

APATA BOYS

SYNDICATE RISING



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BY

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CHAPTER ONE PREVIEW

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Chapter 1

Despite the blistering sunshine, Kodeso Close was gloomy. Jimi Johnson's lethargic sitting posture on the porch of the small brick bungalow at the end of the close characterized the gloom. Not even the loud shrieks of teenage boys playing football on the dirt road lifted the doleful ambiance. The scraggy Art of War book by Sun Tzu on Jimi's lap indicated that he was pausing from reading.

Several dogs sleeping in shaded corners on the street underscored the gloom, making the dreariness at the peak of the day hard to explain.

It was hard to tell if Jimi was watching the football game or lost in thought, his eyes vacant and his expression unreadable as the noisy boys remained in his line of sight.

Jimi lived in the bungalow with his father, Dada. The bungalow's fancy brick walls were trendier than all the buildings in the close. Its asbestos roof further differentiated it from the other buildings, which had rusty zinc roofs and unpainted, cracking walls. A few of the buildings were ramshackle homes of old neighbors whose grown children had left for the cities.

Intermittent bursts of arguments amongst the boys perforated the serenity. A cursory glance at the sweaty horde of boys was enough to establish the hierarchy among them. In most boys' gangs in Ibadan, a bully usually led the pack. The bully established order with his fist, through

leverage, or through social deprivation. There was also always a wingman or lieutenant who helped maintain order or control the pack. The criteria for leading a gang of boys were normally either physical strength or economic might. A few groups had charismatic leaders who did not bully their gang. They were respected, loved, or generous providers.

This noisy gang's leader, Atoki, fit the classic bully type: loud, garrulous, and always eager to dole out pain to his resilient, scrawny troop. Jimi watched without much interest as Atoki tripped a boy cruelly, took control of the ball, and pretended to strike it hard at the diminutive goalkeeper, who dreadfully dodged as laughter erupted around them.

Atanda Arowolo, a skinny, tough-looking middle-aged man, entered the cul-de-sac. He hobbled, using a crutch pressed under his right armpit. His loose clothing flapped wildly in rhythm with the vigorous swing of his left arm. His right leg, stiffly bent at the knee, caused his foot to dangle as he moved.

"Here comes the gecko. Siji now!" Atoki called out. A buck-toothed boy giggled aloud and started to run towards Atanda. Atoki waited with the ball at his feet while the other boys watched intently. When Siji was a few paces from Atanda, Atoki kicked the ball high with surprising accuracy in Atanda's direction. Siji nimbly sprang, catching the ball in mid-air and at the same time deliberately clattering Atanda, knocking him into the dust. The horde of boys broke into wild laughter. Atoki whooped and wiggled his waist, relishing his performance.

Jimi leaped from the porch, charging at Atoki. He seized the scrawny teenager's arm and twisted it sharply. With his

free leg, he kicked another boy in the backside, never releasing Atoki's hold. The rest of the boys scattered in panic, diving behind unfenced buildings, leaping over discarded plastic wares. Startled dogs sprang up, their barking adding to the chaos.

Jimi dragged Atoki to the fallen Atanda, viciously slapping the back of his head several times. The loud slaps interrupted Atoki's pleas, which Jimi did not seem to hear. Atanda was beating the dust off his oversized garb and trousers. He was laughing aloud. Normally, Atanda's freakish looks were unsettling, and the weird laughter made it worse. His overgrown hair, shaggy beard, and beady eyes would easily convince many that there was insanity somewhere. His perfect set of white teeth was a sharp departure from the disheveled mess of a man.

"Let them be. They are kids. You were once them, remember?" He snapped his head up to look at Jimi, now smiling weirdly. "Let him go. He is going to grow to regret it just like you are doing now." He started to hop past Jimi. "Spanking them isn't restitution for you, you know?"

Jimi released the bully, who scampered across to Siji, who was peering from a corner, waiting for his leader.

Atanda hopped on. "Let them be. You had yours."

A confused rage welled in Jimi. His fists clenched at his sides, though his face remained bland. His voice betrayed the rage. "I know you kicked ass, Uncle Atanda. And you still can. Why do you continue to lie in shit?"

"You don't know anything." Atanda hobbled on. Jimi followed closely in measured steps. His body was tense with anger, but his face did not betray it.

"You and that imbecile of my father, I..."

At the speed of a blink and the precision of a cobra that defied his deformed anatomy, Atanda threw a high roundhouse kick with his crutch-supported deformed limb at Jimi's head. With matching speed, Jimi ducked. Again, with the surprising agility of a cat, Atanda threw a second head kick with the same crutch-supported deformed leg with force and deftness aimed to hurt. Jimi blocked the blow with both forearms. Jimi did not expect the attack, but he remained alert and quick to protect himself. The force of the kick he blocked made him stagger, and he quickly moved away to avoid further attack.

Atanda kept his posture, his back to Jimi. "One more word of disrespect, and I will decapitate you."

Without looking at Jimi, he hobbled towards the brick house at the end of the cul-de-sac.

Jimi trailed Atanda to the house, clenching his sore forearm. Atanda hauled himself onto the bungalow's veranda. Jimi spat at the ground, anger sharp in his eyes. "Why?"

Atanda froze at the vehemence in Jimi's voice. He turned with a hard glare, confusion and warning flickering across his face. Jimi stared back fiercely, jaw tense, holding the glare until Atanda slowly broke into a devious, wry smile.

"I recognize that look." Atanda chuckled. "Alright." He added before he entered the bungalow.

Jimi strode away from the house, posture rigid and eyes fixed ahead, the power in his stride signaling strength and resolve.

Jimi was a quiet lad with a serious demeanor, which made him seem older than his twenty years. His peers respected

him, and older people took him seriously. He led his group, which grew into one of the most dominant in Apata and neighboring towns. He was one of the rare leaders who did not bully his friends. His incredible physical strength and fighting skills, combined with a high dose of charisma and underrated intelligence, naturally earned him respect.

Boys from other groups were bewildered at the respect he commanded without doing much. He was neither rich nor a renowned street-fighter, nor did he pull off anything spectacular. They found it difficult to define the group, but, in their view, Jimi gallivanted around Apata as if he were untouchable. Moreso, his group enjoyed such popularity that it caused others to envy it.

Jimi soon became a target for older bullies who envied his popularity, and on a couple of occasions, they cornered him into fighting. The brutal manner in which he dispatched the fights finally solidified his position and that of his group in the social reckoning in Apata and neighboring towns.

It was the fight with Stanley Ugorji, the feared Ibo youth, that cemented Jimi's reputation in Apata. Stanley cornered Jimi after a football match as throngs of spectators were dispersing.

Stanley was a gangly twenty-year-old, a known petty thief who was reputed for stabbing his opponents with broken bottles.

He sought out Jimi, then eighteen years old, and shoved Jimi's head from behind.

Jimi staggered forward, and his cohorts scattered at the sneak attack. They instantly began to raise hell, ready for a fight. Seye Ogunlana, a skinny teenager, was known for his

quick thinking and sharp tongue. He hardly got into fights but had a reputation for starting them. He was the dapper one, and like his thin frame, his voice was slim. Lukman Gbadamosi, burly and tough, was the group's provost. Although Seye was mostly seen with Jimi, Lukman commanded Jimi's respect. Lukman always finished tasks with ruthless precision, no matter how tough they were. He ended up in most of the fights and usually won. From afar, one might expect him to challenge Jimi, but from the start, Lukman took a subordinate role out of respect for Jimi's charisma and admiration for him. His loyalty to Jimi and the group was unshakable. Just a week before the fight, Seye tried to talk him into usurping Jimi or forming his own troop. Lukman refused, saying, "I would rather be with the top group than head a groveling one."

Almost before Lukman completed his statement, Seye quipped. "Then take over the strongest one."

Lukman chuckled. "And what made it the strongest, you?"

Seye wouldn't let up. "Jimi is only riding on the strong backup from the combination of me, you, and Dotun. Any group with both of you and my brain would be the strongest."

Lukman laughed, "Brains? Or mouth? Please let it rest, Seye. I know what's biting you."

Seye feigned anger. "What? What do you know, other than how Jimi's anus smells? And you are even older."

Lukman continued to laugh. "Is it still because of Esther Balogun that you are blabbing?"

Seye replied with a look of mock disgust. "Esther? Don't you think I am too good for her? You think because she is

fine or because she is the principal's daughter. I was never smitten."

Lukman reeled with more laughter. "Who are you too good for? Maybe, Basira *Omo Iya Ologi*. Please get serious." *Omo Iya Ologi*, meaning daughter of a pap seller.

Seye smiled and took a seat before he confessed. "Ah! Esther smote all of us. Do you know I even dreamt about her?"

Lukman's laughter ebbed. "Me? No! I am not a dreamer."

Seye was smiling now. "But Lukman, how does Jimi do these things? He seems to get everything and anything without doing much. How? Is it those boring books he reads?"

Lukman drew closer. "It is called God's star. If you don't have it, you don't. Stop envying those who have it. Be happy for them."

"He has too much of it," Seye said, still smiling.

Lukman continued. "So, you see, that is why Jimi must lead. He has a way of bringing things to us. Things like respect and different sorts of victories. Are you sure that if I become the leader, I would know what to do? If you like, go and join the Adamolekun street boys; Stanley will merely use you as an errand boy."

Seye threw a mock jab at Lukman, who faked reeling at the impact. Seye said, "Stanley? That smelly Ibo boy, I can never go near him. Don't mind me; that Esther matter threw me off. I always thought she was beyond our level. Well, better Jimi than any of those *Aje-butter* boys." *Aje-butter* was a term for rich children who were neither street-smart nor tough. They were softies.

The last of Jimi's cohorts on the day Stanley attacked was Dotun Marindoti, an eighteen-year-old, six months younger than Jimi. Dotun got sucked in by Jimi's quiet charisma and Lukman's rugged ability in primary school. His parents, who were well-to-do and well-placed in society, were constantly embarrassed by their second son's affiliation with the group. Having their son run around with ruffians was beneath their status. They feared it would jeopardize the future they hoped for him. They tried very hard to dislodge him from the street urchins, but Dotun became more determined and resourceful in defying them and evading their attempts to restrain him.

Dotun was precious to the group because of the "goodies" his parents' economic status provided. Also, it was rare to find the son of a rich man among the boys from the south side of Apata, the old settlement dominated by the poor. This added to the group's uniqueness.

Being an *aje-butter* made Dotun an easy target for bullies. His determination to shed the soft tag got him into lots of fights. Soon, he became adroit and fearless in fights. Now he looked forward to fighting.

While Seye and Dotun were noisily engaged in the chest-shoving match with four of Stanley's wingmen, Jimi and Lukman quietly faced off with Stanley. Their silent stare demanded an explanation for the attack. Stanley, who was taller and more imposing than Jimi, kept grinning confidently.

"You!" Stanley pointed at Jimi, "You go about town claiming to be the top boy, right?"

Stanley approached slowly. The shoving match around them stopped as everyone focused on the leaders. Like two top lions in a pride facing off, the others moved to a safe

distance. Soon, a huge clearing emerged as spectators recognized the characters and sensed what was about to happen. Some moved to a safe distance, while many others continued on their way home.

Stanley signaled to his boys with a hand to stay out of this. His attention was fixed on Jimi. Lukman remained by Jimi's side while Jimi stared at his attacker. It was hard to read Jimi. Even the fearless Lukman wasn't so sure about the outcome of this fight. Stanley was older and had a reputation for never fighting fair. He was already a criminal. This was going to be more than the usual boys' scuffle that they negotiated with pure fighting skills. Two glances at Jimi betrayed Lukman's composure, but Jimi was unwavering.

The scene was charged with raucous anticipation as the brimming crowd gathered. Ordinarily, it was a mismatch. Stanley was older, bigger, and was a well-known thug with a history of bloody encounters. Jimi, though also tall, was smaller, but his already bulging shoulders made him look capable. Stanley was the clear favorite. The raucous spectators cheered for Jimi, although they feared for him.

"You, with no history. No tale or escapade. What right do you have to be claiming anything?" Stanley snarled hoarsely. Jimi stood his ground with his entire focus on Stanley. As always, Jimi shut out the world when he was after something. He was deaf to the noise and blind to the milling crowd. The only thing in his consciousness was to fight and win. Reputations or capabilities did not matter. Jimi was ready.

"This is where the nonsense ends for you." Stanley made the greatest mistake of his life. He carelessly charged,

throwing a right punch at Jimi's face. With the brisk precision of a cobra and the strength of a bull, Jimi ducked the punch, spread his legs for stability, and leaned forward, placing his shoulder against Stanley's groin. He wrapped his arms around Stanley's thighs and heaved, maneuvering Stanley in the air before slamming him hard into the dirt. The crowd gasped in awe. Seye and Dotun whooped in delight, shouting praises and encouragement at Jimi, while Lukman guarded the perimeter of the scuffle, ensuring no one else joined the fray.

The scramble on the ground was vigorous, with Jimi on top for about half a minute before the fighters disentangled and got back up to their feet. Jimi had struck Stanley twice in the face with his elbow. On their feet, the crowd noticed and roared at the sight of blood streaming down Stanley's face from a cut on his left cheekbone. "First blood!" someone yelled from the crowd.

The blood did not faze Stanley. It was not the first time he had bled in a fight. It also did not mean he had lost, but he knew that if the fight was stopped now, it would be interpreted as Jimi having bested him, because of a social rule of Ibadan street-fighting: whoever drew blood earned bragging rights. Stanley was sure he would get Jimi. However, his next attack had to be sure. He must get this small boy, he thought. They circled each other for a second. Jimi assumed the orthodox boxing stance, holding both hands up to protect his face. Stanley reckoned Jimi was prepared to trade punches and threw a very stiff left jab that landed on Jimi's protective forearms. He followed the jab with a right cross, but there was no target for it, as Jimi had

dropped to a knee, lunged at Stanley, wrapped his arms around Stanley's thighs and hefted him shoulder-high again. Not again, Stanley thought in midair. He knew his lanky frame made him susceptible to wrestling moves. In such fights, Stanley would quickly resort to a weapon. Most times, he used a bottle from nearby shops or any weapon that Kasali, his regular wingman, tossed to him. He did not figure Jimi for an adept wrestler because Jimi was also tall.

Whilst in mid-air, Stanley resolved to stab Jimi once he managed to get to his feet, but he must survive this second slam. The first slam had jarred his waist. He was certain that if this slam was anything like the first, he would be rendered immobile for a precious second or two, which would be enough for Jimi to knock him out. He decided to cushion the fall. He had to. There was too much at stake. He could not afford to be beaten. He chose to break the slam with his left arm. He heard the snap, and the pain bolted up his arm. Jimi slammed him so hard into the ground because he didn't just throw Stanley; he fell with him. The force of the slam was twice as hard. As the bodies clattered onto the hard ground, Stanley screamed, and then his body went limp for a moment. His left shoulder had popped out of its socket. Jimi did not care. He maneuvered himself astride Stanley's chest and proceeded to pound his face to a pulp.

Stanley kept screaming, but Jimi kept pounding. Stanley could not protect his face effectively because his left arm lay limp by his side, and the good arm was not enough to protect his face from Jimi's powerful blows that landed with devastating impact.

Multiple scuffles had broken out. Stanley's boys tried to push Jimi away and rescue their leader, but Jimi's boys blocked them. Kasali had a bottle; Dotun had a stick. The crowd went haywire. The commotion ceased the moment Jimi stood off when he noticed that Stanley had gone limp, and a voice from the crowd rang out. "He is dead."

"The police will be here soon." Another voice called out, starting a rush to get away from the scene of the crime. Within a minute, the field was empty. Stanley's boys, too, had scampered off. Jimi stood with Lukman and Dotun, staring at Stanley's body. Seye, who had scampered off too, got a grip on his fear and raced back to his group. "Let's go. Stanley's boys will return with the police."

Jimi's chest was still heaving from the physical exertion. Suddenly, he sprang to life and placed his fingers against Stanley's bloody neck to feel for a pulse. "He is not dead." He started to lift Stanley. "Help me." Lukman quickly took over. He heaved Stanley onto his shoulders, and the boys hurtled away into the dusk.

They took Stanley's bloody body to Jimi's house. Dada Johnson was a very mild-mannered man with a mangled right fist that left him virtually a one-armed man. That mangled wrist remained an unspoken myth amongst the boys and the community. Dada would never talk about it. Any curious probe met with an eerie silence from Dada, dousing the curiosity with finality. No one dared speak about it or act as if there was any deformity, or treat him like a handicap. The same applied to the subject of his wife, Jimi's mother. She was last seen when Jimi was barely three years old. Several unspoken myths surrounded the subject. The

popular version was that she left when Dada lost his right wrist, and the accident had caused Dada to be bitter and difficult to live with, so the woman chose to leave, but could not take the boy because Dada would not allow her to. Whatever the truth, Dada raised his son Jimi to be strong and equally tight-lipped. Their relationship was not the usual father-son relationship. It felt like they were brothers. Together, they were not so quiet.

Dada ran a bar in town where Jimi aided a lot. Jimi and his friends spent a lot of time at the bar. Dada was like a mentor to the boys. He gave the boys free access to his home and business. They spent hours in the bungalow's backyard lifting locally made dumbbells and barbells to build their physique and strength. They also used a hanging, sand-filled tarpaulin as a punching bag. Dada instructed them in the art of fighting on the rare occasions he felt up to it. His quiet and resolute strength was the character most evident in his son and his group. They deferred to him in difficult times like this fight day.

Dada was eating an early supper when the boys crashed into the small bungalow on Kodeso Close. Without asking questions, he received the bloody Stanley and took him into a bathroom. Seye quickly narrated the evening's events, emphasizing that Stanley had started the fight. Dada was calm as ever. Without saying much, he revived Stanley by having him inhale a strong minty herb. Stanley jerked back to life, coughing vigorously. Dada, with the help of the boys, washed his bloody head and nursed the cuts and swellings on his head, and snapped the dislocated shoulder back into the socket.

After eating a spicy bowl of pepper soup, Stanley was now fully awake but oblivious of where he was, and he unashamedly asked. The irrepressible Seye answered him. "You had to finish the pepper soup before you cared where you were?" Stanley nervously looked at every face in the room. Being isolated with Jimi's group scared him, knowing that he had attacked them. "I hope the pepper soup has restored your memory." Seye quipped with menace. Stanley's gaze rested on Jimi's face. He rubbed his left shoulder and flexed his jaw, feeling the pain from the punches received.

Stanley thought he was done for if this gathering decided to punish him. Bravado was useless. This match was lost, he thought. Better to make light of it. "If this is the reward for picking the wrong fight, I accept the pain and defeat." He turned to Dada. "Baba, can I celebrate being alive with a bottle of beer to go with the pepper soup?" Stanley smiled hopefully through his broken and swollen lips. The tension in the room broke. Dada reached into a cooler for a bottle of beer and tossed it. Jimi merely sat back, while Seye broke to life, laughingly describing the fight with biting comic exaggerations and gesticulations. The boys had a good laugh. Jimi and Dada joined in the merriment, too. Stanley made the night enjoyable and memorable, laughing at himself as much as the others.

Dada soon left the boys for the bar. Just before midnight, Lukman, Dotun, and Seye left, but Stanley chose to stay back, claiming that Dada's house was more welcoming than his room across town. Stanley and Jimi remained friends. Though Stanley kept his group, he became an unnatural member of Jimi's group.

* * *

Dada looked up from the newspaper he was reading and muttered a greeting at Atanda as he entered the house. "I thought I heard Jimi out there." Dada reached for the curtain and peered out. He saw Jimi walking away from the house. "Where is he going? He is off-duty today."

Atanda had settled noisily into the low, wooden, but cushioned chair across the room, not far from the metal cooler, with the assured motion of one familiar with the house's setting. Atanda flipped the cooler open. He retrieved a bottle of beer and opened it with his teeth.

Atanda released a loud sigh of satisfaction after several long, gluttonous gulps. "Overtime does not kill; it brings in more money." Atanda quipped.

Dada shook his head. "That is my fear." He said softly.

"What fear? You have a hardworking boy. Isn't that every parent's prayer?" Atanda answered and drank more beer.

"No, Atanda, I need him to get into the university and not work hard at a biscuit factory." Dada folded the newspaper and placed it beneath the center table. He reached behind for a small transistor radio and began tuning it, searching for BBC Yoruba. "This is his second year out of secondary school; he passed the West African Examination Council (WAEC) exams comfortably, but can't get into the university, and I do not think he is trying enough." Dada seemed to be mumbling to himself. "I hear they are talking about making him a supervisor in that factory. I am usually not wrong; Jimi

is beginning to like this factory work life more than going to study."

Atanda continued to sip loudly. "Dada, I see you're already nagging that boy."

Dada continued softly. "Why won't I nag? My agreement with him is that he will study and become a banker or an accountant or something better than a common laborer."

"Still, he has chosen to work. We know what boys turn to here, but he has chosen a good path. Soon, he will be a senior supervisor or a foreman." Atanda replied with a smile.

A frown creased Dada's face. "Senior Supervisor? Maybe in fifteen years. When he is bent over and beaten up."

Atanda finished the drink. "Is that a bad life? Considering what we are today?"

Dada leaned back. "No. But he could be a government worker or a manager in a private organization in six years if he goes to the University."

"Or become a teacher." Atanda started to chuckle. "Jimi, a teacher, doesn't sound right. No, it does not."

Dada's tone changed from the tired, soft gruff for the first time since the debate ensued. "Yes, a teacher. I will not mind that, considering what we are today."

"That is sissy, Dada. No, now!" Atanda answered and leaned forward. "How about what we could have been if what happened had not?"

Dada lost his composure and began to fidget. First, he rubbed his thigh, then scratched his eyebrow with his good hand. "I made rice. You can have some from the kitchen."

A devilish smile played on Atanda's face. "I won't allow you to digress that easily this time. How about considering

what we were going to be before it happened?" He repeated the question.

Dada rose. "I won't talk about that. It doesn't figure in this discussion."

Atanda reached for his crutch. "I don't care if, after this, you cut me off as you normally do. You will discuss this because it has everything to do with all the discussions we have ever had or will have. It is your past, our past, and it affects everything we do. Especially what you do about that boy."

Dada moved towards the inner room. Atanda blocked his path with the crutch. Dada's composure returned. "I don't care what you think. I will not wager the future on that past. I have moved past it."

Atanda smiled. "All that is *oyinbo* you're speaking. No amount of books you read will surpass the wisdom of our fathers, who say no man can outrun his shadows. And no matter how many complaints and trickery the tortoise applies, he cannot offload his shell. Dada, the past happened." *Oyinbo* meant English grammar. It was also a word used to describe all Caucasians.

Dada looked at Atanda for a long moment. He knew Atanda was a rabble-rouser. He knew if he engaged Atanda further, he would not be able to control the direction of the discussion. Also, he risked Atanda saying something that would shake the foundation of a belief that had served him well for so long. Dada was fully aware of Atanda's feelings about the past. The past outcome angered Atanda, and his helplessness frustrated him. The frustration boiled over

because Dada refused even to consider doing anything about it.

Atanda's life was always about fights. To him, for every peaceful stretch there was a fight lying in wait. No peace was free; someone was always cooking up a fight somewhere. And how much peace one got depended on how well they fought. Anyone who craves too much peace will have to fight a lot or give up a great deal. He firmly believed that peace found men who were visibly ready for a fight.

Dada had long concluded that Atanda's frustration at being crippled and unable to get into the fights that he wanted was moving him towards insanity. He was becoming increasingly desperate with schemes and frustrated by his helplessness. He nagged, drank, and hallucinated all the time.

Many years ago, Dada grew tired of enduring Atanda's endless schemes to fight back. So, Dada shut him off. Atanda flew into a manic rage, and the quarrel quickly turned very heated. Atanda threw a bottle at Dada that exploded on the wall behind Dada, and a flying piece of the bottle cut his ear. Atanda stormed away that night and left Apata. He returned seven years later - a drunk who still nursed the bitterness of past mishap and the hope that someday, he would have his revenge.

Atanda was still a rabble-rouser, but calmer and more calculated. They became friends again, each acutely aware of the other's perspective on life and their predicament. Yet Dada knew there was a sinister sense of purpose in Atanda, so he deliberately acted as if he didn't care what Atanda was

up to, and he was careful not to give Atanda any chance to speak about any scheme. However, Atanda always tried to ease into such discussions - like this particular day.

Dada exhaled loudly. "Atanda, I know where this discussion will lead. And I see you are ready to go there; I am not. The past happened. I do not deny it. I merely chose to use the past in ways you disagree with. I kindly request that you continue to respect my choices. Please."

Atanda remained angered. He banged the crutch onto the floor. "Those choices of yours are what drive me insane. How could you not respond? How did you stomach it?"

Dada continued softly. "Don't be mistaken. I responded. My inaction is a response, but I know the response you're talking about. I will not be reckless."

Atanda regarded him for a long moment before his tense shoulders sagged. "Please answer me honestly," Atanda said softly. "Is there a plan in the pipeline? Will there be a time for action? Please let me know! Because I cannot understand how you accept this." His voice had risen to a shrill scream.

Dada was familiar with the crazy tirade Atanda was beginning to launch, though he had not been this agitated recently. Dada was ready. He would not be sucked into that whirlpool. Atanda normally became brilliant and convincing when he got into an irrepressible mood. Dada's mind flicked back to the days when he fed off the tirades for motivation. Once upon a time, it served as the perfect energizer before the difficult and brutal jobs they successfully executed, but not anymore. It served no purpose now. Not for him.

Atanda's eyes bulged menacingly. His arms flailed vigorously, the crutch moving dangerously as he gesticulated

wildly. "How?! Dada! How? How did you become this? How can you stomach it and be silent about what those bastards inflicted on us? Do you not see what they are now? Exactly the dreams we had for ourselves. How do you live with yourself, seeing them strut about before your very own eyes every day? If it were the game, and they took our place, then let the game continue, and we take back what was meant for us. They expect it! Even the gods expect us to! Dada..." he stopped the tirade suddenly and reclined against the wall.

Dada merely watched him with a soft stare. A stance he was ready to hold, determined not to respond. They stood and looked at each other sadly. Atanda suddenly flung the crutch across the room in frustration and turned away.

Slowly, Dada put his good hand on his shoulder. Tears brimmed in Atanda's eyes. His jaws clenched in pain and disappointment. His voice broke badly. "I'm sorry; I cannot accept your ways. Please forgive me." Atanda shook off Dada's grip on his shoulder and hobbled to his crutch. Dada nodded with understanding. Atanda hobbled to the door.

"Forgive me, too," Atanda said without turning.

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END OF PREVIEW

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About the Author

Paul Omeje is a Nigerian novelist and storyteller drawn to power, loyalty, ambition and consequence. He studied Mass Communication at Auchi Polytechnic and has written film scripts registered with the Writers Guild of America West. His storytelling is shaped by years of professional experience, travel and close observation of human behaviour.

Discover more about the story and its author.
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