hid it and it was good because when Zuka told Simon there were only two uniforms and one gun, he believed when he checked and found nothing else,” Mary jabbered.

“Where are your children?”

“They are with the bag...here,” Mary stopped at another store similar to what the latrine must have been like before the hole in the ground. Again it was one of Buga’s locked up storerooms and none of his guards would have bothered to suspect a thing. They couldn’t even notice the Nigerian army ship still anchored at Marshland and Laika was grateful for their stupidity.

The door of the store opened to reveal three children between five to eight years, cowering in a corner of the almost empty room with the large bag in front of them. They rushed to their feet at the sight of their mother but hesitated when Mary frowned and it was an impressive frown. If Laika had been a child, she might have been worried.

“What?” she snapped as she marched to the bag and pulled out a scoped rifle which she checked for bullets and then slung over her shoulder.

“My eldest is not here. Where is your brother?” she sounded worried.

The only girl, who seemed the eldest in that present group, looked away, unwilling to snitch on her brother, but the second boy had no such qualms, “He went to watch the flogging, mama.”

“That boy...” Mary fumed but was interrupted by Laika’s clip tones.

“You need to get to the ship.”

“I can’t leave my eldest behind. When I heard there was a possibility of leaving this place, I grabbed it with both hands, I can’t leave him behind,” she panicked.

“Can you fire a gun?” a shake of head was her reply, Laika sighed and handed her a pistol anyway, a look alike with the one Simon wielded.

Mary’s hand shook so much Laika had a rethink of giving her a gun; the buxom woman might end up shooting herself or her children. With a heavy sigh, “We need to get your children onto the ship.”



**RESCUE**

Laika couldn't believe that in a space of an hour and a few minutes, she'd had and changed so many plans for this mission.

She was grateful for Mary's save and had planned to climb down into the ship, check if the lone operator soldier was still tied, enhance his bindings and then return to rescue Zuka.

Right

But she'd gone down the rope ladder with Mary and her gaggle of children who Mary had called monkeys, an apt moniker when Laika experienced their climb down the rope ladder with the wind and darkness and without assistance. Of course, the operator guy had tried to free himself and had almost succeeded but in his struggle, his weight must have toppled the seat he was bound to and he'd ended up smashing his head on the controls and passed out...maybe even died. A quick pressure to his neck showed he wasn't dead; good, because she knew nothing about steering a war ship, he was their ride out of here.

Laika had pulled him up, bound him again and handed over an empty pistol to the girl, she was to point at the man when and if he woke up. The child nodded when her mother reiterated the instruction while giving her other boys the stern eye required to keep them at the corner of the control cabin.

Mary shivered when she passed the four bloody dead bodies in the room and looked at Laika in trepidation. She had no time to assure the woman that she would not be harmed, she needed to get to Zuka and Kapi and Mary's eldest, apparently.

With a clear priority, she had climbed the rope ladder, the wind whipping her dreads over her face with Mary labouring behind her. She had lost count of the plans she had made but all of them had the same conclusion, leaving Marshland with Zuka, Kapi and anybody who cared to follow before dawn. At this point, she had stopped worrying about the Nigerian army at the wall, even if they suspected a hijack, Laika was ready to fight her way through that wall.

Since Mary was still clad in the brown khaki Marshland uniform, she was the ideal person to join the crowd of onlookers as her Zuka was flogged. He had regained consciousness and Laika could see that he had mentally retired to the place of meditation that martial master had taught them – mind over matter. Her heart wrenched in her chest as she watched from her hiding place, a vantage point while she arranged the rifle and scope and hoped she got a clean shot of Buga.

The plan was to shoot Buga after Mary had given the signal that she had found her eldest child and Kapi and in the panic that would ensue, Mary was to rush forward and cut off Zuka's bounds and then proceed to the rope ladder while she covered their escape in case anybody sort to stop them.

Simple plan, but then, this rescue wouldn't be tagged difficult if something didn't go wrong...again.

When it happened, Laika realized she'd forgotten to give Mary an earpiece which would've been useful in directing her actions. She'd began feeling better when Kapi, now wearing her baggy khaki, followed Mary as though she'd been pre-informed; the mother of four gasped and dragged the teen close while her

eyes sort to scan the crowd, a difficulty considering her height. Even from her sniper point, it was difficult to locate the boy in the sea of almost a thousand brown prison khakis.

Her heart rate calmed when Kapi, thin and taller than Mary, scanned the crowd too. But it spiked again when the most violent of Mary's baby daddies, grabbed her arm and leered at her. It wasn't difficult to imagine what he was saying to her with his threatening mien; he was bullying her as usual and the only reason he wasn't dead was Buga. Accidents happened in Marshland and he could've easily been one of those, but as Buga's lieutenant, other innocent people would suffer if something happened to him.

Laika watched Mary struggle to pull her arm from his hold. It would've also been easy to take the shot, but Buga was the price; shooting would alert him and the slimy man would flee before anyone blinked. But everything still turned sour because Kapi chose that moment to exhibit some backbone.

She'd always thought the child delicate, so she protected her from the animals in Marshland but her reaction, a possible by-product from her earlier experience in Buga's chamber, reminded her that Kapi was, indeed, Martial Master's daughter.

One moment she was on the other side of Mary, the next, she had Mary's assailant on his knees while she twisted an obscure muscle under his arm. He let go of Mary instantly and it would've been fine but then his goons noticed, they moved to retaliate and all hell broke loose. Laika had forgotten she'd not retrieved the gun from Mary and the woman chose to use it in her panic, blasting the first goon in close proximity. From the scope of her rifle, Laika could see the hole in the guy's stomach and when she turned, Buga was gone.

As expected.

She cursed under her breath as she tried to scan the vicinity for Mary's son in the melee that occurred at the gunshot, while keeping Zuka in view. And it was a good thing she'd kept him in view because, Simon, having not done enough damage already, decided to be Buga's hero. Despite the jostling of the racing crowd, he took aim to shoot Zuka, defenceless and tied to a post...Laika shot him without remorse; a clean bullet to the head did the trick. She was so angry she'd have loved to riddle his body with so many bullet holes his soul would be unable to experience the afterlife, but why waste the scarce commodity on a stupid corpse, the Cameroon explosive would do that.

More screams erupted at the report of the rifle while her heartbeat threatened to be louder than the stampede below her. With her eyes never leaving the scope, she scanned the vicinity around Zuka, the dust from the crowd making it difficult but gasped when Mary's son pick up Simon's gun. The teenager looked up to where she was positioned, his expression was as though he waited for direction and Laika breathed a sigh of relief; she'd not have wanted to kill Mary's son but would've if he'd posed a danger to Zuka.

Laika had expected more of a fight, but with guns going off in the courtyard, Buga's lieutenants were noticeably absent, most probably hiding with the crowd. Mary and Kapi struggled out from the pushing horde and the plan went as expected. Mary started slicing Zuka's bounds, but seemed to be taking time so her son shoved the gun to Kapi, collected the knife and cut Zuka down in seconds.

Hanging the rifle across her shoulder, Laika looked below the boulder she's been positioned on for a quick way down instead of using the abandoned stairs she'd used to climb up. The only way down was to

jump down and grab the washing line attached across the courtyard. She knew the washing line wouldn't hold her weight but she did it anyway.

“Laika!” Zuka exclaimed, his panic shout coinciding with a growl of thunder as she took the scary jump.

She grabbed the rope and as expected, it snapped, but instead of falling, she wrapped her wrist with the rope, swung with it and then let go, landing in the centre of the yard, where her small group waited, with a smile of gratitude that Zuka was okay enough to worry for her.

“You're okay,” she heaved, her eyes scanning his torso.

“The guy flogged like an old lady,” he joked, causing her grin and a smattering of nervous laughs from their audience.

“What's the plan?” Kapi asked, twitching on the spot while Zuka stripped Simon of the uniform, it was fortuitous she hadn't damaged it while killing the idiot.

Mary and her son turned to her, even Zuka.

“We need to hurry to the ship.”

## VOYAGE

The wind had picked up and it was obvious not all residents of Marshland would be evacuated on time.

When they got to the rope ladder, some prisoners hung around, staring down at the warship with curious murmurs. When Laika looked down, she saw some shadows jumping down from the ladder onto the ship and she had no way of identifying them, they could be friend, foe or curious innocents.

Having no time to worry, she allowed Mary, Kapi and Julius, Mary's son, descend before Zuka insisted she go next. Then she heard Zuka's voice as she landed on the ship, he'd obviously wanted them to go first to avoid the stampede which would likely break the rope ladder as he stayed back to organize the evacuation.

"Stupid man," she huffed, while she contemplated climbing back up to get him or rushing inside to wake the controls guy to start up the ship.

"He must have told them," Kapi whispered as screams erupted above them and the struggle for the ladder ensued.

"Let me check on the kids," Mary heaved, hurrying towards the stairs that went under deck, Julius followed her while Kapi waited behind, the wind blowing her khaki flat on her thin body.

"What do you want to do?" she asked the same moment the first slip occurred. The prisoner screamed as he fell almost a thousand feet to the deck and groaned. Some weren't so lucky, people fell into the marsh and the crocodiles rushed them in relish.

Laika's worry for Zuka increased.

"Zuka!" she put her hands over her mouth and shouted; it felt as though the wind blew her voice away. On the sixth shout, he answered her, still at the top.

"Oh, thank God," she whispered, and then shouted again, "Use the loading pulley!"

With a pounding heart, she heard the creak of the pulley, yet she worried that Zuka wouldn't be on it as he was one of the most selfless people she knew apart from the dead Martial Master.

"The shouts have reduced," Kapi noted, standing beside Laika, both their heads bent backwards as they watched the shadows on the wall. Laika didn't care anymore, she just wanted to find Zuka's broad shoulders; deep down she worried that Buga must have heard of the evacuation and would soon find a way to foil it.

Whatever Zuka said to the prisoners worked because the alarming swing of the rope ladder reduced to twitches as prisoners began arriving in orderly fashion on the deck. Soon, the pulley, a large wooden platform, suspended by chains, began its slow journey. When it was almost to the deck, Laika noticed that Zuka had managed to pack the pulley with all the children on Marshland. He stood in the centre while the children formed a tight circle around him, huddled by holding onto each other's uniforms.

Her heart melted when she saw what he'd done. "You stupid, awesome man," she whispered and didn't hesitate to rush into his arms when he offloaded the children and sent the pulley back to bring down the rest of the adults.

"What kept you so long?" she accused while basking in the warmth of his arms around her.

"It would've been a disaster if I hadn't stayed back to organize."

"How did you do it...what did you say to them?"

Zuka stared at Laika and Kapi's curious faces and shrugged, "I just spoke reasonably about the disadvantages of struggling."

Laika took a step back, her eyebrow raised, Kapi's head cocked to the side in contemplation, both communicating their disbelief.

"Okay, okay, I pointed the gun while explaining that the walls were already wired and shaking the ladder in their struggle could trip the bomb."

Kapi nodded, "That worked," she said in a reasonable voice before walking towards the children, herding them away from the rails to avoid unfortunate accidents.

"Oh wow," Laika whispered, staring up at him, "You're brilliant and..."

A scream rent the smelly air from the stairs. Laika snatched the gun in Zuka's hand and raced towards the scream. When she got below deck, she realized it came from the control room. Oh God, what now, she thought, heart pounding as she raced to the cabin.

"Finally!"

Her heart stopped when she saw Buga held Mary's crying daughter with the gun pointed at her head. The controls guy remained bound but awake with eyes swivelling from Buga, to a sobbing Mary, to Romeh roughly handling the little boys which Julius wanted to safe but couldn't move, since she pointed a gun at Buga.

"So nice of you to join us, Zuka," Buga said when Zuka skidded to a stop behind her at the entrance of the controls cabin, taking in the scene.

"Let the girl go, Buga, it's over for you," Laika said keeping both slimy men in sight.

"No, dear Laika, it isn't over for me, not with a gun in my hand."

"We all can leave Marshland before the explosion..."

Buga scoffed, "You can't evacuate everybody on..."

"Everyone is on the ship," Kapi announced from behind Zuka.

Laika saw Buga blanch, she reacted differently by shooting Romeh in the head, the minion died looking shocked. Julius reached his screaming younger brothers first before Mary while Buga pulled the trigger of the pistol on Mary's daughter's head but it clicked.

He tried again and cursed when it clicked with no effect. “Stupid, foolish gun,” he muttered as he let go of the little girl and tried to fix the gun with both hands. The girl raced to her mother, while Zuka rushed the tyrant, punching him the moment he looked up.

“Your evil brain failed to direct you check the gun for bullets,” Laika spat saliva at the groaning tyrant who didn’t seem so terrorising anymore. Zuka slammed his boot in his stomach, the force lifting him a few paces back into a metal cupboard.

“He should be thrown into the marsh!” Kapi exclaimed passionately from her position at the entrance, she was heaving and close to tears.

“I agree with the girl,” the controls guy quipped, causing every eye in the room to turn to him in consternation. He swallowed with difficulty and added, “He’s a terrible man and was going to kill that little girl; he deserves the crocs.”

Mary chuckled first through her sobs while hugging all her children and the others joined.

“Well, the Nigerian army has spoken,” Zuka declared bending to grab Buga by the scruff of his shirt’s neck and dragged him kicking and groaning towards the door.

“But we will do it right, we will hold court above deck,” Laika followed.

“You need to be quick though, he,” the controls guy jutted his jaw at Buga, “...had answered the call from the wall and told them a coup had taken place and that he was approaching with some people on the ship.”

Laika’s heart stopped beating and ratcheted again, their element of surprise was lost. Zuka reacted by smashing his face with his boot.

“What...what does this mean?” Kapi asked in trepidation.

“I heard the commandant at the wall ask that he put any of the officers on the line, but I pretended to be passed out. The wall knows there’s been a hijack. They will be waiting armed.”

“You all die anyway,” Buga chortled and got another booted foot in his face.

“What do we do?” Laika asked, shocked that the controls guy was helping them.

“We could try calling...”

Laika noticed that he was already associating himself with them. “But why are you doing this, why are you helping us...?” she paused with an open palm at him requesting his name.

“Musa,” he provided and looked down before answering, “My brother and his wife were taken here, I was hoping to find them,” his voice cracked.

“Don’t be hopeful, several have died over the years. But what’s his name?”

“Ahmed.”

With a deep breath, Laika nodded and preceded Zuka out of the cabin while he dragged Buga along.

When they got on deck, indeed, it was crowded and loud but the noise died when they appeared. Zuka hoisted Buga to his feet and the gathered group gasped, the tension was palpable.

“I want us all to assume this is the court and Buga stands charged of several murders at Marshland. He has judged you unfairly, has raped women and even children, has stolen from you. He also was about to leave with the ship without rescuing you even when he knew Cameroon will be bombing Marshland soon. The decision is yours, should he live or die by the crocs?”

Silence hovered over the prisoners. Fear was palpable in the eyes of the ones standing in front of the gathering. They were probably wondering if this was a trick and they would be punished for daring to convict the dreaded Buga.

Zuka punched him again when he dared to struggle and he spat blood on the deck...a weak old man, not the tyrant that had made their prison worse than the hell it already was. They must have realized this because, someone from the back shouted, “Death by the crocs!”

One by one, they hollered the sentiment until the prisoners chanted it, some even went as far as pushing Buga supporters forward for judgement. Laika nodded at Zuka who hurled Buga towards the rails, followed by other prisoners who shoved Buga supporters forward.

Laika felt the moment should have been profound, she should have given a speech wishing Buga a terrible stay in hell and that this was for Martial Master and all others he’d murdered. But none of that happened, she just grabbed his neck, looked into his terrified eyes and smiled while shoving him over the rails into the marsh.

His scream lasted seconds before the crocs tore him apart. Buga supporters, thirteen of them were given swift judgments and despite their pleas, were flung over the rails to the waiting crocodiles. Then cheers went up with several thanks the same moment rain poured.

With lightening slashing the sky, Laika made Zuka call out for Ahmed, a tall thin man shuffled forward looking terrified. Laika knew him, it was his wife that had been Buga’s Marshland wife until he killed her in his chambers earlier. She felt pity for him but didn’t know what comfort to give, except to usher him below deck while Zuka arranged for the soldiers’ bodies to be thrown overboard and the children be settled in first with their mothers before others. It was a tight fit but it was better than being in the rain.

Musa hugged his brother, both crying over the death of Ahmed’s wife. Then determinedly, Musa called in and reported that they’d been held hostage by Buga and his cohorts but Laika and Zuka had freed them, so he was returning. When they asked of the captain, Musa fibbed and blew on the mouthpiece to imitate a bad connection which wasn’t farfetched since it was raining heavily.

“There are no guarantees. The commandant isn’t a nice person. Everybody knew he was in support of how Buga ruled Marshland, and the guys on the wall were specially chosen by him, they have directives from the Senate not to save any soul from Marshland.”

“So this was all for nothing, we can’t go through the wall,” Laika croaked, swallowing hard to curb her urge to cry.

Musa sighed heavily and turned to the blinking controls. He stared at the screens, then clicked on some buttons, “Not entirely,” he said, “This is a warship after all.”

**BULLDOZE**

It was a daring plan, suicidal even, but it was the only chance of survival they had...to use the warship against the wall.

“I am betraying my country,” Musa worried as he steered the ship. Laika understood that as an army officer, what he was doing was treason and if caught, punishable by death.

“You are saving lives, think of the children,” Mary snapped from the corner, giving Musa the stink eye, while she gathered her children close, except Julius, he had found his way to Kapi’s side.

Zuka was out there explaining the situation of things to the prisoners. They had to understand that this wasn’t a full proof plan and they would be on their own once the ship berthed at Nigeria, amidst chaos.

“I don’t know how your brother got here, but most of us at Marshland were betrayed by our country,” Laika leaned on the wall, arms folded under her breasts with her whole body armed. “It might have been through the justice system or plain evil of men. Mary was widowed without a will from her husband or so the lawyer claimed. But ultimately, her in-laws connived with the lawyer to send her and her two children to Marshland...we all know why.”

“Her son was a child, the daughter a baby when they arrived.”

Musa glanced at Mary and frowned. His brother spoke in their dialect, possibly explaining that the other smaller children had been birthed at Marshland.

“Women are raped everyday at Marshland,” Laika informed him and watched as his hand tightened on the controls. “Kapi and her father were sent here because he had dared to challenge the police IG to do his job, she’d arrived with her father as a child too, even though Buga murdered him years later and tried to sexually abuse her earlier.”

“I was accused of embezzlement at the Bank of Agriculture,” Ahmed said without prompting. “My superior did it but he was quick to get me arrested and sent here with my wife, before any investigations. An absent man can’t defend himself,” he concluded sadly.

“I’m not saying there aren’t guilty ones amongst us, but Marshland seemed to have been created more for the innocent than the guilty. You’re making right that wrong in your small way.”

Musa nodded, took a deep breath and, “You need men in the turret. The automatic cannon can reload itself, but the turning mechanism broke, so aiming the cannon needs to be done manually.”

Laika nodded, already calling Zuka on the two way radio. When they got to the turret, after shuffling through several passages in sideways formation with the men they’d chosen for the job, they found it musty.

Zuka swallowed his misgiving and joined the men in widening the rusty, iron door which yawned quite loudly in the tiny space. Zuka had thought to bring a flashlight, so he pointed it into the dark cave overcome by cobwebs.



“This looks like it’s not be used for eons,” Zuka commented, sneezing as he walked in with his hand before him to clear the cobwebs.

The two way radio sputtered to life, “Musa, come in over.”

“Musa responding, over.”

“The turret seems inactive, nothing is working, over,” she said this because she saw Zuka flip several switches but the dome shaped container remained dark.

Silence reigned on the line.

“Musa, are you there, over?”

“Yes, I forgot this had been turned to a transport only ship, I’m sorry, over.”

Her heart stuttered in fear, then her eyes met Zuka’s, both of them gleaning the hopelessness of the situation. Questions flashed in her eyes, could Musa be trusted or was this a genuine oversight?

“You can return to the cabin,” she croaked to the other three men. They hesitated for a second before nodded and filing through the narrow passage, leaving both of them behind.

Swallowing with difficulty and clearing his throat of any strain of hopelessness, he moved to stand with her by the entrance, and engulfed her in a hug. They stood there for a long time, just breathing.

“I can’t ask the question,” she whispered.

Zuka sighed, “I have no answers.”

They stared at each other, not needing words to communicate how lucky they’d be if they survived this.

The radio sputtered and Musa’s voice rasped through, “Err...Laika, we are nearing the wall and it doesn’t look good. I’m detecting more than one canon on us...what are we going to do? Over.”

Their gazes shifted from the radio in Laika’s hand and met again, holding.

“Well, he asked the question for you,” he tried to joke.

Laika shook her head, her smile was sad as she pressed to reply, “I’ll be there in a minute.”

His hands raised to her shoulders before he slowly lowered his head, pressing his warm lips on her temple and leaving it there. When he raised his head, his hands smooth the front of her bound dreadlocks even though none was out of place.

“We did our best...you most of...”

“But it can’t end here!” she sobbed, dropping her head on his broad chest and Zuka gathered her close again, not knowing what to say to make the situation less terrible.

“What about the children?” her voice was muffled against his Nigerian army uniform and Mary’s kids flashed in his mind, constricting his chest.

Laika jerked off the protection of his arms. The anger, coupled with the day's frustrations, surged from her stomach like a tsunami. She released it by growling and shoving the door of the turret, with all her might. The loud yawning sound shocked her first, then she watched as though hypnotized as the heavy metal swung backwards, bulldozing through the triple stacked cartons of...bullets.

Bullets of all kinds, some strange, elongated ones she assumed were for canon rifles, spilled everywhere. It didn't stop there, she had caused a domino effect and so, they watched as carton upon carton toppled over knocking the next stack until they stood in the centre of the chaos.

Laika swallowed and slowly turned to look at Zuka with widened eyes, they laughed at the same time at the preposterousness of the situation.

"Hey, what's that?" Zuka noticed some cartons had spilled white packages. He passed Laika, flashing his torch as he neared. Laika followed him but stopped at the scope of the canon, wiping it with her elbow to see. She swallowed hard; the wall stood at the edge of the water and was currently fully armed, obviously prepared for the war with Cameroon.

With a pounding heart, she counted five armoured tanks and a solid line up of military personnel. All they had to do was bomb the ship and sink it, problem solved.

"Laika?"

"Hmm?"

"You need to see this," his awed tone galvanized her from the scope to where he bent over some of the fallen cartons.

"Is that real money?" she couldn't be sure, it'd been years she'd seen any naira notes.

"Yes," Zuka whispered. "I noticed the white package which turned out to be cocaine and when I dug deeper, bundles of two thousand naira notes were at the bottom."

"Zuka, our highest currency denomination is one thousand," she pointed out.

"Probably seven years ago. With no news or info, we wouldn't have heard when this denomination was added. There'd been rumours then though..."

"So, this is real money?" she snatched the bundle and held it to the light. It was the naira note, just like the ones she'd known but without the face of a prominent person. "Hmm, they finally learned not to put dead people's faces on the money," she noticed.

Zuka didn't chuckle, he couldn't, not when he was focused on flipping through cartons and discovering more bundles of money. It didn't make sense that they were discovering this when they were about to die; could God be that cruel?

This was obviously illegal money. Was this the commandant's deal or were other government officials involved; could this have caused the war?

"Check the others," Zuka ordered.

She reacted by going to the carton by the door but then she passed it, climbed out of the turret and went to a cabin they'd passed earlier. It was a store and she found what she was looking for, cartons of army pouches and knapsacks. She grabbed two, one carton over the other and returned to the turret. Laika went back for the duffels and the stacks of cartons reminded her of how the cartons in the turret had fallen, domino style...

"I know how we can survive this!" she exclaimed. She snatched the radio from her belt and called in.

"How far are we from the wall...give me in minutes, over."

"Err...twenty-two minutes, maybe less. What's going on? Over."

Musa's question mirrored Zuka's expression.

"How fast are we going?"

"Not at all; I'm not in a hurry to reach the wall without any form of defence."

"The best defence is a good offence," when she said that, Zuka cocked his head, his eyes widening as he begun understanding her drift.

"What?" Musa quacked through the radio and then, "Oh!" he got it.

"That wall is at the edge of the water, and doesn't look so sturdy, especially against thousands of tons of warship metal..."

"I'll ramp speed and plough through..."

"Yes...it's the only way."

Laika could feel the increase in vibration of the ship, Musa was doing his thing already, she really hoped it worked.

Zuka took her by surprise, he bounded to her, grabbed her face and kissed her so fiercely her knees weakened. "You're a genius, Laika," he whispered looking into her eyes and kissed her again, this time softly...it still weakened her knees and filled her head with naughty things she'd only been able to dream of at Marshland, but could literally taste the possibility of it now.

"I want to be braced when we hit the wall," she said but her head was still bent backward, her lips puckered to receive Zuka's kiss. He didn't disappoint, he nipped her one last time and nodded.

He returned to fishing out bundles of money while she began flinging them into the duffels.

She switched on the radio, "Musa, tell your brother to go with Kapi and distribute weapons to everybody, they'd need it when they're topside. Then ask Julius to meet me at the turret. Over"

"Copy that, over."

Laika had just zipped up the second knapsack when Julius arrived and proceeded to be speechless. She understood his shock but there was no time to waste, so she flung a knapsack at him.

“Fill that for your family,” she ordered and then proceeded to fill the second duffel.

After two minutes, Laika suggested they abandon the rest before the ship, which was on full throttle now, hit the wall. She exchanged the rifle over her shoulder for one of the knapsacks she’d filled, Zuka took the bigger one and Julius, having been warned not to overload so he’d be able to run with it, slung the last knapsack over his shoulder.

The guys dragged the duffels down the narrow passages, while Laika followed with the cartons of pouches with their voices echoing the simple plan of handing out a bundle to each person, a pouch and survival tips for when the ship hit the wall...it was simple, run for dear life.

Every prisoner had a bundle of two thousand naira note, even the children and that amounted to a hundred thousand naira each. It wasn’t enough but it was better than nothing, a fair amount to start out, maybe it would get them home to their families, at least.

The ship was practically flying now. The previously sluggish ton of metal now felt like it was floating on water. Laika left the remaining cash in the duffel for Ahmed and Musa, while making sure Zuka, Kapi and Julius followed her to the stair leading to the upper deck where Mary and her kids waited.

Laika had no idea how they’d survive this, but it was a die trying moment. Kapi offered to hold Mary’s youngest boy, he was five, or was he four? He refused to leave his mother though, so Kapi got stuck with the other boy, who wasn’t much older. Zuka picked up the girl and without instructions, she clasped her arms and legs around his body, her tiny hands rounding his neck through the straps of the knapsack, securing herself to Zuka for the run about to occur.

Kapi hefted the small boy who wasn’t much bigger than his younger brother and held him the same way. Mary followed suit, it seemed the most secure way to hold the kids as they’d likely be running bent over to avoid being hit by bullets.

They lined up on the steps, each wrapping their arms around the iron bannister in preparation for the collision; Laika at the top of the stairs, immediate to the closed deck door and Zuka below with everybody in between. “No matter how disoriented you might feel, the moment the ship stops, we run, because we have a better chance while the soldiers are trying to recoup,” everybody nodded, though she could see the terror in their eyes, which mirrored what she felt, probably more.

She turned to advise the prisoners, who had left the cabin to fill the narrow passage, the same moment the ship hit the base of the wall and her advice happened...they were flung along the narrow passage like rag dolls. With the entire ship being of metal and iron, severe maims or even death was inevitable as opposed to if they’d remained in the crowded cabin, cushioning each other at collision.

The force jarred her arms, sending a continuous vibration through her muscles resulting in a weakening effect. Laika worried about the same effect on Mary or Kapi and gasped when the teenager screamed. Her eyes opened in time to see Kapi slip from the bannister. It would have been debilitating, especially with the kid wrapped around her torso, but Zuka was quick to grab her and hang her back on the bannister, where she promptly wrapped her arms about the iron.

Over the terrified screams of prisoners was the deafening yawn of metal disintegrating from the ship. It seemed longer than expected for the ship to come to a stop, but it did. Laika was beginning to be grateful that the effect of the collision hadn't been so bad when she experienced a tilting motion.

“What’s happening?!” Kapi screamed, her voice a tiny resonance in the midst of other screams and the ship’s slow fall...

All that was left to do was hold on for dear life. The whole experience felt like what an earthquake probably felt like...deafening noise and uncontrollable vibrations.

Nobody moved after the eon long tilt of the ship. Laika straightened tentatively as though any sudden movements would worsen the tilt. When she looked down, her people were doing the same thing and nobody had as yet let go of the bannister.

Light fixtures hung by wires sprouting electrical sparks while some fluorescents flickered but still showed the alarming destruction in the ship.

“Everybody okay?” she croaked, chancing a glance down, her people were intact.

“Try to get to the deck door,” Zuka advised and she crawled forward, not let go of the bannister, since it would be a long fall down the narrow passage if she did. She tried the metal door to no avail, “I think the latch is stuck.”

“The collision must have bent the metal,” Zuka heaved at the door for about a minute, having crawled over.

Prisoners were beginning to crawl out of the cabins and then Musa and Ahmed were there, crawling up the stairs towards the latch. And without words, Zuka passed Mary’s girl-child to Laika and the men joined efforts to pull the lever of the latch.

Nothing happened. Not even after Musa used his knife to try and shake loose the stuck part of the latch. Murmurs from the prisoners droned the ship wreck and Musa whispered that half of the ship was still in water and it definitely will be collecting water, subsequently sinking the ship.

Panic appeared on Zuka’s face and he expelled more effort in getting the latch to open. It was beginning to feel as though all their efforts had been for nought when the lever shifted and they instantly flung the latch outward. A cheer erupted from the prisoners, Laika felt like joining in but she frantically slashed her arm in the air for silence...stealth was needed at this point.

Musa crawled out into the breaking dawn, Zuka allowed Laika, Julius, Kapi and Mary to crawl out before he followed with Ahmed leading the rear before prisoners began piling out.

With the ship tilted, they couldn’t get to their feet, plus it was slippery after the heavy rain. The ship had indeed bulldozed the Nigerian wall, knocking off personnel and, Laika squinted and realized, only one armoured truck remained on the far side of the wall. Heavy smoke billowed in the vicinity of the wall, Laika assumed the armoured cars might have exploded when the ship ploughed through.

As the prisoners struggled to get out of the ship, the momentum caused a slight tilt of the ship. “The rest of the wall won’t hold for long,” Zuka noticed.

“And let’s hope the army don’t recover sooner,” Musa added, already shouts could be heard from the army camp behind the wall.

Laika handed over the kid to Zuka before crawling to the part of the deck tilted upward. “We have to hold on to the rail, walk slowly forward and then slide towards the wall. I’ll do it first and then cover for you guys.”

She couldn’t see their faces but their apprehension weighted heavier than a wet blanket. There was no time to waste, she crawled, climbing over the fallen aft mast to reach the rail, then she moved one step at a time, looking back once to make sure her people followed her...they did.

A loud yawning sound startled everybody and the group turned in time to see the main mast bend towards the wall. The sound of iron on iron as it tumbled was deafening; Laika was glad it fell away from their current position.

Creeping past the Fore Superstructure, Laika headed for where the deck gun should have been, it obviously had been knocked at the collision; from there, she got on her buttocks and let off the rail to slide down to the wall.

The wall was as high as a three storey building with bridges that swooped down to the ground. It was an ingenious design with stairs on the side for those on foot and the smooth arc for the armoured cars to drive up to wall.

As she climbed over the rail onto the comfortable walk way on the wall, she could glimpse the destruction they’d caused with the ship. Indeed, armoured cars had exploded and army men ran around like ants on the ground trying to douse the fire.

Nodding at the acceptable situation which would hopefully allow them skulk into the forest, she waved her people over the rail, whispering urgency and pointing them to the far off armoured and the bridge which was nearer to the forest.

“Take the lead,” she told Musa who knew the way better.

Musa nodded, “We can’t take the bridge; there will be sentinels at the bottom. I hope the training rope is still hooked...” he said and led the single file on the walk way, hunched over and running.

“Oh, sweet Jesus!” Mary cried.

“Are you okay?” Ahmed asked her.

She shook her head with vehemence, “I’m afraid of heights,” she stammered.

“What?” Laika was shocked, though she prodded her long, springing a small smile for her little boy whose skinny arms wrapped her neck. “But you climbed down from the Marshland rope ladder.”

Mary shivered, “That wasn’t as high as this one, plus, it was a ladder. I was ascending and descending. This one...”

“Don’t look down!” Laika snapped just before she did. “Keep your eyes on Kapi’s back...one step at a time, Mary.”

And as though the world was bent on scaring Mary more than she already was, a yawning sound indicated the tilt of the ship and someone exclaimed, “The wall is cracking.”

Laika looked back only once, Mary’s whimper increased her trepidation, and with her heart in her throat, she turned to Mary, “Run!”

With the vibrations of the wall cracking under the weight of the tilting ship, screams erupted and the army below noticed and opened fire.

“Keep moving! We’re almost there!” Musa shouted from the fore of the procession.

Bullets whizzed by, some hitting the sides of the wall in a burst of concrete dust and then an explosion wracked the wall, somewhere behind. Laika staggered, as did everyone else, she reached out in time to steady Mary who stumbled and was about to fall sideways, which would mean falling to her and her last child’s death.

“Jesus! Jesus!” Mary whimpered while Laika prodded her.

Musa led the way under the last armoured tank, what he called the Main Battle Tank, no wonder it was placed strategically; the turret boasted of two machine guns and a giant calibre canon. Laika was just glad to see her people going through quickly. She looked back while Mary struggled through, and saw that the explosion had made serious damage on the wall and some prisoners had stumbled over the side to their death.

“You go,” Ahmed prodded and she crawled under the tank without question. When she got to the other side, Zuka had collected Mary’s boy from her, in addition to the girl he already had clasped to his neck. He made sure both children held strong, while he descended one of the training ropes hanging by the side of the wall, while Mary took the other one.

Another explosion happened close to the armoured tank and Laika crouched, her heart hammering so loud, she almost didn’t hear Ahmed’s scream of pain. Dropping to her knees, she crawled back to the tank, looking under she saw Ahmed lying helplessly while other prisoners passed him, sliding under as quick as they could.

Laika pulled out a pistol, went on her stomach and was in time to point it at the current prisoner trying to crawl through, “Stop!”

The prisoner’s eyes widened and his terror turned to whatever was more than debilitating fear. “Go back, and drag the wounded guy under the tank!” she shouted this and indicated her seriousness by cocking the gun and looking so menacing the prisoner retraced his movements.

It took a minute to position Ahmed under the tank; Laika crawled under, grabbed him under his arms and dragged him out. She had to shift him to the side to avoid the almost stampede of scrambling limbs that followed from under the tank.

Her radio squawked while she used a piece of Ahmed’s prisoner khaki, shaved off with her knife, to tie off the wound on his thigh.

“Laika! Where are you?!”

*Zuka*

“Ahmed got shot, I’m stemming the blood...we’ll be down soon,” she assured to calm his worry. Well, Ahmed would be down soon, as an idea had just bloomed in her mind. It was so clear, it felt divine.

“Can you stand?” she shouted to be heard over the boom of the bazookas. Ahmed nodded, then placed his hand on the huge tire of the tank to heave himself up. He tenderly placed weight on his left leg and winced at the pain.

“I’ll manage,” he croaked and hopped with her help to the edge of the fence. With some difficult manoeuvres, he held on to the heavy duty, industrial rope with both hands, but only wedged his right leg on the wall while the wounded one dangled.

Laika watched him for a few seconds as he painstakingly went down the rope. She swallowed hard and clicked on her radio. “Zuka?”

“Yes, baby...I don’t see you,” he huffed while the explosions echoed through the radio, crackling the connection. Her heart melted at his pet name.

“Help Ahmed...” she choked.

“I don’t fucking see you! Laika!...”

“I’ll be down in a moment...”

“We don’t have a moment. Doves of armoured tanks and truck full of army guys have arrived!”

“More than half of the prisoners are dead, Zuka.”

“But we’re okay, we will be okay,” Zuka tried to assure her. All he wanted was for her to come down from that wall. Musa had already led Mary and her kids and Kapi into the forest and many other prisoners. “Is this pay back for earlier when I stayed back to organise the prisoners? Come down, Laika, we’ll be fine. Ahmed just got down, you have time.”

“But what if we can stop this war? I’m thinking about the innocent children in Nigeria, even if the plan is to end this after 24 hours, innocent people will still die.”

“Laika, you’ve done so much, you’ve done enough...”

Laika turned to the armoured tank, climbed on it and struggled with the hatch while Zuka squawked on her radio. Balancing on the iron ladder, she used both hands to pull on the hatch, when it opened, she almost fell off balance.

“Laika...baby...please answer me.”

“I’ll meet up with you guys soon,” she panted while climbing into the dark hole.

“Fuck! Whatever it is, tell me, I’ll help.”

“I’m in the armoured tank, Zuka...”



“What?!”

Laika pulled her small flashlight before pulling down the hatch. It felt like a vacuum, almost peaceful as it instantly dimmed all the racket bazookas were making.

“Jesus, Laika, get out of there. The soldiers are climbing the wall!”

“I need to be quick then,” she switched off the communication line and clicked onto Musa immediately.

“Musa, this is Laika, how do I turn on the Main Battle Tank?”

She chuckled because she sounded as though she was asking for something as casual as how to make moi-moi.

“What?!” Musa’s voice crackled through. “What are you doing in the tank?” he sounded dismayed and breathless.

“Stopping the war,” she replied and sobbed when she heard the shake in her voice, she was terrified and absolutely confused as to if this risk would work. She should be running away with Zuka, the man she couldn’t deny being in love with any longer. She should be cooped up somewhere with him, in relative safety, hoping this nightmare would end sooner than later. Taking a deep breath in determination, she controlled her breathing, “Tell me how to use this thing,” she demanded; someone had to do the dirty job.

While Musa spoke, his own anxiety and terror obvious in his stammered directives, she pointed her flash light on the control seat, sat on it and turned the lever that would power the tank. With his directives, she was soon staring at the screen connected to the optical periscope mounted on the turret. She got up to turn on the reloadable canon, returned to her seat to manoeuvre the control which rotated the turret to point at the general direction of Marshland.

The formidable building, her home these past years, looked small and unimpressive on the tank screen. That grey block that had generated so much pain and anguish to so many people, now looked like a toy house on the screen.

Instead of waiting for Cameroon to do the honours, Laika thought it was fair that the heinous creation be destroyed by the creator, Nigeria. Marshland was no man’s land; she recalled the martial master, Kapi’s father, speaking of years of altercation between Cameroon and Nigeria concerning that piece of island in between the countries.

There had been a treaty signed; Nigeria would use the land for only seven years, wherein they would hand it over for use by Cameroon. But with Marshland being absolutely useful to Nigeria - silencing people, being a money laundering mechanism for some selected few, the treaty had been broken and so, war, since Cameroon would take that land by force.

Laika suspected this was probably the reason for the war. She hoped if she shot down Marshland, blew it to smithereens by God’s grace, it would look like Nigeria wanted to avoid the war and so was destroying its structure by itself. And hopefully, Cameroon would desist from their attack.

Her hands got sweaty as the tank shook at the whirl of the turning turret; then with a basic knowledge of touch-screens, she tapped on the zoom lens, bringing Marshland into the centre of the red scope circle on the screen.

“Now handle the trigger...” she did.

“...and shoot,” Musa stammered.

“Yep,” her hand trembled, she swallowed and pressed.

She didn't know which was more shocking; the scary jerk of the tank when she fired or the powerful zoom of the projectile, heading straight for Marshland. Laika watched as though in a trance as projectile after projectile, shot off from the tank and soon, Marshland became a bloom of fire and smoke.

It looked almost beautiful against the dawning horizon; like a fiery bloom on a sky blue canvas.

A jerk she didn't cause, hit the tank, breaking her trance.

“What the...”

“Laika!” her radio sputtered before the hatch of the tank banged open, letting in the morning sun and cacophony, more than she'd left behind when she'd climbed in. It was Zuka. He'd come back for her.

“Laika, get the hell out o...” a barrage of bullets clanged on the hatch, shutting her in and Zuka...who could be...

“Zukaaaa!”

**RACE**

Her heart stopped.

It felt like lead.

*Oh Zuka.*

She was sure she wasn't breathing, yet she heaved, panting with anger, mostly at herself as she sat down and turned the turret to face the direction of the barrage. The optical periscope displayed on the screen a surge of Nigerian soldiers approaching the tank from the arced steps; they looked like a crowd of termites determinedly climbing decayed wood, except these termites had guns and they'd shot her Zuka.

A sob broke from her blocked throat.

Her sight blurred as she switched from the canon to the calibre rifle. Laika cried out right when she squeezed the trigger, spraying bullets and watching through her tears as men fell like dominoes.

"Laika..."

The sputter of her radio jerked her from the haze she'd fallen into.

"Zuka!"

The hatch jerked open, and there was her man.

"Are you done, baby?"

She broke into a sob instead, and then grinned, "Yes! Yes, I'm done," she enthused while climbing out of the tank. Zuka covered her, shooting in spurts as she climbed down and raced for the fence and the ropes.

"Zuka!"

"Right behind you!"

Or beside her, because he took the second rope, and they both swoop down as fast and safe as possible. The rough rope burned through the glove but it was nothing compared to the joy that Zuka was fine.

He shoved her into the thick forest while he pulled out several grenades from his side pockets, pulled out the pins as he raced after her, and flung them over his shoulder.

Zuka ploughed Laika to the ground as the bombs exploded. Then even when the smoke burned their eyes, choked their breaths and made it almost impossible to see, he prodded her to her feet, shoved her forward, and chose a denser part of the forest instead of the clear path other prisoners had taken.

They staggered through the forest, glad they didn't hear any sound of pursuit but not relaxing either. Zuka was panting when he spied the barbwire corralling them in. The forest was still inside the army camp, probably why they weren't pursuing them, his eyes swivelled up to look for drones.

“Musa,” Laika said into her radio, as winded as Zuka.

“Musa,” she tried again, the radio spat and sputtered but didn’t connect.

“Do you think they’d been caught...”

“Musa, come in!” she sounded desperate.

Zuka was taking out his radio to try his connection when it sputtered and squawked, “Zuka...” it wasn’t clear, but it was Kapi’s voice. Laika hurried to his side.

“Kapi! Where are you?”

Static crackled. Her voice cracked. They could barely hear the message.

“Circle back right? Is that what you heard?” Laika asked with a frown, not sure she heard right, as that meant going towards the Nigerian army instead of running from them.

“That’s what I heard,” Zuka concurred, grabbing her elbow and taking off in a run, dodging leaves and branches as much as he could in the dense forest.

After ten minutes of running, they came to a roughly cut hole in the barbwire were the sand had obviously been disturbed by boots. Of course, they couldn’t assume Nigerian soldiers were escaping their camp, this must have been done by prisoners. Laika hoped they were okay, as outside the barbwire was a steep slope and a marsh with crocodiles milling in the mud.

“Let’s go,” she prodded.

“Are you sure this isn’t where we are supposed to go?” Zuka stalled.

Laika chewed her lower lip in concentration. Even though the time was wrong, Zuka’s body tightened, appreciating and recalling how soft her lips had been when he’d kissed her.

“She said circle back right...I know Kapi, if it were here, she’d be waiting.”

Zuka nodded, and they took off again.

They were almost to a clearing, Laika strained her neck to scan the various jungle training equipment that loomed over the trees and shrubs of the forest they were in, when she stumbled. Zuka was just about to call out her name in alarm when a wave of soldiers, with guns at the ready, stormed through the hedge that covered the training ground.

“Officer!” the soldier leading over twenty Nigerian soldiers straightened and saluted smartly, Zuka, with his throat in his mouth and a pounding heart, returned the salute hesitantly, wondering how they didn’t know they were Marshland prisoners.

“The report was that sentries should move this way to intercept fleeing Marshland prisoners; did you pass any?”

Zuka swallowed and nodded with a finger pointed behind him. The soldier followed his direction.

“Follow the barbwire, you’ll find a big hole, if you hurry, you might catch the ones we couldn’t kill.”

The soldier nodded eagerly, straightened again for another salute when his eyes swerved to Laika still bent over from her earlier stumble, and narrowed his eyes.

“Commandant had warned women against going to the wall,” he declared officiously, handling his gun as though he wished to shoot Laika for the infraction.

Zuka felt Laika’s elbow in his hand stiffen; he knew if she had her way, she’d beat the idiot soldier to a pulp. “And that is why commandant instructed me to get her to the guardroom the instant she was discovered.”

“I wish I had the time to execute the punishment myself,” he said almost wistfully and it was Zuka’s turn to tighten his hold.

“God’s speed, officer,” Zuka saluted, shifted to the side with his hand still holding Laika. The soldier got the message and barked orders for his team to fall out. They jogged in sync down the barbwire, disappearing into the forest before both Laika and Zuka let out held breath.

“The fucking asshole,” Laika sniped.

“The pervert. I’d forgotten we were dressed as Nigerian soldiers,” Zuka whispered.

Laika nodded, “I hope the prisoners are long gone,” the guilt in her tone fired up the underlying guilt in his heart.

“Me too,” he gruffed and went through the hedge, pulling her along, “Now that we have an excuse, we don’t need to skulk around.”

“But you need to hurry up!” Julius popped up from behind the huge tree holding one end of the stretched twine net in the obstacle course clearing.

Laika and Zuka stiffened, expecting more soldiers but sighed when they saw Mary’s first son.

“What are you doing here?!” Kapi popped out from the other side of the stretched net, furious.

“I followed you,” Julius scowled.

“You shouldn’t have; I told you not to.”

His stare became impetuous, “You need protection.”

Kapi sputtered and was about to launch a full blown, teenage tantrum on Julius, when Laika stepped in; both adults had been swivelling their heads, following the shocking exchange.

“Kids, kids, enough!”

“You both did good to come get us,” Zuka acknowledged.

“But you never disagree on a battlefield,” Laika’s tone was sage.

“Absolutely not,” Zuka added, enjoying that they were in sync with this.

Both teens sighed, the palpable tension thinned until they were smiling when Laika hugged Kapi and Zuka did a man hug thing with Julius.

“This is the right time to move,” Kapi informed.

“Musa is waiting with a huge, army truck,” Julius added.

“Those soldiers were the ones manning the gate of the camp.”

The adults exchanged glances and said together, “Sentries.”

“So, we can just drive out,” Julius pointed out.

“It’s the safest time,” Kapi concluded.

Both adults grinned at them, “Aww, you guys are cute together,” Laika commented, giving them knowing looks.

“We’re not!”

“We are?!”

Kapi looked affronted, Julius looked hopeful, Laika grinned and Zuka just shook his head and said, “Good job guys. Now lead us to the truck.”

They followed the teens, avoiding the obstacle course equipment.

“Julius has it bad for her,” Laika whispered, still smiling.

“He’s not the only one falling for a badass babe,” Zuka gave her an intense look.

Laika stumbled; her throat went dry as the interpretation of that look turned a part of her breathlessness into sensual. “Oh,” she swallowed hard, “But...but I’m not protesting...she’s protesting too much.”

Zuka grinned, “It’s the female way. Besides, you’ve had some time to get used to it,” he said, drew close and kissed the corner of her mouth. Laika stumbled again; she hadn’t gotten used to it at all.

“Come on,” Zuka grabbed her arm, pulling her forward. With that tone and hot gaze, she would follow him anyway without question.

The teens had stopped at edge of a concrete area, a large, open space with offices on both sides and over thirty, forest green, tarpaulin covered trucks parked in sequence of six by five.

“It’s at the front,” Kapi pointed down the fourth line-up of five trucks.

“When Musa drives out, it won’t seem suspicious.”

“Good idea, guys, but it will even be better, if Musa drives out the truck at the edge,” Zuka said.

“But...” both teens sputtered.

“There are offices on both sides of the park,” Julius had deferred for Kapi to explain.

“I agree with Zuka. It’s dangerous but it’s less suspicious to pick trucks at the edge not the middle of their line-up.” Laika raced, bent over, to the right side, passing four tarpaulin covered-back trucks, to check out the offices. When she returned, Zuka was returning from checking out the other side.

“The offices seem locked up,” Laika reported, squatting where they’d left the teens.

“This other side have open offices and female officers milling around. So the right side is advisable,” Zuka concluded.

“And it’s closer to the gate,” Laika added and got to her feet. “Okay, we don’t have to skulk like both of you since we have uniforms, so, go first, we’ll watch out until you get to the truck. Then get your mother and siblings out of...”

“And Ahmed,” Julius interrupted.

“I’m glad Ahmed got here safe,” Laika really was. “Grab everyone and things to the truck on the right edge.”

“We’re right behind you,” Zuka assured glimpsing the rapid beat of their teen hearts at the base of their throats.

The teens nodded and took off, sticking their heads from the side of each trucks to make sure there was nobody before they raced to the next. It took seconds, then Laika and Zuka followed, walking with confidence in between the trucks as though carrying out an inspection.

Zuka went to speak with Musa in the driver’s seat while Laika helped Ahmed out of the tarpaulin covered-back, making sure they were as quiet as possible while proceeding to the truck on the edge.

Voices rose in conversation from the offices, so Laika had to herd Mary, the teens with the kids they carried to the side of a truck, all of them breathing harshly. They had one more truck to pass before getting to their destination. Leaning Ahmed on the truck to support his injured leg, Laika peeped, saw no one and raced to the truck on the edge to untie the tarpaulin from the truck-bed for easy entry. She even flipped her flashlight to survey inside the truck.

In minutes, she had them settled inside the truck and slid her hand from the flaps to retie the tarpaulin to the truck-bed as though it hadn’t been tampered. With the radio working again, she knew Zuka went to get the gate while Musa fired up the truck and rolled towards the gate.

Without knowing if the camp gate was padlocked and where the key would be, Laika couldn’t breathe from anxiety. She felt the truck slop down a speed bump then turned right. She recalled when she’d been led through the camp yesterday and had been driven in an army jeep, they’d gone left and had driven for 45 minutes to get to Senate.

In less than a minute, she heard the passenger side door open, the truck shifted as Zuka climbed in and it was moving before the door closed again. Her relief was mirrored in the eyes of Mary, the teens and Ahmed; the kids just clung to their mother.

“They always have sentries down the road,” Laika worried as she radioed Zuka.

“Musa said so. But so far, the check points we’ve passed are deserted...”

“They withdrew all the sentries?” she was incredulous.

“Looks like it...Good for us, right?” Zuka joked.

Actually, she thought, “Yes.”

Everyone on the back of that truck seemed to be holding their breath; even the children were still as though they understood what was at stake. Apparently, those up-front held their breaths too because when Zuka’s voice came through the radio, it was with a relieved sigh.

“We are home free guys. We are five minutes into Oron town.”

A little cheer went up from the teens and Laika was glad to see the wide smile on Mary’s face and the warm hug she gave her little kids. Ahmed on the other hand grimaced and Laika realised he was in severe pains. She clicked on her torchlight, revealing gallons, possibly filled with fuel for the truck and iron boxes stacked at the base, which she proceeded to go through.

The iron boxes were pre-arranged life packs for soldier. It carried canned and packet foods, water, medication and first-aid kits. With the help of the teens, provisions were distributed while with the torch clasped in her teeth, she managed to clean and dress Ahmed’s wound despite the movement of the truck. After he ate, Laika handed him pain relievers and antibiotic tablets which soon got him sleeping.

“Zuka, you guys need to eat.”

“Eat what?” he sounded incredulous.

“There are provisions...Why are we slowing down?” she whispered in alarm, the fear rippling through the occupants of the back.

“Hey, don’t panic,” he rushed to assure, “Musa says we need to be off the streets for now, they might use drones to search for the truck. So, he’s taking us...here?” he sounded surprised as the truck branched into a bumpy road, moments later it slowed and Musa killed the engine.

Laika scrambled to the back-cover, loosened it and climbed down into a forest. She frowned and circled the truck when she heard both doors bang.

“Are we safe here?” she asked Musa.

“For now; it’s the unofficial marijuana smoking spot for us soldiers. The town’s people know not to come here and an army truck driving in here isn’t suspicious. But at night, we can’t be here, as soldiers will come for their relaxation and someone might recognise the stolen truck.”

“They’d have discovered it missing by now,” Zuka added.

Laika chewed her lips, “Do you have to fuel the truck? There’re gallons of fuel in the back.”

Musa shook his head, understanding her nervousness, “This is a Stallion Four-by-Four, it runs on diesel.”



Indeed, it was a smoking spot as millions of cigarette and marijuana butts, empty gin bottles, snack wraps, condom packs and other debris littered the small clearing by the river. Laika looked around, letting out a relieved sigh, at least, they were covered by thick forest, even the path they'd driven through didn't seem so obvious.

"There seems to be water everywhere," Zuka grumbled, coming to stand beside her with a frown Laika found adorable.

"Oron is a riverine town, so it's not surprising to find bodies of water in and about it."

"So, this water connects to Marshland?"

Laika shrugged, though her heart palpitated at the mention of the prison, "Probably," then she choked, "I can't believe we made it out."

Zuka dragged her into a bear embrace, "It's all you, baby," he whispered, kissing her temple while she trembled in his arms.

Musa left them embraced and went to help the others out from the back. They settled on fallen tree stumps, branches and leaves from the monstrous cicadas formed a canopy from the sun and protected the truck from possible drones while a light breeze blew from the river. Minor injuries were dressed, food eaten, Ahmed assured his pain had subsided, the kids fell asleep and Musa rushed to the back of the truck to get sleeping bags.

Laika watched as he laid the kids with care while remaining close to Mary. Frowning, she nudged Zuka's arm, and nodded to the soldier awkwardly wanting to please the chubby prisoner, "When did that happen?"

Zuka shrugged, "Could've been when we were in the turret on the ship?"

"We weren't gone that long?" Zuka nodded that they were.

"Things like this happen when one is faced with a life or death situation. And time is inconsequential during war. Speaking of which, the town didn't look like war was imminent."

Laika looked away from the teens huddled together and Musa finally having the courage to sit with his thighs touching Mary's, to face Zuka's frown.

"What do you mean?"

"People seemed to go about their usual business; they didn't look...panicked."

She was just about to speak when a cell phone blared an Arab song. It was Musa's phone. He hurriedly pulled it out, looking at it in shock as though he didn't know what to do with it. Laika and Zuka got up, the teens did same, they stood in alert.

"Answer it," Zuka directed.

Musa swallowed and swiped the screen of his phone, "Hello," his tone tentative. Then he sighed in obvious relieve after he'd listened to the caller.

“Training?” he listened more, “Oh, yes, yes, today’s own was serious.” Musa chuckled, “I understand. No, I don’t need merchandise, but I’ll call you when I need. Alright, thanks,” then he ended the call.

Despite his obvious relieve, nobody had sat down, well except Mary who hadn’t gotten up and Ahmed and the kids who slept. They looked expectant.

“It was my marijuana supplier,” he glanced self consciously at Mary. “Apparently, people thought the hours of gunshots and explosions were war simulations.”

Everyone, even Mary, sputtered in consternation.

“How?” Zuka asked.

“I don’t understand, the town thought all those explosions were just training? Is that how soldiers train?”

“He said an announcement came over the radio and television an hour earlier, for people not to panic as it was just a simulation.”

Laika’s mouth remained ajar as she stared at Musa, then she chuckled in disbelief, shaking her head, “Only in Nigeria...so, we help them stop a war and...wait a minute, what were they going to tell the masses when Cameroun blew not just Marshland but their precious wall to smithereens?”

“I don’t think it would have gotten to that,” Zuka murmured, his shock more subdued.

“I suspected, which is why I blew Marshland instead...”

“So, they just wanted Cameroun to...kill us?” Mary’s lips trembled as she stared at her sleeping children, probably imagining the horrible death that would’ve befallen them.

Kapi slumped onto the tree stump, also realizing what would’ve been their fate. As though wired the same, Musa and Julius both reached out to silently comfort their love interests. Both females sobbed into the shoulders of the males. Musa murmured verbal comfort while Julius looked beyond his depth, though he kept holding her.

“It appears they didn’t want to be responsible for killing their prisoners, while at the same time wanting them dead...”

“Because it would’ve been expensive to relocate that number of people,” Laika interrupted Zuka, “So, to avoid that expense and the guilt or heartlessness of blowing up an obvious mistake they’d made, they feign disagreement with Cameroun, knowing and expecting their reaction. When the deed is done, Marshland burned to the ground, they’d call for peace and everything will be dandy again,” Laika resumed her disbelieving laugh.

“Motherfuckers!” Zuka swore.

“Let’s...look at it this way, we made it out alive,” Ahmed must have woken up to the conversation.

“Others didn’t!” Laika spat.

“I agree with my brother,” Musa murmured.

“What are you saying? So many lives were lost. Soldiers were sacrificed for this ruse!” Laika trembled with the force of her anger.

“And what are you going to do about it?”

The quiet question bulldozed through her fury, her shoulders sagged; there was actually nothing she could do.

“Look at us, I don’t know how we made it out alive, except by divine help. We came out of a hopeless situation with children and teenagers...you cannot fight the Senate, there’s nothing you can do but be glad to have survived. You did enough by getting us here and stopping a war...you saved lives today, Laika and we owe you our eternal gratitude.”

Zuka’s arms tightened around her and she sobbed on the dark green, criss-cross leather on the Nigerian army uniform. She cried from the frustration of her inability to fight the country, a system that had gotten stronger overtime.

“It isn’t the whole country that’s bad,” Zuka consoled. “This must have been done by a few evil minds.”

Laika nodded and sniffled, gathering strength to control her emotions. “We need a place to stay the night, change cloths, before leaving town,” she croaked.

Zuka grinned, “Ever the strategist!” he hailed and everybody laughed, the tension broken.

“From the hours I’ve known you, your comment means you have a plan,” Musa teased, his arm still around Mary’s shoulders despite her lack of tears.

Nodding, she said, “My father’s house. It was confiscated during the trial, but the ban was lifted when new evidences arose. Then he was killed and I was arrested by his best-friend for vague reasons...point is, that house is possibly standing empty with our things...things you all could borrow to wear, in it.”

Silence greeted her words, Laika fidgeted under the stare of six pairs of eyes, “When do we leave?”

Musa cleared his throat, “In two hours, I guess, it will be dark then.”

“Good, then we’ll head to 89 Marina Road,” her tone was brusque.

“The house on the hill?” Musa’s mouth dropped open.

“The very one.”

**REFUGE**

As half assed as all their plans had been so far, this one wasn't any better.

"I don't like this plan," Zuka murmured again as they arrived the monstrous home of Laika's father.

"Me neither, but we need a place to stay, a change of cloth and hopefully, a car. We need to dump this truck," Laika replied from the bench behind the passenger and driver's seat of the truck.

The house on the hill loomed over the other smaller houses on Marina road. It'd been fenced round when her dad had gotten the security contract from the government, a deal brokered by Uncle Nsemeke, her father's best friend; he'd been, practically, family. No lights reflected from the windows, the huge house stood there like a hulking shadow; a forgotten palace.

As a kid, she'd always climbed the stone balustrade round the veranda at night, to catch a glimpse of the lighted Cameroun Mountain, or so the maid had told her, but as an adult, she realised that the 'light' she'd seen those nights was volcanic as the Cameroun Mountain was an active volcano.

"Drive round and turn left," she directed, Musa obeyed.

"We aren't going through the front?" Zuka frowned.

"The back gate is easier to pick; the front is automated."

Musa drove through the unused, narrow path, slowly driving over shrubs with no headlights; no need to alert the neighbours.

"Left here," Laika directed and tapped on Musa's shoulder to stop him along the high fence of the back. The front of the house was hilly while the back slopped, but the fence remained equal.

"I'll call with the radio when..."

"I should go with you," Zuka tried again.

"No," she crawled out of the truck and ran bent over to the huge gate, passed it and kept running along the fence. As a young adult she'd escape the mausoleum to attend parties and returned late at night, and she'd use the monstrous mango tree to climb over the fence.

With a relieved sigh, she approached the tree she'd feared might have been cut down and begun climbing. It wasn't as difficult as it'd been several years ago, of course, not after years at Marshland and today. Nostalgia engulfed her as she stood on the fence, surveying the backyard with her father's cars. It was exactly as she remembered, as though nothing had been disturbed.

Shaking out of her reverie, she walked the fence to the high gate, hung down and dropped the remaining distance to the ground. The jungle boot cushioned the jar to her legs. Not bothering about a key, she pulled out her Swiss knife and picked the rusty padlock. She radioed Musa before one side of the gate was completely opened.

The truck rolled into the vast backyard, fitting in comfortably even with her father's two SUVs and one Mercedes salon car.

She was closing the gates, heart pounding in fear because the rusty hinges were like gun shots in the quiet night, when her peripheral vision caught a shadow jogging from the right side of the house. Laika reacted by dropping on one knee, her gun out and aimed.

"It's Zuka! It's me!"

"Jesus," her hand and voice trembled as she climbed to her feet, swallowing with difficulty as she proceeded to shut the gate.

"I'm sorry," Zuka approached tentatively.

"I specifically told you not to follow. I could have shot you!" she snapped.

"There was no way I was letting you get in here without back-up, Laika."

Laika shoved his shoulder, though it barely shifted the huge man, "You insufferable, stubborn..."

"You never disagree on the battlefield," Kapi said sweetly, throwing Laika's words at them.

"Absolutely not," Julius came to stand by her, both teens smirking at them.

The adults stared at them as though they'd have loved to smack them, then they realised their ridiculousness and chuckled, breaking the tension. Mary had her kids on both sides of her, Musa held the youngest on his chest while his brother leaned on the truck.

"I picked the lock on a side door," Zuka announced.

"Good, because my hands are shaking too much to be useful," Laika spat, she was petrified at almost shooting Zuka.

He swallowed his guilt and led them to the cobweb covered entrance, Laika walked in first, announcing that no electrical bulbs could be used. "Fans are okay, you can charge your phone, Musa, but keep the drapes covered to hide the flash of your torches."

Laika had to extend her hand to keep cobwebs from caressing her face as she traipsed through her childhood home, emotions rising in her throat while she tried to control the urge to sneeze. She felt terrible for the kids who started sneezing from the dust.

Everything looked the same, as though she was transported back in time, but then she couldn't get the lost time back, she couldn't get her father back. She marched through the vast house to her room and found her cloths missing and the room trashed. Obviously, Uncle Nsemeke had been here searching for...Laika was still unaware of what would've made him murder her father, his best friend.

Without a word she matched to the store and wasn't shocked to find hers and her father's cloths, shoved in with other olds things, like her childhood and late mom's things, which she'd been too emotional at the time to dispose. Tears clogged her throat and as she struggled to breathe, she felt Zuka's hand on her

shoulder. The single touch calmed her like a breeze and she nodded, understanding that he sincerely got her back.

She assigned everyone rooms, putting Mary, the kids and Kapi in her mother's room, the biggest in the house, but by some unspoken consensus, after baths, everybody trickled to Mary's room. When Laika went to check on them while Zuka showered, she found they'd dragged in a mattress from the guest room, all the males, including Mary's little son were on the mattress while the girls, Kapi, Mary and her daughters, shared the bed. They had all found something that fit to wear from the store of old clothes and were currently giggling at Musa's story. Laika left them smiling, feeling fulfilled that they'd survived the horrific day.

"The bath's yours," Zuka commented, trying to sound light when a huge metaphorical elephant occupied the room, sucking all the air. Finally, they were together, alone, with no prying eyes or the fear of Buga hanging over their emotions.

Laika felt the mood, nodded and rushed into the bath with cloths she'd selected from her pile in the store.

Zuka had found a pair of jean trousers that must've belonged to her dad in the store, it was a bit snug, but the material was soft from being old and comfortable. He wondered if Laika was still angry from earlier, he would apologize to her again, he thought while he stared at the huge bed in her father's room as though he couldn't fathom what to do with it.

So he paced, while trying to construct the perfect apology that would put Laika at ease. At ease for what, his mind asked. And from then, he couldn't control the sensual images he'd been holding at bare any longer. The already snug jean tightened as his lower body engorged, his hands shook and before he could tame his unruly excitement, Laika came out, dressed in a nightwear that was both innocent and seductive. Zuka did what any reasonable man in his position would do, he blurted out his apology.

She noticed his jittery voice and frowned, "I thought we were over that."

"We were? But you were gloomy when you entered the bathroom, I thought..."

"Thoughtful, I was thinking about what my father could've had that'd have made his friend turn on him."

"Oh," he cleared his throat, trying to keep his eyes on her face and not below where the nightwear emphasized the luscious fullness of her breasts, while praying she didn't look down the bulge...too late, her gaze snagged on the bulge which seemed to have a life of its own because it jerked at her gaze and increased to a discomfiting proportion.

"Um..."

"God... I'm sorry, Laika. I'm just really..." he swallowed.

"Don't apologize, Zuka," her eyes remained on his fly, she drew close. "I love you..."

"And I love you!" he enthused.

"Then..." her hands landed on his chest, "Then..." she whispered, caressing down, her nail grazing a nipple, Zuka gasped, his hips undulating as though his nipple was directly connected to his groin.

“Then...this has been a long time coming,” she stepped away and dropped her nightie at her ankle, baring all.

He stared at her dark skin, not minding the scratches she must have gotten in their race through the forest or even in their bid to escape the ship. She stood there naked, with only the unique necklace she'd never removed from her first day at Marshland. His gaze got stuck on her bounteous bosom and how her nipples hardened, her breath hitched as he lowered his gaze to round hips and in between...

Their eyes clashed, emotions boiled to the fore, spilling like the volcanic magma that it was, Zuka rushed her with a roar stuck in his throat. His large palms grabbed her soft but firm buttocks, lifting her up to kiss...no, ravage her mouth, Laika thought. Their tongues duelled, his growl continued like a beast that had been let loose after a decade of imprisonment, which was true.

The kiss was feral, he bit her lips and Laika was sure that was blood she tasted, but it fuelled their pent up passion. When they came up for air, Zuka trailed his lips down her jaw to her neck, tasting the metal tang of her necklace as he bit into the soft skin between her neck and shoulder, as though he couldn't bear being away from any part of her.

Two strides had him depositing her on the bed, then his eyes glowed wildly at he took her in, her dark lusciousness against the whiteness of the beddings, her unbound dreadlocks spread like tentacles, making her look like a sexy super heroine, a goddess, his goddess.

His hand scrambled to pull off his jeans, he toppled over her in his impatience to touch her having not completely pulled off the trousers; quick ankle twists took care of that while he buried his face in her neck.

Her arms folded over his neck, her legs widened and hooked the back of his muscled thighs as he settled his huge hardness against her wet core. Zuka paused his exploration to gasp at the delicious feeling which had him grinding helplessly against her while his mouth watered from her soft moans.

“I want to worship your body,” he groaned, his hips pulling back and forth with the swollen head of his dick nudging her clit, they both gasped. “But at this rate, I won't last...” Fever engulfed him, he was blind to reason, all he wanted... “I want to be in you so bad. I want to feel your tight pussy swallow my dick, Laika.”

Her moan was louder, “What are you waiting for?” raising her hips to meet his thrusts, wanting him in her but frustrated that he kept bypassing where his hardness was desperately needed. She loved everything about him, he was broad everywhere, like a warm block of deliciousness.

“I want to be inside,” he begged, frowning as he recalled they had no protection, “But we can't...”

“What?!” her eyes bulged from their sockets, “Why?” she sobbed.

“Protection...”

“Fuck that, Zuka, we just survived a fucking war!” she panted and her vehemence was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen and without a word, he slid home.

“Oh, mercy!”

“I will not last!”

“You’re so big.”

“So, tight...”

“Faster...please...harder.”

“So sweet...so sweet, baby, Laika...oh my...” he lost control and pounded into her without rhythm.

Laika loved it. She loved that he lost control as she had. She loved his big, muscular body over hers. She loved the contraction of his muscles as he moved above her, the delicious heat he caused in her pussy, the friction from sawing into her, his groans, his eyes narrowed to slits, the boiling in the pit of her stomach...

“Oh...” her mouth hung soundless as she had the first orgasm in over five years and the best ever.

“So beautiful...and I did that,” Zuka crowed, slapping into her twice more before he stiffened, uploading his seed in the most mind blowing orgasm of his life. He grunted as though in pain but it was unbearable pleasure. He gathered her in his arms as he fell to the side, kissing her eyes, her mouth, her nose, neck and wherever else his mouth reached while murmuring his love for her.

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Laika had expected they’d immediately fall asleep having been awake the previous night, going through all they’d gone through to be here, plus the beautiful exertion of making love with Zuka for the first time, but...

“I can’t sleep.”

“I can’t stop thinking of your...” his voice went hoarse and his breath hitched, and Laika swooned at her effect on him, she could feel his hardness against her abdomen.

“But you’ve had...”

He knew what she was going to say, that he’d had sex with women at Marshland, so he cut her off, “Only before and during your first year, when I struggled with my feelings because it was stupid to have such feelings in a place like Marshland. We had no future, no hope and I was faced with love?”

Laika crowed something sympathetic into his ear as she drew even nearer to comfort him with her head on his shoulder. Zuka played with her locks as his mind went back in time.

“You were so chubby and innocent when you arrived...”

“I’m still chubby,” she joked.

“Hmm,” he agreed, “But not so innocent,” he tweaked her breast and she giggled, hitting his hand away in jest.



“I knew you were one of the innocent set-ups unlike me who robbed banks until one of my crew members killed a cop and when he got caught, he sold me out for a lesser jail term or no jail term at all. I found out his uncle had some clout in government which is why I was delivered to Marshland.”

“My so called boyfriend set me up to be caught, he was the false witness in whatever accusation I was tagged with, I was too numb to care; I still don’t know what I was charged with,” she fiddled with her necklace as Zuka had noticed she usually did whenever she spoke of the past.

He’d asked her once about it and she’d confided that her father had given it to her after his trial and had called it a celebration of his freedom, a few days later, he’d been killed and she’d been arrested. Zuka didn’t want to speak about such gloom, so he returned to his story.

“So, my indiscrete liaisons with Marshland bitches were me fighting my growing feelings for you and it got worse when I began seeing you in my dreams.”

“You dreamt?” Laika raised herself on an elbow, studying his handsome face, “About me? You never told me this,” her voice fell into a whisper.

Zuka raised himself, looking into her eyes, letting her see his vulnerability, “I had to have a bit of pride, baby, for myself. Here was I, bad guy in a hopeless situation, falling head over heels in love with you, it just felt stupid at the time, like I’d lost my mind.”

She caressed his bearded jaw, “I understand.”

He leaned into her touch, “But then, we got close during Martial Master’s trainings, and it seemed you reciprocated it and Martial Master pointed out my feelings to me and how obvious it was...” he groaned and leaned in to kiss her succulent lips, “I couldn’t resist,” he whispered against her lips, smiling because she moaned and followed his lips when he withdrew.

Their lips merged. It started soft, tongues tangling, moans erupting, heat building as passion swirled when Laika stiffened and wrenched her mouth from his, eyes alert.

“Did you hear that?”

Zuka jumped from the bed, he bypassed the jeans on the floor and went for the army trousers which still had his weapons. Laika did same as she listened to the long buried familiar sound of the front gate clanking open on its rails.

“I thought you said it was automated,” he whispered, pulling on the black inner vest.

“Whoever it is must be with the remote,” she sounded terse; the fight was obviously not over.

“Shit. What do we do?” he didn’t sound happy.

“Go warn the others to be silent and not come out no matter what,” Laika opened the door of her father’s room softly and stepped out, not looking at Zuka’s face because she felt guilty for putting everyone in danger again. Maybe, dying at Marshland would’ve been more humane than having to run the rest of their lives, looking over their shoulders; that is, if they survive this latest enemy.

She was almost to the sitting room, when light from the car driving into the compound illuminated the dusty furniture. She needed to hide and was about stepping down from the corridor into the living room when Zuka grabbed her arm and swung her around.

“You scared me!”

“Sorry. But you looked like this is your fault, it isn’t! Do you hear me? We’re in this together,” his determined gaze speared hers until the guilty look faded and she nodded. “Good,” he growled, kissed her fiercely and marched down the corridor to warn the others.

It was as though he had by that kiss and his words, poured fresh courage into her soul; Laika was prepared to battle any beast just so she’d enjoy what she had with Zuka. And Mary and Musa might have a chance at happiness and the kids would live in freedom...so much depended on winning this unknown enemy.

She had hated the heavy drapes that her father had chosen to decorate the house with when he’d just gotten the first instalment of the security contract’s funds. He’d said the floor to ceiling drapes were trending on the house decor show he loved watching on TV. Now, Laika found the drapes a perfect hiding place in a dark, vast room with an unsuspecting visitor.

Laika chose the most out of the way corner of the drape, which had the monstrous couch before it, to hide. She stiffened to curb her need to wiggle when she felt cobwebs on her exposed skin and held her nose to desist from sneezing as the drapes were heavily coated with dust.

When the key turned in the lock, she struggled to recall if they’d touched anything that would alert the intruders to the presence of people in the house. Her right hand flexed on the pistol while she relaxed her stance.

“But uncle, I told you, we searched this place thoroughly that year and didn’t find anything.”

Though the person, an adult male, was grumbling, she would’ve recognised that voice even in her dreams. It was Paul, her boyfriend, the false witness at her arrest. And his uncle would be...

“I wasn’t with you people then, you mustn’t have searched well.”

...Nsemeke, her father’s best friend.

“It’d be helpful if we knew what we were looking for,” Paul muttered pointedly as he shut the front door.

“Did you check his study, anything with a weirdly shaped lock?”

Paul sighed in exasperation, “Do you have a weirdly shaped key?”

Laika’s hand instantly flew to her neck to fiddle the pendant on the necklace her father had given her before his death. Could it be...what had her father been hiding? As though a light bulb turned on in her mind, she recalled what the pendant, the key, might unlock. They would’ve searched the house forever without finding out; her father was a genius.

“See, uncle, I don’t see a point to this. I don’t know what I was thinking when I agreed to this...charade. The case has been closed for years...”

“Marshland exploded today...”

“Wasn’t that the plan?” Paul snapped and the sitting room got illuminated with light, and then went off again; whoever turned it on must have realized his mistake.

“Cameroun was supposed to be liable but prisoners escaped, they hijacked the *ship*.”

Nsemeke’s emphasis on ship meant he was in on the drug trade the warship had been used to run, probably from Nigeria to Cameroun, or other coast towns.

“So?” Paul didn’t still see the importance.

“They took the money. The General said they were so organised, only a few prisoners died and the few that were caught said a lady facilitated the escape. Her description fit that of Orok’s daughter,” Nsemeke sounded distressed.

The silence that followed was so heavy Laika wondered if she’d imagined the whole situation. Then Paul burst into uncontrollable laughter, giving Laika the cover to sigh, relieving the tension that had taken hold. She suspected her father had evidence against Nsemeke. Heavy regret suffused her mind at her younger self who’d not cared about her father’s work or the case against him until he’d died. Her father had always been upright and it had annoyed her at the time, now though, she was sure he had evidence of this corruption and Nsemeke was afraid she’d expose him.

“Jesus, uncle, so, you believe that Laika, the *fat* daughter of Orok, would lead an escape, hijack a ship, steal the money and what, return home for revenge?” he laughed again as the whole thing sounded preposterous to him. “I can’t believe you woke me up for this,” he whispered to himself.

Laika frowned, biting her tongue to control her fury. She had dated this fool for months and had been close to showing him the necklace her father gave her when she got arrested. She was tempted not to blame him for his disbelief of her capabilities, he obviously still thought of her as that over pampered daughter of Orok.

“So, how do you explain the missing money?”

“For Christ’s sake, Marshland was filled with criminals, they took it. Or...or what about that guy, the greedy one who was some sort of leader...Buga!” he exclaimed in sudden recall.

“No one has heard from him.”

“Well, he could’ve taken the money,” Paul pointed out.

“He wouldn’t have shared it to all the prisoners.”

Silence reigned again. It appeared the seriousness of the situation was dawning on Paul.

“Okay, alright, I’ll bite your theory,” Paul capitulated, “Though, I don’t believe Laika led anything, but I understand your need to find whatever has got you so petrified. Where do we start?”

Nsemeke suggested they start searching for a safe in the study and led the way into the corridor she’d just stepped out from; her father’s study was at the end of it.

Laika wasn't worried about the others, Zuka would keep them quiet. She struggled out from behind the drapes, walked silently until she stood by her mother's room and listened to the men stumping about in the study. The door beside her opened without a sound and Laika immediately grabbed the muzzle of Zuka's gun. His dark expression dropped as relief engulfed him at the sight of her, though, he took in her entire person before that relief showed.

She made a sign which he understood as she'd got the intruders covered. Zuka nodded but still waited down the study, ready to charge in if she needed help.

Laika stood at the door for a few seconds, watching the unaware men, scatter her father's study. Nsemeke seemed really into the search while Paul was lackadaisical about it.

Then, with a dramatic gasp, she pushed the door wider, startling both men, "Paul! I thought that was you, but I couldn't risk believing it," she rushed as a simple love struck girl would towards the tall, though not as tall as her Zuka, fair in complexion man.

Paul took a step back, his eyes swivelling to the gun in her hand. She ignored him and rushed into his arms, sighing in relief as her arms wrapped round his neck, pretending not to watch Nsemeke behind her father's desk through the sleets of her lowered eye lashes.

Her former boyfriend was hesitant, after a while, his hands slowly rounded her body. "God, I missed you, I thought the army had discovered my hiding spot," she faked a shaky voice and sighed again, leaning her half naked upper body on him.

When Paul dragged her from his body, his eyes swivelled to her bra covered chest, where her breasts spilled over and jiggled at the slightest movement, then he went for her gun and with a forced smile, grappled and collected it from her fingers. Her peripheral vision caught the relieved sigh of his uncle when he had the gun.

"Paul?" she called when she saw the hardening of his expression, she widened her eyes and looked suitably helpless.

"Are you here alone?" she nodded eagerly.

"Uncle, oh, I'm so happy to see..."

"How did you get here...from Marshland?"

"Oh, it was the most horrific experience, Paul," she said and made to go close as though to hug him, but Paul wasn't having it, he stepped back and pointed the gun at her, and Laika elicited a suitably convincing gasp of horror. "Paul!"

"Cut the crap, Laika!"

"I told you, Paul, I told you," Nsemeke worried, still behind the desk.

Paul didn't take his eyes off her, her face transformed from scared to smug, "You should've believed your Uncle, Paul," she drawled.

“Yes, I should have,” he agreed, his pretty face turning to the asshole he really was, “Now, I’ll finish it, foolish girl,” he squeezed the trigger and the gun clicked.

Laika giggled when she saw his shocked expression and the horrified look of Nsemeke. She looked up with a sigh, happy that the universe was according her an opportunity for vengeance, her own way. Everything was going according to how she’d hoped.

“I’m not sure if you’re high or incredibly stupid to think I would hand over a loaded gun to you, who set me up,” she shook her head, “Seriously?” her hands went to her hips, pushing her bra clad breasts forward.

“So, you dressed sexy to distract me?” Paul sneered, his eyes swept from her unbound locks to her dirty combat trousers.

“No, P-boy,” Zuka appeared, leaning casually on the door frame, his gun rested on his thigh, “This sweet, super lady, my girl friend, love of my life and mother of my children, God willing, did not dress to distract you,” he looked away from Laika to Paul, “She dressed to kill you,” his gaze was sincere, causing Paul to show fear at last.

Her heart stuttered. She knew it wasn’t a good time to be distracted so she carefully filed Zuka’s words away, to fawn over later. “Aww,” Laika smiled at Zuka, she allowed the warmth of his declaration in the pit of her stomach.

He looked at her again, this time in exasperation, “Did you really have to hug him?” his frown was absolutely jealous, and the warmth increased.

Laika opened her mouth to reply when Paul spoke, “Really, Z-man, you slumming now? I thought you detested fat chicks?”

“It’s an acquired taste that I’ve come to love very much,” he met Laika’s questioning gaze, “Her, especially.”

“You know this guy?” Nsemeke asked what Laika was thinking.

“My crew guy with the big uncle,” Zuka replied Laika’s silent question.

“Ooooh,” she drawled, returning her gaze to Paul who must have replied his uncle’s question because the older man looked sick, “Yeah, Uncle Nsemeke, you should be very worried.”

“Do something, Paul,” Nsemeke urged dismally.

“Yes, Paul, do something,” Zuka growled.

And Laika watched as he inhaled through his nose and broke into a false smile, “I know you’ve been itching for a fight with me, Z-man, so, let’s have at it.” He got into a fight stance with his fists raised, “You should know, I’ve fucked her smelly pussy, and the thought of it still disgusts me,” he spat.

Laika stiffened, shame crawling like termites on her skin though she smiled to hide it and glanced at a furious Zuka over her shoulder, requesting permission.

He looked back at her, sighed, “Okay, okay, have at him,” his tone as though he was giving in to a persistent child.

The words hadn’t completely left his mouth when Laika rushed Paul with a super-man punch. He recovered quicker than she’d expected and landed a punch in her rib which elicited a gasp of pain from her. Laika swallowed her pain and returned Paul’s punch with a kick to his knees which temporarily reduced his height and afforded her the opportunity to deliver an upper cut that sent the man staggering backward.

Zuka hardened his jaws and flexed his fist, itching to get it on Paul. He didn’t think the fight would be easy, Paul could handle himself but he believed more in Laika’s determination, his woman will crush him, though he worried about the few blows Paul would land.

Paul straightened, anger rolled off him in waves at Laika’s score and his uncle’s incessant prods from the sidelines. He rushed her with pure fury as motivation and Laika grinned evilly, waiting until the last minute to feint to the right while landing another foot slam on the same knee which sent him buckling and growling in frustration.

“I’m going to kill you,” he grunted, his irises rolling almost into his head as he puffed.

“My big, bad boyfriend will not let you,” Laika taunted with a sneer, then she advanced with a kick to his groin which continued to his face before she dropped her leg. Paul still refused to fall, when he straightened, Laika went to land a punch on the side of his face but he grabbed her wrist and twisted, holding on as he gave a furious Zuka a smug sneer.

Laika stepped backwards, stumping on his sneakered foot, which really did nothing, but it got her close enough to slam the back of her head on his nose; she felt rather than heard the crack of cartilage which caused him to loosen his hold on her wrist. Laika turned with a swinging high kick that finally sent him to the ground. He slammed his head on the tiled floor and passed out with a bleeding nose.

Panting, her gaze rose to Nsemeke whimpering behind her father’s desk, his starched shirt so wide it brushed the flat screen of her father’s computer monitor.

“Did you kill my father or have a hand in his death?”

“Young lady...” he begun trying to sound stern.

“Answer me!”

Nsemeke flinched, cowering in the face of her fury, “He...he should’ve just let it go. The reason he’d been given that security contract was because he was genius enough to use his technology to cover the...”

“The drugs?” Zuka supplied and Nsemeke nodded.

Laika inclined her head to the side and nodded, moving closer to Nsemeke, “So, you killed him, right?”

“I didn’t give the order and I’d tried to tell him...”

“No need to explain, I actually understand why you would kill a man who was a threat, but then what did I do wrong?” Nsemeke kept shifting backwards until he blocked himself in a corner, there was nowhere to shift to, so Laika stood, her bare feet touching his moccasins.

The man’s eyes, shifty with fear suddenly gained strength, “I saved your life,” he whispered, “I saved your life,” he shouted.

Laika leaned back in shock, she swivelled a glance to Zuka who’d just finished binding Paul’s wrist on his back. “You call sending me to Marshland...saving my life?”

Nsemeke panted, “Well, you wouldn’t be here now,” he stammered, edging away from her even though there was nowhere to go.

Silence reigned for what seemed like a minute, Zuka waited, watching Laika whose bosom rose and fell with an emotion that could only be fury and hurt. Her hand snapped up and grabbed Nsemeke’s neck, the man tried to pry her hand off to no avail, she squeezed tighter until he began choking, his eyes rolling in their sockets.

“Laika! Baby...”

“He deserves to die,” she grated out.

“Of course, he does, but not from your hands. We need to get out of here,” he had to raise his voice above Nsemeke’s choking, “Laika?”

She growled her frustration, and without letting go of his neck, her left hand grabbed him at the belt, lifted and flung him over the table, to where his nephew lay unconscious. Her furious eyes pinned Zuka for stopping her, he sighed and kicked the coughing man in the face, sending him into a faint and then looking up at Laika with a contrite expression.

Laika couldn’t hold her anger at him, she chuckled, shaking her head as she reached for and unhooked the necklace after so many years.

“This is the key,” she told Zuka who paused in securing Nsemeke’s wrists to stare at her.

“Your necklace?” she nodded, not looking at him. “What does it unlock?”

Laika sighed and went on her knees, looking under her father’s table, “I don’t know, but it should be here.”

“What?” he came around and confronted her beautiful buttocks in the air while she docked under, her palm tracing the surface of the table. He swallowed, mentally shaking his head to clear the sensual thoughts which popped up at the sight of her position; this wasn’t the time, but after that show of strength and prowess, he was itching to have her under him again.

“I found him getting to his feet a few times I’d barged into his office without knocking. I’d wondered what the hell he’d been doing down there, but I was too self centred to bother about it.”

Zuka got on his knees, having heard the self censure in her tone, “Hey, don’t do that. That was years ago. All the people you protected at Marshland and all the lives you saved today, has more than made up for that. Additionally, you were a kid then.”

“At twenty-six?”

“In experience, yes.”

Laika sighed, her hand pressing a slightly elevated area on the floor. Where everywhere beyond the table was tiled, the small space beneath the table had wooden floorboards. “I think I found it.”

When Zuka looked under the table she’d been rubbing, obviously to find a keyhole, he found her pulling back the foot mat under the table.

“I was checking the wrong place,” she muttered as she unlocked the wooden floor and pulled it open to reveal a metal box.

“Let me go this minute!” Nsemeke griped, groaning in an effort to free himself.

Laika withdrew from beneath the table, getting to her feet as she opened the dusty, unlocked metal box to reveal cellophane wrapped flash-drives, four of them, all labelled and a cell phone.

With Zuka at her shoulder, both of them ignoring the ranting man on the floor, she powered the computer on her father’s table, and while it booted, she dragged the swivelling chair and sat in-front of the illuminated screen. It took a while to come up, so she sorted through the drives, her heart thumped when she found one labelled with her name.

She picked the one labelled with a high government official’s name, one her father had admired a lot and had been proud to work with when he’d been awarded the contract. Laika plugged in the drive and clicked the only folder on it to reveal the absolute corruption that certain ministers and senators were involved in. It revealed the scam that Marshland was covering and the many lives destroyed in the process. It was a compilation that would destabilize the entire structure of the country if not properly managed, which is why it had Obeh’s name and contact on it.

As she clicked through the data with her mouth open in amazement, Laika glanced over her shoulder at Zuka, and his expression mirrored hers. She couldn’t believe the extent of corruption, of the drugs and trafficking that occurred on the ocean, Marshland being the excuse that Nigeria was allowed to trespass on that area of international waters.

The next flash was made to another big man with the same information, although extra titbits were added to it and some information on the other flash weren’t on this one. Laika realised what her father had been trying to achieve. He’d made it possible for these men to work together, all of them checking and balancing on the road to destroy this corrupt ring in the heart of government.

“When I get out of here, you will not like the consequences!” Nsemeke continued.

Laika chuckled while tapping away at the computer. “I can assure you, old man, your consequences aren’t looking good either.”



**REST**

Through her tears, Laika read her father's letter to her on the flash. It was more heart wrenching that he sounded confident in her ability to figure out that the pendant was a key, to find what it unlocked and carry out his instructions, except he hadn't known she'd also be in danger. Besides, recalling how self centred she's been then, her heart broke more that he'd believed in her. Perhaps, it was because she'd been the only one he could trust after all that had happened, a trust she'd almost broken if she'd shown Paul her pendant then.

"Babe," Zuka bent and kissed her neck while she read her father's letter. Her tears must disturb him and she sniffled, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand while Nsemeke kept shouting retribution.

She stood, "I'm fine," she nodded at Zuka's concerned mien and dragged him out of the office, closing a shouting Nsemeke and his unconscious nephew in, before explaining the plan to Zuka.

Laika would have preferred everybody, especially the kids and Ahmed, rest till day break, but time was of the essence.

As though knowing he was needed, Musa stepped from the room, the door showing the room was dark, but Laika knew the teenagers, Mary and Ahmed were alert in there and awake.

"It's 3:15 am, Musa but I need three packages delivered, how do I do that?"

Musa swallowed his trepidation when Zuka smiled at him, silently communicating that the situation was under control. "My weed guy, he does that sometimes for top army officials. He's trusted because he swears his business depends on trust and discretion."

"But this late?" Zuka prods.

The army man scoffed, "This time more than any other hour of the day."

"So," Laika sighs, getting a confirming look from Zuka, it wasn't like they had a choice, "Call him, Musa. Fix a meeting point while we rally up everybody."

Zuka moved to handle explaining the present situation while she pulled out the phone her father had left for her to make the call to the three top government officials whom her father had left packages for. The men answered on the first ring, sounding both apprehensive and expectant, it so happened they knew the number and were shocked to be receiving the call they'd been expecting seven years ago.

Laika told them what her father had instructed her to and she told them to expect a package at their gates in an hour.

By the time she was done with the calls, Zuka had everyone gathered in the sitting room; Mary, Musa and Zuka, logging sleeping children on their shoulders. She pulled on a t-shirt and exchanged her army khakis for her old jean, same as everyone else. They looked like a ragtag group of refugees.

According to her father's instructions, she led them past their stolen army truck, her father's cars and out the gate. Laika went to their neighbour's house, the one a little bit down the street. He'd been one of the

people her father's letter had instructed she call and she'd been relieved to know, the car for her was still in working order. Her father had been afraid his cars had been bugged.

They trod down the deserted street in silence, breathing in the cold air and releasing smoked breaths. Mr. Ulap met them at the edge of his compound, the ancient man squinted at her and smiled, hugging her tight even though his hold was feeble.

"I've kept the car in good working order even though I'd lost hope. May Orok rest in peace and may his enemies never find rest even in death," he spat and then hugged her again as though he couldn't believe his eyes.

Giving him an abridged version of the past seven years, she collected the keys to the Highlander SUV and passed it to Musa who immediately had everyone settled in the vehicle, it was a tight fit but they managed and soon, they rumbled down the street to meet Musa's weed guy at a secret rendezvous.

Ten notes of two thousand naira was his payment to deliver the package as soon as possible and keep his mouth shut about it. Laika didn't have to threaten that if anything went wrong she'd come back for him, but she did anyway, bringing a proud smile to Zuka's lips.

The next instruction was driving the long distance to Nsit Attai local government, an obscure, out of the way town where nobody would bother to look for them if such a need arose. With Musa driving in a manner that will not attract attention from the army guys stationed on the roads, they got to the one storey building, at the edge of town at 5:48 am.

There was no time to admire the building her father had explained had never been lived in; she just took out the still shiny keys from the package with her name and tried to open the unique looking but rusted locks. At some point, Musa had to use engine oil on the key before it turned the lock. The gate swung open after that and they drove in, surprised no one woke up to check the noise they'd been making in the neighbourhood.

Laika knew who she had to meet in the morning, but now, she just wanted to sleep, it felt like she'd not shut her eyes for a whole week. She was proud of her father; the man, even in danger had made plans to provide for her. The house had a five bedroom apartment upstairs and two three bedroom apartments downstairs.

She didn't have the time to check it out just yet, she just herded everyone upstairs and settled. It appeared everyone had the same thought in mind, to sleep. So despite the cobwebs and the dust, they found fresh bed sheets in the wardrobes of their chosen rooms, made their beds and slept.

Well, Laika thought the others slept but she was too wound up and equally relieved to sleep.

Zuka received her embrace because he felt the same. He kissed her fiercely, both of them disbelieving but grateful that they'd survived the war which now seemed like a terrible nightmare after all these hours.

"Marry me, Laika," Zuka gasped as she pulled down his beltless jeans and grabbed his engorged dick.

"Yes," she said without thought and lowered her warm mouth on his hard length.

He jerked, lifting his hips and pushing his erection in her mouth, groaning from the pleasure shooting through his whole body.

“Not now, baby...oh!” she’d tightened her lips and sucked upwards. With his heart pounding, he reached down and pulled her up with his hands under her armpits, he held her bulk to him, enjoying her weight on him, then he flipped his body, turning her to her back with him above her.

With great care, he stripped her of her cloths, loving the flesh he was revealing and her little gasps as he kissed his way down her soft body. “I love you, Laika.”

“I love you too, Zuka,” her reply was the encouragement he needed to line the head of his shaft at her wet entrance. He slid in slowly, biting his lower lips as he pushed in the tight, wet suction of her pussy.

“Hmm,” she moaned, her hands caressing down his muscular back, down to his arse which squeezed each time he pounded into her.

Their love making was wild and tender, a celebration of survival and an expression of their love. Laika bit his shoulder when he hugged her close while his hips slammed in and out, giving her mind blowing pleasure that required she scream.

“I’m going to cum, baby,” he muttered through clenched teeth but did not stop his movement, instead he increased his tempo. Laika matched his tempo, whispering that she was close too.

She sort his lips when her eyes began clouding over, she kissed him with all her strength, shutting her eyes as the wave of pleasure sucked her in and Zuka remained her only anchor. Zuka held tightly to her as he pounded into her as though he would die if he stopped; it was reckless and desperate, his grunts were like cries as he climaxed, his hands so tight on her body it was sure to leave bruises. It was as though they were afraid to separate.

They slept connected.

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It took a day for Nsemeke and Paul’s arrest to be announced and it started a domino effect around the country, top government officials were arrested almost every week as investigations heightened and more drugs and money were recovered from other ships. The best part was the arrest of the Personal Adviser to the President on Marshland Matters.

Bloggers and newspaper houses were going crazy with the news and speculations; CNN wouldn’t shut-up about it. Laika was sure not all the evidences were made available to the public, some of the crimes would have to be handled in-house. She was happy for the justice being served and the peace treaty with Cameroun.

“They mentioned your father as National hero today,” Zuka said two months later, hugging her from behind in their kitchen, she let her head fall back, resting on his broad shoulder; he kissed her cheek.

“Hmm, I know. Ubeh called me, he wanted me to show up for his posthumous award or an address he could send it to,” she turned in his arms and leaned in, fusing her mouth to his. They were not afraid to be interrupted or discovered since the apartments downstairs were now occupied by Mary and her kids and

the other by Musa and Ahmed. It was looking as though that would change soon. And though Kapi stayed with Laika and Zuka, she was almost always downstairs at Mary's apartment, except when everyone climbed upstairs to visit.

"And?" he asked with humour in his tone, nipping her lips and grinding his hardness on her cove.

"Of course I refused, but I did tell him to forward any monetary rewards to my father's account."

Zuka chuckled, holding her close as she giggled, "I love you, Mrs. Zuka," he said this, his eyes smouldering into hers as he kissed his ring on her finger, "But, you like money too much," he admonished jokingly.

"Just because my dad left me enough, plus the one from the ship doesn't mean I won't get money from the Federal Government if they offered."

He lifted her, her legs rounding his hip as he walked to their room, both kissing. "Hmm, your smart is why I love you."

"I thought it was because of my arse?" she frowned then laughed when Zuka seemed like he was contemplating, his hands squeezing her buttocks in consideration.

"I do love your arse and you boobs and your pussy...hmm," he got swallowed in a kiss that took so long when they separated, they were panting.

"I feel so lucky and blessed to have you," she whispered, looking into his eyes, his erection poking her cove temporarily forgotten.

"This might sound weird but I'm glad for the war; it gave us this opportunity to live our love."

She nodded. It was totally true; with Mary and Musa, with Musa and his brother, with the possibility of Kapi and Julius, with Mary and her children.

War allowed love.

**THE END**

## FROM THE AUTHOR

Hooyoo!

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