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A Sword for Jehuda

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# Prologue

**T**hat night was particularly harrowing for the Lappidoths. A lone vehicle groped its desultory way painfully through the alleys of Lagos slums in the darkness of a power blackout, snake easing its forward thrust amidst the maze of traffic that gave this west coastal city the distinction of being the congestion capital of Africa. On the dashboard of the Peugeot 505 saloon car, the clock had registered 23:30 hours, which heightened the young motorist’s surprise at the sparse population of pedestrians on the streets. The latter darted here and there, mere lonely ghostly figures scraping their trek along the sidewalks of the narrow streets, the network of headlights that brandished across the precincts throwing their long shadows erratically in keeping with the chaotic traffic situation. The driver thought it was uncharacteristic of Lagos to have such an abysmally low number of pedestrians and commuters at what was, after all, quite early by the reckoning of Lagosians. However, he soon dismissed the matter, attributing it to the power outage, which confined most residents in their tenements. The commuters, by the way, were inside the vehicles trapped in the hold-up. The car swiftly rounded a bend and launched itself into the main dual carriage away leading from Agege. The traffic jam, having largely eased off, the driver pressed down the accelerator and the car shot into the frozen darkness, the shafts of light from the headlamps piercing the night like multiple arrows. The driver bobbed up and down to the rhythm of music from the car radio. Streaks of light from the hurricane lamps and torchlights in the street buildings whizzed past him like meteors dropping from space. The interior light beneath the car roof suddenly flicked on as he decelerated and pulled over at a checkpoint. Under this shower of light, his chocolate skin glinted like the smooth surface of a hide drum. He was a youth probably in his early twenties. The police corporal on duty approached him and mumbled something for a couple of seconds. In response, the young man made to shake hands with him, but deftly passed a wad of naira notes into his palm. Next, he revved up the engine and zoomed off. ‘Safe journey,’ the officer threw after him waving as the vehicle charged forward soon to be swallowed by the night.

 He came upon the next junction almost before he realised it and had to wheel the steering very rapidly making the car to swerve, leaping to the right into the ante side of Victoria Island and presently pulled up before a bus stop booth where two young men of his own age stood waiting. Both wore black Tee shirts over a pair of blue jeans, which were not unlike what the drive wore. Without uttering a word, they got on board, one taking the front passenger seat beside the driver while the other sat behind them at the back. As the vehicle began to pull away and gather momentum, the twain produced dark hoods from their jeans pockets and masked their faces, still without spoken words.

 As they rolled into the incline of Bond Street in Victoria Island, the car decelerated and wheeled down the street at a walking speed, the headlights dimmed. The streets grew even quieter; there was no one in sight and, for company, one had only the breeze, which intermittently stirred past rustling through the verdant greenery of the resident trees. The two passengers peered intently through the car windows at the dim outlines of street houses as though bent on not missing their destination. The driver glanced at them and said, ‘It’s No.10; I’m familiar with the place.’ They were his first words since he lifted those weird passengers.

 Suddenly, he rotated the steering wheel reversing to the way they had come and pulled up before the gate of a single storey duplex; it was one of the few buildings there that were illumined by an independent power plant. They became very urgent, literally leaping down from the car, all three now hooded. The armed cop on duty quite irrationally opened the gate and walked up to find out who they were. In a flash, he was jolted back when one pointed a gun at his forehead and threatened to shoot if he made a move. The second rounded him tying his arms to his back and blindfolded him with a strip of cloth. They forced him down on his buttocks and tied up his legs with the warning that he’d be instantly dispatched if he made the slightest move.

 This done, they dashed into the premises, darted into the building stamping their feet on the staircase up to the single-storey floor of the building. The household had retired to bed except Ambassador Ehud Lappidoth, the Israeli ambassador to Nigeria and his twenty-two-year old only child, Miss Zilpha Lappidoth. Both had stayed up to watching a late night movie. Thus, when the noise of racing footsteps wafted to them, they had just the fraction of a minute to wonder why the security man was coming upstairs at such a speed when the hooded strangers burst into the living room. Ambassador Lappidoth was flustered. ‘What’s this? Who’re--------,’

 ‘Keep quiet!’ baked one of them interrupting him and bringing the butt of his rifle down on his shoulder. The man collapsed on the floor. ‘Face down!’ the gunman further instructed.

 ‘Jehovah, the God of my homeland, please protected your children,’ Miss Lappidoth whimpered on a kneeling position.

 ‘Shut up or I’ll blow up your dirty arse,’ bellowed a second ramming his feet on her buttocks and thereby making her wince with pain.

 Believing they were robbers, Ambassador Lappidoth besought, ‘How much do you want? I’ll pay but please don’t harm my daughter.’

 The gunman stamped his feet hard on the man’s back. ‘I warn you; if you try my patience again, I’ll dispatch you.’ The man fell silent. The gunmen blindfolded the girl who continued to utter plaintive moans. Then, to silence her, they tied up her mouth and led her away. In a jiffy, they were downstairs. They dragged her past the gateman who had calmly resigned his fate to the inscrutable forces of that night. They shoved the girl onto the back seat of the car, flanked by the two while the driver set the vehicle rolling. One of the gunmen fired some bullets into the air, ostensibly to scare away any would-be opposition.

 The light over the car plate number showed that it was registered in Port Harcourt, but no one was there to see this. The car plunged into the dark street yonder, the headlights cleaving through the darkness like twin tunnels. It was soon submerged in the canopy of blackness.

Chapter 1

**S**ome two hours to the hearing of the suit, the court was already agog with excitement. The courtroom was brimming with people, both the low and the exalted. People from all walks of life: ministers of the Federal Government; members of the diplomatic corps, including the Israeli ambassador to Nigeria, Mr. Ehud Lappidoth whose daughter, Zilpha, was a plaintiff in the suit. Others were prominent jurists, including the Attorney General and Minister for Justice; veteran journalists including the editor of the *National Chronicle,* Chief Adeniyi George and other media moguls; and scores of other miscellaneous elements.

 The murmur of discordant voices rose and fell like the surging waves of a stormy sea. In addition, the sprawling throng of expectant spectators outside the courtroom milled about like a colloidal fluid.

 It was now a 9 hours 30 minutes and, in the next thirty minutes, the trial judge, Mr. Justice Bode R.K.A. Randolph, was expected to walk into the courtroom to commence this epoch-making trial. The suit was a final appeal to the Supreme Court of Nigeria sitting in the Federal Capital Territory (F.C.T.) Abuja. The claimant, Miss Zilpha Lappidoth, brought the appeal against the judgement of the Federal Court of Appeal, which sat in Lagos. The court had discharged and acquitted Mr. Saroki Williams of the three-count charges of abduction, assault and rape levelled on him. In addition, it quashed the charges of conspiracy and aiding and abetting the crimes, brought against Messrs Obinna Okoroafor and Olufemi Ayo, between March 20, 2001 and April 15, 2001.

 The first hearing of the case was in the High Court of Lagos on January 10, 2001.The trial judge, Justice (Mrs.) Bukola Akinwade, had dismissed the case on the ground that there was insufficient evidence to substantiate the plaintiff's claim. The plaintiff had submitted that she was abducted, raped and impregnated by the chief respondent, Mr. Saroki Williams who subsequently plotted and almost succeeded in abducting her baby, young Master Naphtali Lappidoth upon his birth in an Enugu teaching hospital. Justice Akinwade subsequently ruled that the fact that Zilpha claimed she recognised Saroki in the voice and outline of the face of her rapist and that he was seen in the hospital on the day an attempt was made to kidnap young Naphtali were not enough grounds to convict the accused. Although Miss Lappidoth appealed against this judgement, it was upheld by the Federal Court of Appeal.

Suddenly, the courtroom was drowned in frenzied movements as everyone scurried to their feet amidst the long-drawn shouts of "court!" issued by the court clerk to herald the arrival of the trial judge. Justice Randolph, seven-feet-five inches tall, towered above his retinue of legal luminaries as he strode regally into the courtroom, regarding the spectators and the litigants as though to reassure him that all the parties to the suit were present and then ascended three flights of stair to the bench to mount the judgement throne. He was flanked by two other Senior Advocates of Nigeria(SAN). Justice Randolph was slim-built but firm in physique with a rather narrow face and a brownish, tawny skin that gave him a hamitic air. However, he had a characteristic flat-shaped black African nose. That he was an experienced jurist there was no denial. He had been a member of the bench for twenty-five years during which time he served in the O.A.U. Commission of African Jurists for three years and again represented Nigeria for five years in the International Court of Justice (I.C.J.) at The Hague. Above all, his trial of the famous dispute involving a Nigerian textile merchant who colluded with an Italian syndicate to export Nigerian girls for prostitution in Italy and Spain lent him tremendous popularity. He had convicted and sentenced the suspects, a judgement that was applauded across the nation and the international community.

 As the presiding judge took his seat, an ominous silence descended on the court only punctuated here and there by the occasional murmur of the swelling crowd of spectators who strained their necks through the open windows of the courthouse to capture the proceedings from without. The two counsels, the counsel for the prosecution and the counsel for the Defence, each comprising three advocates, sat facing each other before the justice bench. The plaintiff sat before the former counsel. Next to her were her mother, Mrs. Deborah Lappidoth and the ambassador himself. In addition, at the rear of the latter counsel were to be seen seated Chief Dappa Williams, a Port Harcourt-based business magnate and father of the chief defendant Saroki; Mr. Ogueji Okoroafor and Oba Ogundipe Ayo of Abeokuta, fathers to the second and third respondents respectively. Seated with them were two women who were probably their wives. Friends, relations and sympathisers occupied the rest of the rows of seats alike on either side of the counsels.

 Soon, Justice Randolph cleared his throat and motioned the clerk to read the suit as contained in the case file. 'This suit,' commenced the clerk, 'is the third hearing, on appeal, of the suit filed against Messrs Saroki Williams, Obinna Okoroafor and Olufemi Ayo on a four-count charge of abduction, battery, rape and conspiracy.’ According to him, on February 26, 2000, a gang of three gunmen invaded the official residence of Ambassador Ehud Lappidoth in Victoria Island, Lagos and, having disarmed the security personnel on duty, they took the ambassador's only daughter, Zilpha, away shooting sporadically into the air to scare away all possible opposition.

 The plate number of the 505-saloon car in which they drove away was never identified. All police efforts to find out their destination failed.

 Five months later, she was suddenly found one morning blindfolded and left at the gate of her father's residence. As she reminisced about her ordeal, she related that one of her abductors battered, brutalised and raped her every day for the entire period of her confinement in a building whose site she couldn't quite recollect.

 Meanwhile, the profile of her assailant, who wore a mask, reminded her of an experience she couldn't quite grasp completely. After an examination by her family doctor, she was found to carry a four-month-old baby! Constable Ayodele Jimoh, her father's personal escort who picked her up at the gate that morning was also in the court to testify.

 In December of the same year, Zilpha accompanied her parents to Enugu on an official tour and had to be delivered of her baby at the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, (UNTH) Enugu when she suddenly went into labour. The hospital maternity ward became a hive of journalistic practices as the media got tidings of the incident. The security and nursing staff had a hectic day trying to control the influx of reporters and other dignitaries who came to have a glimpse of the baby.

 It was in this maze of confusion that a young man who must have been in his early or middle twenties, complete in his medical garb, a stethoscope slung across his shoulders, came and whisked the baby away on the pretext that he needed some examination in privacy. In a couple of minutes, when Zilpha was wheeled out of the theatre, the baby was announced missing! The hullabaloo, which ensued, almost shook the foundations of the hospital. Nurses, doctors and patients alike raised a terrible outcry and people ran helter-skelter.

 Meanwhile, the hospital matron who had ransacked the entire ward soon spotted the young man moving rapidly as he ducked this way and that wriggling his through the dense crowd towards the adjoining casualty ward. The matron exploded in a rage, 'Hey!' Doctor Stop! Stop him! Stop him!' Too late though as he quickly scaled through the exit door now running briskly towards a waiting Peugeot 505 saloon car. Perhaps, it was the matron's shouting that alerted the four cops that had been guarding the exit from the maternity ward and they gave chase. Few metres to the car, he dropped the baby when he noticed that it was unoccupied. It was still wrapped as it was in a white linen winding sheet. Then, he took to his heels. In addition, before the police could gather their strength to go after him, he effortlessly sailed over the wall at the Akwata end of the hospital and disappeared into the jungle without.

 At the main entrance gate to the hospital, the security guards must have been attracted by the haste with which two young men in tight-fitting jeans trousers and woolen shirts attempted to leave the premises. Upon interrogation, they claimed they had been to the hospital in company with a friend who had gone to see a patient whose name they couldn't tell. Meanwhile, they had received an urgent call to be at home immediately. When asked whether they had come in a car, they answered in the negative. The police wasn't satisfied, so they were remanded in custody pending further investigations. In the meantime, the driving licence found in the car showed that it belonged to one Saroki Williams of 27th Avenue, Trans Amadi Layout, Port Harcourt. On the next day, all national dailies carried the news and Williams' passport photograph graced the front pages of most newspapers.

 Accordingly, on December 15, 2000, three days later, a squad of six mobile police officers arrested Saroki at the Enugu railroad station as he was purchasing a ticket for the next journey to Port Harcourt. As fate had it, investigations had revealed the other duo to be former university friends of Saroki's named Obinna and Olufemi respectively.

 As Miss Lappidoth strode elegantly towards the dock, gracefully clad in a multi-flowered flowing gown, her feminine charm held the courtroom spellbound. Tall, slim, slender with every curve at the right place; an oval face with a characteristic erect Caucasian nose; and a pale brown robust skin; her presence radiated a unique warmth that seemed to ripple away from her and she exuded a magnificent air of royalty that seemingly pulsated across the length and breadth of the courtroom.

 The chief attorney for the prosecution, Barrister Nnaemeka Akaolisa (SAN), asked her whether the content of the case file reflected the reality of her claims. 'The trio and I were schoolmates at Makerere University, Uganda,' she supplemented, her sonorous voice mesmerising the courtroom like a magic wand. ‘For two years until just three months before our degree examination, Saroki and I were dating each other. Through him I got acquainted with Obinna and Olufemi whom he introduced to me as his bosom friends.' She paused, picking her words carefully. ‘When on June 21, 1999, I discovered that he was a sex maniac and was wanted for hypnotism and the raping of the leader of the campus sorority, Miss Linda Walker, our relationship crashed. You all know the implication to a woman of such behaviour. In a nutshell, his dossier, which I stumbled into in the Ugandan National Bureau of Investigation (N.B.I.) website, showed that he had escaped arrest twice and my personal enquiries, revealed that he had had sex with virtually every girl in his faculty!

 'It wasn't easy for me to communicate my decision to him but I did it all the same. In addition, the fact that my exam was at hand helped to keep me busy and, although he made several efforts to see me, I refused to see face-to-face with him. A week before I finally left campus to join my parents in Nigeria, I received an e-mail in which he threatened he was going to make my life a living hell. When several months ago, I was abducted, battered, brutalised, raped and impregnated----' She sobbed, tears rolling down her cheeks and her eyes glistened, suffused in tears. ‘I realised repeatedly that the physique of the rapist reminded me of someone I couldn't then remember,' she continued. 'It wasn't until that fateful day when my baby was almost kidnapped in the hospital that everything became clear to me.' She stopped.

 At this point, the prosecuting counsel tendered Saroki's dossier to the judge as exhibit 1 and Zilpha was permitted to return to her speech but she had nothing more to add.

 In his cross-examination of the plaintiff, the lead attorney for the defendant, Chief Onikan Bamidele (SAN), described the plaintiff's claims as largely preposterous and a deliberate attempt to defame the person of his client. He posited that, if Miss Zilpha Lappidoth had been abducted by three masked gunmen and later raped by one, as she claimed, then it was ridiculous that she could recognize the rapist as Saroki Williams. The fact that the rapist's physique reminded her of her estranged boyfriend wasn't sufficient evidence to convict his client. Besides, such a rape victim would be so traumatised and disoriented that she could hardly identify her assailant. He described it all as a charade and a carefully hatched plot to slander his client. He further argued that, as the daughter of a serving Israeli Ambassador to Nigeria, Miss Lappidoth's representations were tantamount to a seditious felony and calculated to breed disaffection between the two countries in diplomatic circles. ‘My Lord, with this I beg your leave to rest my case for now.' He sat down.

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