Word of Revenge

By Jayden D. Knight

“What do mortals with power desire most?

More power.”

Part I: Jɔ̈t de Kɔc ke Rem
(Uprising of the Youth)

-Chapter I-

2013 - South Sudan
A small child walked through the dark streets of his city looking around, frightened as always. Although he made this trek almost every single night, Adisa was still frightened by the sounds of gunshots and dog barks even though he had heard them plenty of times. As he ducked through the tin topped homes in the slum, an old man's cloudy gaze through the curtain door of his overpopulated home put fear into the boy as he was already on edge. Adisa was near his home as larger buildings surrounded him and was speed walking as if he was trying to get away from something. His head turned and he looked down a frightfully intriguing alleyway to his left. In his short gaze, his mind filled its dark passage with the worst creatures hiding and waiting for the boy to come near so they could pounce on him.

Every day after the boy worked, he had to leave the farm-filled outskirts of the city and sluggishly walk thirty minutes through the city to get back to his home. He lived near the middle of the city which was about as crime filled as you could get in Nileville.

Nileville was the second biggest city in South Sudan after its Capital of Ibis. The city stood on the White Nile above the country's Capital that also stood on the river. Both Ibis and Nileville were closely tied and Nileville was even referred to as: "Little Ibis."

If it was up to Adisa, he wouldn't have the job because it took away from his after-school time with friends. His social life was pretty much non-existent, and it got to the point where his friends stopped asking him to hangout or when he would be free as they knew the answer would be no. Dara, who was Adisa's mother, told him he was lucky to have a job because it would help support the family, but this was cow-shit in Adisa's mind as he had his whole life to work but not his whole life to be a kid.

He worked on a cattle ranch in a rural area outside of the city from the moment he got out of school till eight o' clock at night. The only reason

Adisa got the job in the first place was because his Uncle Abraham was the longtime owner of the ranch. He also was highly encouraged to get a job as Adisa had always been the man of his house as he did not have a father and the only other man in his house was his little brother.

Adisas' father, who he didn't even know the name of, left his mother before she even gave birth, which is why his uncle played a big part in his life. Abraham was not Dara's brother but instead Adisa's father's brother.

The two brothers had so many questions about their father but always were ignored or punished by Abraham and their mother for asking such things. It was clear that Abraham and Dara, hated the boys' father to such a degree that his name was never spoken and questions about anything relating to him were punishable.

Abraham supported his family who he took in after his brother abandoned them, but Adisa tried to not look up to him too much, being that he had been a violent drug abuser for as long as he could remember. Even so, the boy was forever grateful that someone stepped up and got them the nice complex that they lived in. If it wasn't for Abraham, Adisa and his family would have been living in the slums just like most of his school friends or they would be out on the street. Adisa was lucky, and he knew it.

Although his uncle Abraham was his boss, Adisa did not think highly of him as he treated his workers horribly and was addicted to crystal meth. The drug issue tied into why he did not treat his workers well, Adisa guessed or maybe it was just because he was a vile person. Without his uncle's knowledge, Adisa had walked in on his uncle smoking glass before and seen the brutal way it made him act. Abraham was a tall and brawny man, and not skinny like the rest of the drug users Adisa had seen before. He managed to keep his image up and seem as if he was not an addict to his friends and family who had no clue of his use. Adisa wondered if he was the only person who knew, besides Abraham's dealer and if his uncle did find out he knew his secret, he wondered if he would kill him.

After Adisa spent his day shedding sweat and blood at his labor, the exhaustion and soreness that weighed on him during his walk home were nothing compared to the pain of the relentless beatings forced upon him each night. Six out of the seven days in a week, as he made his weary journey home, Adisa braced himself for the inevitable, a brutal, senseless

beating at the hands of thugs to whom he owed nothing and knew even less. He had no idea why he was beaten and robbed night after night, especially by men known around as drug dealers with their days spent loitering on the same street corner where desperate fiends came to feed their addictions. Adisa thought the men would have made enough from dealing that they wouldn't need to wring what little they could from a child. It meant nothing to the men that Adisa was just a boy even if they were twice his age and more than twice his strength. The men would savagely pummel the defenseless boy before subtracting a portion of his hard-earned cash that he barely had. They didn't need the money but making Adisa suffer is what the men got off to. Adisa seemed to be the source of fun and power for the drug dealing young men that stood on the corner of his apartment building every night. In the small chance that they missed Adisa for the night it would be because they were too intoxicated, or they had a girl to keep them entertained. If the thugs weren't doing either of those things, it was a clear sign to Adisa that he would be battered. Adisa wished he could just avoid the men but the entrance to his apartment was right in front of the neighboring apartment corner that the men lurked around. Even if Adisa tried to take a different route or try to outrun them, the gang would always catch up to him and it would just make the beatings worse. It was as if all the hoodlums made their life, and plans revolve around Adisa as if they couldn't survive without taking advantage of the child. After so many relentless beatings, Adisa couldn't shake the feeling that God Himself had turned His back on him.

Adisa didn't have someone to protect him like an older father, or an older brother instead he had a neglectful uncle and a younger brother who was two years younger than him, Being twelve. His Mother didn't do anything about the thugs and Adisa didn't expect her to as she was a civil and soft woman. She simply told Adisa to suck it up if he couldn't fight and to fight if he wanted it to stop. Dara did not realize that these men weren't the usual thugs who just wanted some cash, but instead, they were a ruthless clique that craved blood more than wealth.

The issue was that Adisa didn't own a weapon and if he used a knife to try and protect himself, he would be ganged up on and overpowered. This wouldn't just lead to a beating on the boy, but his death, as it would be the perfect excuse to end the child's life.

After thinking about the beating that was sure to come, Adisa had his home in his sights, walking along the empty road right before it. Not a sound was heard in the boy's ear as he looked up at his blocky three-story apartment that had more clothes hanging on its side than windows. The apartment was tan and soulless and had remnants of scorch marks running up its sides. The silence in the air was unusual as normally you could hear the hooligans laughing or speaking louder than they needed to with their remarks running down every alley in the city. The corner next to the neighboring Apartment where the dealers usually stood was empty and the metal can that usually facilitated a fire inside of it had no light coming from it, which surprised Adisa. He put a pep in his step to try and get inside quicker before the men crept out the shadows. Adisa kept his eye on the corner to his left and looked immensely for any souls. No matter how long he looked, not a sign of life showed. A smile irked across his face as no man seemed to stand in his way. The boy was so overwhelmed with joy that he nearly skipped to the front door of his apartment, his excitement radiating with every step. His smile soon wore off his face being that the door he tugged on to get into the apartment was locked shut. This had never happened to him before, and he worriedly looked behind him as he shook the doorknob thinking that he would be met with the predators ready to strike him. It went silent again and the sound of a piece of metal falling onto the floor sparked Adisa to run again. He remembered that there was a side door to the apartment, so he hit a hard right and rushed his way to the alley leading to the door. When he put his foot into the dim alley the silence was still suspicious to him ringing off all the wrong bells in his mind. With Adisa's vision in an unmoving line towards the side door, a man in a cut off shirt jumped up from behind the garbage can that was to his left. The man who was familiar towered over Adisa and then in a swift move punched the boy right in his gut. The man laughed and held his stomach as Adisa slowly toppled to the ground. Another three thugs popped out from more crevasses of the alley and joined in on the fun looking at a curled up young boy on the dirt. Adisa felt the need to throw up and he reached his arm into the dirt to try and help himself up. Halfway through struggling to maybe get up he realized it was too much and instead gave up.

"Look at this little wimp. He gets all this money, works all the time yet still can't stand up for himself… Always Sitting on the ground crying."

The other men laughed along with the hoodlum who punched Adisa and mumbled meaningless agreements with his statement. The hoodlum who punched Adisa, leaned over himself and thrusted his hand into Adisa's back pocket and pulled out a thrashed, worn-out brown wallet then opened it up like he was going to use the money right then. He looked down in the desolate opening of the old leather wallet, seeing a couple pounds, then quickly grabbed six out of the eight bills Adisa had on him. When the money was crunched into the man's hand, without another word he dragged his bended up flip flop across the ground and ended its journey in Adisa's stomach. The other hooligans instantly started to follow their leader and pound on Adisa, kicking him anywhere they could. Something about this beating was different from the others as it felt personal, and it hurt worse. It was as if Adisa had wronged them, and they were reprimanding him.

Adisa's consciousness faded in and out and he was turned onto his back so the sadistic ruffians could watch the boy's reactionary and puckered up face. Dirt and the bottoms of the men's shoes smashed against Adisa's face and in between this, he caught a glimpse of the money the man had in his hands, and it looked like more than usual. Even though his hearing was buzzing from one of the men kicking on his ear, when the thugs had enough, Adisa was able to hear the man with the money say, "Times are tough, you're gonna start getting taxed more."

All four of them shared a laugh and then one of the men harshly spit on Adisa who was already broken down enough. When the watery line of spit settled on the boy's thin and striped shirt, his nose filled with the smell of nasty chewing tobacco. As Adisa laid completely motionless, the men turned their back on him and walked out of the alley.

Adisa questions if he will be able to get up or not, being that every inch of his body was aching. He wanted to stay down and melt into the ground as the pain was so overbearing. With every heartbeat, the aches and pains became more prevalent.

Something inside him let him get up and when he got through the struggle of using his arms that didn't want to work to pick his body up, he held himself on the broken brick walls of the alley way. A breath of pain came out, his lungs having a hard time catching a single breath. He took two steps away from the wall to try and make it to the side door and then

from behind him, a loud and ghastly whisper crept up his back and went into his ear

"**Hey Kid.**"

Adisa questioned if what he heard was real and he slowly turned his head back to face who was talking. Through Adisa's blurry vision, A silhouette stood at where he entered the alley, and it was so dark it looked as if he had no facial features. Adisa chalked it up to his shaken-up vision. Even if he had terrible vision, the silhouette truly looked like a spirit.

The mysterious man uttered, "**You want advice? Stop letting people stomp on you.**"

Confused in what he was hearing, Adisa painfully spoke, "Why didn't you help me? Who are you?"

The man let out a small bit of air and then whispered out, "**Catch this.**"

A hunk of Metal flew from one side of the alley to the other. Adisa raised his hand up even if his arm felt broken and barely caught the shiny piece.

A Silver revolver now laid in his shaky hands, with a beaten-up wood grip. The gun felt heavier than he thought a pistol would be and Adisa peeked into the unopened cylinder seeing six bronze bullets laying ass up at him. On the back of the bullets was engraved something he couldn't read because it was cut off. Adisa repositioned the revolver to lay flat in his hands again and he admired the beauty again for a second until from the corner of his ear he heard the man speak again.

"**Bring me the dealer's souls and I'll reward you with respect, power, money and anything of your liking. Leave one of the men to survive even though it may be hard. He will spread the word of your revenge.**"

Adisa squinted his eyes in disbelief at what the man was saying, and his eyelids touched then the silhouette disappeared without a trace or sound. Not one detail of the man stuck in Adisa's mind, it was like a hallucination or some sort of nightmare.

Still in his hand laid the revolver the mysterious man threw to him. Adisa wondered if this was a revolver used in a murder and if the man was giving it off to the boy to get rid of it? He also wondered if this man was an enemy of the drug dealers, and he wanted to use Adisa as a tool to kill the hoodlums.

Adisa did not know what to think but he did know that something did not feel right about that interaction. Something felt supernatural about it, like a ghost story someone would tell. The man vanished right before his eyes, he asked himself What else could it be? Why would this random man be helping a random child? Was this a man who just wanted to watch people die as entertainment? Was this a deal with the devil? In Adisa's mind he knew it couldn't have been a regular man, the fact being that people don't disappear like that, and the man gave him a task. Adisa did not know if this was to benefit the man or if it was a potential random act of violence that the man wanted to be carried out to please himself.

Still injured and bleeding all over himself, Adisa turned around and walked up the stairs to the side apartment door only to be met with the same outcome as the front door. It was completely locked. He accepted his defeat and pushed his new piece into his shorts and laid against the dingy wall. His body tossed and turned for a while and he noticed that the gun was poking into him and making him uncomfortable. He took the gun out of his shorts and looked at it again with glances of beauty and disgust. In his mind he thought about if he was caught with it by his mother or a police officer, The consequences would be dire.

He strutted back down the stairs slowly step by step as his body still hurt and placed the clean revolver in one of the many garbage cans riddled down the alley.

Once he reached back to the side wall of the apartment he laid down and slept like a baby even though he was sitting up against a hard wall.

-Chapter II-

A tap on the head woke Adisa up. It was still late at night, The moon looking very close and bigger than usual right on top of Adisa's sky. It illuminated the alley that looked oddly wider and more open than usual. The man that stole Adisa's money tapped on Adisa's forehead some more until the boy grabbed the man's hand.

"Feisty, eh?"

His men laughed in perfect unison with the man and Adisa did not feel worrisome this time about the thugs beating him. Him and his men sounded drunk this time and in Adisa's mind they probably went out to the bar and then came back to mess with him. Adisa looked to his left through the bars of the wooden fence he laid next to, with the assorted hooligans scattered throughout the alley. The boy turned his head and right when the man was about to open his slobbery mouth again a dog began barking in the alley right behind him and his gang. They all slowly turned around in unison and looked at the dog and the man drunkenly shouted, "Put down that mutt!" All his men pulled out silver revolvers and shot the dog multiple times, but it still barked even though it had red holes running down its entire body. Adisa squinted and looked a little harder at the silver revolvers and realized they looked exactly like the one he had just put in the trash can. This was quite odd, but it made Adisa remember his revolver was right in the trash can next to the men. If he could walk over to the garbage and grab the piece while distracting the men, he could try and shoot all the drunkards. While Adisa was thinking this plan up the hoodlums seemed to stand in silence as he was stuck in a trance of thought, staring directly into his soul. Adisa stood up seemingly undamaged from the night before and said to the men, "How about this. Let me grab a surprise for you guys out of this garbage can. Then I can give it to you and you all can leave me alone?"

"Sounds good to me," The main thug said while smiling approvingly at his victim.

Adisa shook his head and walked down the stairs slowly to not give off any suspicions, the whole gang of three looking at him. His arms made it to the top of the garbage can. His fingers wrapped on the edge of the lid, and he quickly pulled the lid off and had his other hand already prepared to grab the gun. With the lid in his left hand and his neck bent down at the garbage can, he realized there was no silver revolver laying in the can but instead just garbage. He turned around towards the door in fear and no gang member stood in front of him anymore. Just his brother Abel standing there with his revolver pointed right at him. The young boy stood menacingly on the stairs leading to the door with the moonlight hitting the shiny silver on the revolver, blinding Adisa. Abraham stood behind Abel with both of his hands on the boy's shoulders and his body scrunched down like he was teaching the boy to shoot. The burling man that was Abraham

did not look into Adisa's eyes but instead just in his general vicinity. He looked proud of Abel who was looking into Adisa's eyes ready to use his own gun to shoot him. Adisa decided to shift his feet away from his family and he began to run down the alleyway towards its exit. He was right at the end of the alleyway and prepared to shift his feet but his ability to run gave out when a bullet struck through his stomach. Adisa rolled face up listening to the dog still bark even though it was shot and looking up seeing his mother cry over his body with Abel and Abraham nowhere to be found.

Adisa woke up from the nightmare the next morning to the sun rising right down the middle of the alley. His mother swung the apartment door open, saying, "Adisa! I've Been looking for you all morning. What is wrong with you?"

He perched himself up and then said, "Yes Mother I-I know, it was those hoodlums again thrashing me up and taking my money… May I take the day off school?"

"No child, get yourself inside and get ready for school."

Adisa nodded his head back and rolled his eyes then let out a groan.

"Alright mother, Will do. Just give me a moment please, I have just woken up."

"You better hurry and be ready to walk with your brother or I am whooping you and sending you to school with more bruises."

She smiled and closed the door. Adisa's mind asked itself, where is the gun? He hurriedly got up off the wall and straightened his aching feet up. Automatically he felt the cold steel in his shorts to which he then gripped through the bottom of his shirt. With his eyes open, not believing what he was feeling, he took the silver piece out again and examined it. He did not know how it got in his shorts, and he couldn't believe that he had it in the first place as the interaction with the shadowy man felt like a dream as well. The option to throw it away was right in front of him and he thought about it. The fact was that if he was caught with it, it would be a big deal and would possibly ruin his life. The alternative was much scarier though, the thought of being caught without it. At this point the beatings for Adisa were a part of everyday life that he had to accept, but what if it wasn't. Maybe the revolver was a blessing not a curse. Maybe he should follow the man's instructions. What did he have to lose? Adisa, without

another thought, pocketed the revolver and then walked into his apartment complex to get ready for school.

Adisa left his apartment complex with Abel, feeling somewhat paranoid of him after the dream. He looked over his back at his brother as they walked along the dirt streets just to check if he was going to run up to him and stab him in the back. This seemed irrational but something within him told him to be weary of his little brother. The dream felt more real than a lot of reality and didn't seem that far off from the truth. Abel always wanted to be better than Adisa or act as mature as him even though he did not have a job and was naive in some aspects. While Abel was covered from the bad parts of the city they lived in, Adisa had to see all of it, being rougher around the edges. The revolver in Adidas pant waist assured him that there would be no problem with his brother. The material item gave Adisa a sense of minor comfort. Adisa thought more about the dream on his silent walk with his brother like most mornings. Maybe Abel would not literally kill him but instead maybe it would be a killing of other sorts. The silence grew loud between the brothers.

"You seem silent this morning, what is on your mind," Abel softly spoke.

Adisa stopped in his tracks turning to his little brother who was behind him. When he turned around it was quick and powerful, sending a message of anger to Abel.

"I'm fine Abel. Let's get to school," Adisa demanded.

Adisa turned back around and tensed his upper lip into his nose. He rolled up his sleeve and looked at his scratched-up gold watch with a cracked face and a brown leather band. Reading the time was quite the mission due to the broken face so he picked it up to his head a little more and squinted his eyes. The clock read eight-fifteen which made him un squint his eyes, breaking him back into reality. School started at eight-twenty, and they were about fifteen minutes away from the school signified by the crossroad they were on.

Adisa then exclaimed, "Shit, we are going to be late!"

"Whatever," Abel said while throwing his arms up in the air in defeat. When Abel said this, he gave Adisa a side glance of disapproval which Adisa did not take kindly to.

Adisa tilted his head at him and spoke, “You know for someone who does as little as you, you do have a lot to say. I know uncle spares you because you get good grades and such but guess what? That will lead nowhere!”

Abel exhaled and responded, “And what makes you think Cattle herding for uncle will lead anywhere? The only reason you even work for him is because mom and him pity you.”

Abel let out a laugh and then walked in front of Adisa after saying his remark as Adisa stood still even though they had somewhere to be.

The brother who was poking the bear shouted from behind himself, “You know what Uncle tells me? You're one of his worst Workers. He says that you don't deserve the money you make and that he’s damn glad that those hoodlums take your money every night.”

Abel was always Abraham’s favorite, and Adisa never felt the love of his uncle. Even if Adisa broke his back for his uncle, he always got the short end of the stick and was screamed at and pushed on while his brother was looked at like the golden child.

Adisa slowly walked behind him looking down at the imprint in his shorts. He didn't respond to Abel and instead thought about sticking the revolver’s barrel in his little brother's hair and then throwing his Body in the dirty water that followed them on the path they walked to school. The rest of the walk was filled with silence that was filled with the brothers' hate for each other. Both expected a fight from one another as that was a usual thing for them, but it never happened.

After the awkward walk the boys made it to school and separated from each other for the day. Adisa sat in class, not listening to a word the teacher said and repeatedly looking down at the outline of the silver pistol in his shorts.

With his elbow on desk and his chin in his palm, Adisa fantasized and wished that someone would try to mess with him as he was untouchable in his mind.

The rest of the class day he thought about what he would do if the thugs tried to take his money again tonight.

He thought about which one he would kill first and where he would shoot them. Adisa made up his mind that he would of course shoot the dominant one in the group first and make a big scene. Then after that he would hunt down the other men.

The whole day all Adisa could think about were his fantasies of watching the men suffer. During teachings his eyes were empty, staring off for long periods of time not moving his pencil or body. The only time he moved was to look down his shorts to confirm that his dream would come true. No matter how many times he looked at his revolver he would find a sense of joy from it. A sense of power, feeling as if he could run out of school and rule the world.

When school ended before heading off to work, he walked over to his friend group needing to talk to them. His friends had become tired of Adisa because no matter how many times he said he would, hang out next time, he never fulfilled that promise. When he approached the group of boys, they didn't realize him at first until he tapped his good friend Paulo on the shoulder. Afia stopped his conversation with the group and turned around smiling at Adisa.

"Look who it is! Rare guest appearance by Adisa!"

The boys laughed and Afia pulled Adisa into the circle of boys. Afia was one of Adisa's first friends and their friendship went a long way back. He was not as close with Adisa as he once was as no one was close with Adisa anymore, but he was a well-liked kid even for having a girl's name. Rumor had it that he was born with a buried pecker, so his parents gave him a girl's name. After they found out he was a boy, they didn't mind the name and stuck with it. Of course, Afia would deny this, but kids would ask why else he had a girl's name, and he couldn't give an answer.

Adisa looked around to faces of happiness and disappointment. Afia had his arm around Adisa, speaking out, "What do you have to say?"

"I have news that I will bring tomorrow. A big change is coming."

His friends started to look at each other in confusion and smug looks were passed around. The silence broke when Adisa's good old friend, Paulo began to chuckle and slapped his knee. The other boys joined in, and laughs surrounded Adisa. He did not slouch his shoulders but had a stern posture while being ridiculed. Paulo broke the laughter when he spoke, "What the hell are you talking about? Change of our lives? Maybe if you quit working for that piece of shit uncle of yours that would change something."

Paulo was looking for a reaction out of his once friend who he had made his disapproval of quite clear. The pestering boy was loud and would

always butt his head into issues that didn't concern him which made the other boys not respect him.

Boys laughed again until Adisa pulled up his tucked in blue shirt out of his shorts. The smiling boys dropped their jaws and pulled their chins back as they went completely silent. Only the curved hammer of the gun was showing but the boys knew exactly what they were looking at. One of the boys worriedly spoke, "Where the hell did you get that?"

Afia reached for it and said, "Let me see friend."

Quickly moving out of the way, Adisa turned over and walked off from the group. They all stood completely still in Awe like they had just seen something that they couldn't believe. Adisa turned back around from the group, then saying, "You will see tomorrow. Everyone will get their share."

Adisa walked to work after his school day and after all the walking he had done so far in the day he felt exhausted. Last night's beating had started to take a toll on him. His left arm felt broken, almost unusable being that he had had it under him while the men kicked on him. When he arrived at the ranch, his work output was subpar, which was quickly noticed by his peers. A couple other boys that worked with him started to whisper to each other about his injury. They couldn't be more obvious about their gossip towards Adisa being that they stared him right down in the eyes as they talked crap. Adisa covered in dirt and cow dung stared them down as well, His eyes piercing them as they were the only thing that wasn't covered in brown powder. He redirected his attention back to work and tried to slowly creep on through the day without his injuries being noticed by his uncle.

Almost half of his workday had passed, and the sun was just about to begin to set. His quality of work was awful, and Abraham saw that from a mile away. Abraham Locked eyes with the boy and then sternly walked through the ranch to his nephew. Adisa knew he was coming over so turned his back to Abraham and crouched down acting as if he dropped something.

When the two locked eyes Adisa was petrified as his uncle was the only person, he had met that he was terrified of. In Adisa's mind, the worst memory of his uncle he had stored was him coming home from school and hearing shouts blow through his bedroom window. It sounded like a sharp argument between a man and woman and Adisa knew it was his mother and

Abraham. Adisa and Abel tried their best to ignore it and eased their minds with small talk between each other. The two continued talking to each other as Adisa leaned against the front door of the apartment. While a sentence was rolling off his tongue, a push of wood came from behind Adisa as Abraham angrily shoved open the door and knocked the boy down to the ground. Instead of words of apology as he emitted his large shadow over his nephew, Abraham threw a scoff down at the ground where Adisa laid.

"Stupid Kid," was muttered from under Abraham's Breath. He stepped right over Adisa while he was still on the ground and Adisa never could forget that moment. The worst part was not him falling on the ground as he was accustomed to physical hardships but rather the fact that when he entered his Apartment his mother was sobbing, and she refused to tell him what happened.

After thinking back to that pivotal moment, Adisa closed his eyes and repeated under his breath, "Ignore me, ignore me, ignore me." The pleas did not work as Abraham grabbed the back of his dirty shirt and pulled him up. He turned him around like a play toy and faced him towards his big, towering body.

"What is this bullshit, Adisa? You have never been the best worker, but this is unacceptable!"

Adisa looked up at his tall uncle and said, "I do not know Abraham. Just not feeling the best today."

Abraham had a nasty look on his face, looking Adisa up and down examining his body.

"Don't call me Abraham. Call me boss."

Adisa looked down at his shoes then back up at his uncle.

"Let me guess it was those boys again? You deserve it at this point. Have you ever heard the phrase, fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me?"

Adisa shook his head no to his uncle's question then Abraham scoffed then walked off like an angry bull.

"May I use the restroom boss," Adisa shouted towards his uncle's back.

"You might as well. Not like you're doing anything of Value here so go ahead!"

Adisa did not respond and followed Abraham for a few seconds then detoured off to the Straw outhouse. He rested his covered butt on the stone toilet that was more of a bottomless shit pit than a toilet with a lid. The

toilet was quite disgusting as well, seeming to have dried liquid stains running down its side. Adisa did not have to take a poop, instead he sat down and pulled out his pistol from his front. As warm light crept through the thin gaps in the straw of the outhouse, Adisa admired the glistening silver on the gun. He had never shot a gun before or even held on, so he rubbed his thumb around the gun looking for things to learn about it. On the left side of the gun's frame, Adisa spotted an oval shaped button that he rested his thumb over. Adisa clicked it over and heard a faint noise. The boy titled the gun to its other side and the cylinder popped out for the bullets to be shown to Adisa. He looked down at the six brass shells of .357 ready to be fired anytime and was amazed at what he was holding. The cylinder shut on the revolver, and he clutched the piece tight into his hands and stood up off the toilet in a quick push. Adisa slammed the crappy rotted wood door open and caught the two boys in his glance with the shiny pistol laying in his hands. Adisa only took one step at the boys and without them even looking he pointed the pistol up with his right hand and fired on both of them. Two shots rang off through the air making the cows go crazy. In the blink of an eye the two boys who were just looking down at Adisa were on the ground with a bullet in both of their heads.

"Adisa!"

Abraham screamed his nephew's name from the entrance of his makeshift shed after he saw his workers drop dead and then began walking towards the armed boy. Adisa planted his feet in the ground and shot Abraham in the stomach. Abrahams big stature let him eat the bullets as he continued to take steps at Adisa. With his shaky hands, Adisa pointed his hand up to Abraham's face then pulled the trigger again. Adisa stood over his uncle's Body noticing his eyes were still wide open from the rage he had while he was walking over to Adisa.

Adisa squinted his eyes hard realizing he had gotten too much in his head and had blacked out for a minute. His eyes were still staring at the open cylinder of the revolver. He shook his head and dismissed the Idea of killing everyone on the ranch and then he shut the revolver closed.

-Chapter III-

Adisa finished his sloppy workday and began his long walk home in the dark, Ready for anything. This walk to his home was not as scary as usual as now Adisa's ego had assured him, he could protect himself through anything. As he walked along the dirt roads in his city, he knew what was waiting for him when he reached his apartment. He knew after tonight they would never mess with him again, Or anyone else. His feet pick up his body with vengeance running through his mind. Now the wounds he had were forgotten as all he could think about was spilling blood. Every step he took was another one towards freedom. Adisa got close enough to where he examined the four men all standing on the corner, surrounding a trash can that had been filled with burning paper. The main member of the group was talking with a lit joint hanging off his bottom lip as he talked his mouth off. A woman who must have only been a couple years older than Adisa was wrapped around the man's arm, not seeming to be amused by whatever he

had to say. She had a red cropped puffer jacket that matched with her ruby lipstick that contrasted her dark skin. Fishnets ran up her legs and ended at her pair of black daisy duke shorts.

Adisa knew this girl wasn't the smartest as she was hanging out with a group of drug dealers who were too old for her.

The three men that surrounded the obvious leader of the gang all had their bodies facing him to hear his lousy story.

Adisa gulped and looked down at the front of his shorts again. His breathing began to change and then started to march across the street. He stopped halfway across and watched the joint get passed from the man's lip to the woman's fingers.

As she was filling her cheeks up with smoke, the man holding her looked in Adisa's direction and then looked back at his friends. He swore he saw a silhouette, so he did a double take and then locked eyes with the young boy who was barely visible. Adisa's faint silhouette was only visible because of the orange trash can light that covered him and the buildings walls behind him. Most of the boy's face was visible with his eyes being the only thing you couldn't see as were completely shadowed in. The man upped his head to the other hoodlums and slowly raised his hand to point at the dimmed Adisa who stood motionless in the street. Everyone stayed silent as they slowly turned around thinking they were going to see something terrifying. The silence ended when they stared at Adisa and gave him a laugh. Joyfully throwing his hands in the air, the man holding the woman shouted, "Little Man! After last night's fun you can take tonight off!"

The man with the girl in his arms looked at his men again and they turned around, forgetting about Adisa. They all shared a laugh, and the man shook the woman he had in his arms until she forced a small smirk. The leader began to speak again, saying, "As I was saying…"

The circle of smoke and jokes continued, with no one noticing Adisa slowly approaching the fire they stood around. Adisa reached into his waist and pulled out the revolver, not even paying attention to the silver beauty, as its looks did not matter anymore. His sweaty thumb cocked the hammer of the gun like he did it before. Only fifteen feet away from the group, Adisa stuck his feet in the dirt and settled them. He stood deathly still and raised the revolver at the main man's face who was standing right in his view.

Both the man and the boy caught each other's glances then Adisa shut his eyes and with the man's head in his sights, he pulled the hair trigger.

In a bloody burst, the man's nose exploded, drenching his face in crimson and spattering his blood across his arm candy. The man collapsed toward the dirt, his hand searing against the blistering rim of the garbage can as he went down. Screams that sounded like they came straight from the pits of hell filled the city as the woman at his side covered her eyes and then her loudmouth as the dead body slipped onto her like a fish. The Eyes of the three hooligans that were still breathing looked at their friend's body and then swiftly behind them, right back into Adisa's eyes. Their feet picked them up and ran them into the apartment as they ran like they never had before. In shock, Adisa pulled back the hammer of the gun once more, but the fleeing men were already out of reach. His mind spun with confusion over the unsettling rush of taking a life, a twisted surge of power that felt almost godlike, sorrow for the frightened boy within him that didn't know what he was doing, and a searing anger for every time they had beaten and humiliated him.

His ears rang, and his eyes were snapped wide open, gleaming with fierce intensity like a predator on the hunt. Adisa was feeling a new sensation never put in front of him before. This momentary delay cost him, and as the apartment door slammed shut, Adisa bolted after them with his revolver clenched tightly in his hand. The girl, now behind him, didn't run. Instead, she remained crouched over the man, her tears falling onto him. Adisa gave her a quick glance and ignored her, continuing his hunt. He shoved the apartment door open with a stiff arm and reached the base of the staircase. Adisa's head jerked up, locking onto the only visible man ahead who had his back turned to the boy, just moments from vanishing around the corner. With his right hand gripping the railing, the hoodlum scrambled to escape Adisa's view, but he failed. Without a moment's hesitation, Adisa fired, the shot slamming into the man's back just before he disappeared around the corner. The man fell and wheezed as the sound of the bullet was thrown through all four stories of the corridor. As he fell, the victim twisted around, his back scraping against the rough concrete wall, leaving a thick streak of red smeared across its cold, gray surface. His arm lifted weakly toward Adisa as the boy sprinted up the stairs, reaching the landing where the hoodlum slumped. The young boy without a morsel of mercy in his heart held the pistol up and shot the man again, right in the

chest. Blood pooled beneath the man, and within seconds, he drew a few shallow breaths before his eyes went stagnant and his heart stopped.

The other men had made their way farther than the first man and were almost to the top of the stairs. Adisa peeked up at the middle of the stairs and saw the men tightly gripping their hands on the railing to guide their bodies while their feet scurried on the steps.

Leaning his small body against the railing, he pointed his revolver up the corridor, squinting one eye shut as he searched for any sign of fingers. The man who had made it the farthest up the stairs reached for the metal railing and Adisa saw his dark fingers clear as day. With little hope of landing the shot, Adisa pulled the trigger, the crack of the gun followed by the sharp clang of the bullet ricocheting off the metal.

"*Agh.*"

A short, almost dog-like yap came out of the man's mouth, but the victim kept running, though his middle and ring fingers dangled, barely held together by thin strips of skin. The other hoodlum, once trailing behind the wounded man, sprinted ahead as his friend slowed. The faster of the two glanced back, offering no help as he watched his companion fall behind. Adisa raced up the stairs, reaching the top where an open window to his right caught his eye. The hinged glass pane swung slightly, a clear sign that one of the men had just leapt through. As his attention was on his right, Adisa was surprised with the sound of a door to his left slamming shut.

Inside his room, the man slammed the door shut, shoving a dresser against it to barricade the entry. He yanked a double-barrel shotgun from beneath his bed, aiming it right above the barricade at the blocked door with his trembling hands.

Adisa knew if he entered that door, he would possibly be met by gun fire, so he walked over to the door to the right of the hoodlums' room and reached his hand on the doorknob. He also knew that if he could get into the neighboring room, he could reach the hoodlum's room through the side door connecting the two.

The click of a deadbolt locking echoed in Adisa's ear just as his fingers grazed the doorknob, igniting a surge of anger within him. He yanked at the doorknob, but it held firm, and he quickly realized there was no chance of it budging. Knowing he had very little time to show these men a lesson before the cops showed up, he shuffled over to the door to the left of the

hoodlums' room and twisted the doorknob. Surprisingly this doorknob was not locked and allowed him to twist it fully open. Adisa stuck his head through the door to see the room was pitch black and only had a small candle to illuminate anything. As Adisa stepped into the room, the faint flame flickered, casting just enough light to reveal two faces in the dark corner. The door behind him closed with a quiet thud. In the corner of the room, a sweating woman clutched her frightened child tightly, a small kitchen knife shaking in her hand. Her wide eyes locked onto Adisa, who stared right back. The small boy buried his face in his mother's breast in fear, but curiosity got the better of him. Slowly, he turned to steal a glance at his home's intruder. Adisa and the child locked eyes, the boy's face streaked with tears and snot, glistening in the dim candlelight.

"Please don't hurt us. Please," The woman pleaded shakingly.

Adisa had never seen this woman or boy before, yet their fearful eyes and tense faces made it seem as if they had been expecting him. They must have heard the gunshots and sat trembling, like cornered rabbits bracing against the inevitable approach of a fox.

Adisa felt a sense of guilt and grief take over his body while looking at the defenseless pair. Although the woman had a knife, in the end it would be nothing to a person with a handgun that could lay both of them down with no effort. No effort or swing or push of a knife, just a single pull of a small trigger. Adisa said nothing to the woman, his silence lingering as he trotted through her apartment. He moved straight to the side door, the one that connected her space to the hoodlum's apartment. The door was locked, of course, but Adisa overcame this by pressing the barrel of his pistol down on the doorknob. Adisa's .357 roared, the shot echoing through the room. The mother clamped her hands over her child's ears as the shot through door swung loose. The boy's foot kicked the door open, and a blast of buckshot ripped through it. But Adisa remained untouched, having wisely stayed outside the room.

The paranoid hoodlum, fumbling to switch triggers to initiate the other barrel, barely had time to react as Adisa swung into the room in one swift motion, his gun already raised. Another shot rang out, striking the man straight in the heart. The man's shotgun slipped from his hands, clattering onto the wooden floor. His eyes remained frozen, vacant, as his body crumpled slowly to the ground. His body slumped against the flat

back of the dresser; the same one he'd desperately moved to keep the child out.

The child's cries echoed through the apartment as Adisa heard the mother sprint across her room behind him. The door swung open with a frantic creak as she fled.

Adisa spared no glance at the fallen man. Instead, he stooped to grab the shotgun from where it lay and slid his revolver back into the waistband of his shorts. He was eager to leave the room, but his eyes caught on the filthy nightstand beside the bed. Eight shotgun shells sat scattered in a row, alongside a stack of pounds and a small bag of what looked like drugs. The bag looked familiar, resembling the one Adisa had seen before on his uncle's work desk. Without much doubt, the boy assumed it was meth.

Adisa pocketed the shotgun shells and pounds, then examined the cloudy bag of meth.

As the boy held the bag to the lamp light, A voice came from the right of Adisa saying, "**Take it. Now go get that damned soul.**"

Adisa's eyes darted in fear, and for a fleeting moment, he saw the figure from the alleyway the night before, standing eerily beside the hoodlum's lifeless body.

A dark, smoky aura surrounded him. Something Adisa had never seen before. The figure's blank, shadowed face burned into his mind for an instant before vanishing just as quickly. Adisa shook his head, trying to shake the lingering image away. He pocketed the bag of ice, then shoved the bloody dresser aside, clearing the way to the front door.

As he pushed the door open, Adisa quickly turned his head left and right, scanning for any sign of someone ready to arrest or attack him. He turned the corner of the hallway and headed towards the open window. The cool night air brushed against Adisa's skin as he approached the window. Gripping the base tightly, he leaned forward and stuck his head out, scanning the darkness below him. Adisa squinted his eyes looking for the man until a little running silhouette rushing across the top of a building caught his attention. The man still had two or three buildings to cross if he wanted to reach a safe spot to jump down into the night. Adisa peered down at the building where the man had landed, realizing it was a two-story drop he had braved. Judging by the man's limp, his legs were clearly injured. It also explained why, despite the time he had to escape, he had only managed to make it three buildings away from Adisa. With his injured

state, if he were to jump down another two-story drop, he would be likely to make his legs unusable. The first two story drop was quite damaging so if he did it again no doubt, he would be dragging his body to try and escape from Adisa.

The limping man kept running until he reached the last building, which was the lowest to the ground, only being a one story drop and slowed his legs down. He peered over the edge of the building into the narrow alleyway, searching for any sign of the vengeful child. But all he saw were scattered trash cans. The man gripped the edge of the building, before dropping down into the alley below.

The moment his feet hit the ground, a sharp, searing pain shot up both legs, jolting through him as he landed. He gritted his teeth against the pain, his breath hissing through them. His paranoid eyes darted around, scanning in front, side to side, and even up and down. The man began to limp out of the alley, desperate to reach the street and find help, but just as he neared the exit, a long, drawn-out whistle echoed from behind him, freezing him in his tracks.

He slowed to a halt, his head turning cautiously over his shoulder. They're stood Adisa, close behind, his shotgun gripped in his hands. The man put his hands up feeling defeated, knowing he couldn't run away and turned around towards his enemy.

Adisa wanted to make the man feel what he had felt time and time again from all of the beatings he had endured.

Adisa's shotgun was aimed directly at the back of the man's head as the child approached. The hopeless man closed his eyes for a moment, then decided he needed to at least try and escape. His throbbing legs dragged along the dirt as he tried to run out of the alley into the main street.

Adisa's lips formed into a smile as he leveled the shotgun at the man's left arm, the one that was already wounded. The child pulled the second trigger, unleashing a blast of lead balls that tore through the man's arm, ripping it to shreds. It was so pain inducing that the man pushed a guttural grunt out and tumbled over himself and collapsed into the dirt. The man crashed face-first into the dirt street, then rolled onto his back, screaming in agony. His eyes looked onto his mangled arm, now hanging by only a few strained tendons. The spray had torn through his triceps, leaving only a few strands of muscle from the front of his arm desperately clinging to what

remained. He struggled to sit up, using his right arm to push himself backward, desperately trying to put distance between him and Adisa.

Adisa grinned as he stared at the man, snapping the shotgun open and tossing out the spent shells. Smoke was knocked out of one of the shells that fell to the dirt with the other one being dry. His fingers shoved two new shells into the shotgun and then closed the double barrel. The cold barrels of the shotgun pressed against the man's forehead, drawing a shaky sigh of relief from him, a silent acceptance that his suffering was about to end. Adisa ending the man's pain coming from his arm would be a relief so the man dropped his only usable arm in defeat, hoping his death would come quickly.

After seconds of waiting, no shot was fired from the shotgun. The cold relieving barrels of the gun were taken off the man's forehead and then thrown chucked down towards the dirt by the child. Even if the boy wished to carry out this act of revenge by killing the man, he knew that he couldn't. The boy gave another look at the man's shredded up and then he climbed on top of the man, his grin widening and the twisted satisfaction being shown in his eyes. He pushed the man into the dirt by pressing his torso down into the ground. The man tried to fight by swinging his only arm into Adisa's side while Adisa smiled and seemed to get off to the man's struggle.

"No, no," The man repeatedly pleaded.

Adisa dug his fingers into the man's mangled left forearm tightly. With brutal force, he began to tear the limb away, each tendon snapping and fraying like the strings of a broken instrument. The man's scream pierced the night, louder and more anguished than ever heard before. Its echo jolted awake the nearby citizens and made them peek out of their windows.

The poor soul used his only arm to claw at Adisa, but Adisa felt numb through the pain even as the man's untrimmed nails dug into his skin. Adisa felt nothing but pure, unrelenting power. No pain. No fear. Only the intoxicating rush of control.

When the man's arm was torn off, Adisa held it up proudly in front of him towards the moon and examined it like a trophy while the man grabbed his stub in horror.

Onlookers peered from their windows; their eyes wide with shock. Outside of their homes, Adisa stood triumphant, hoisting the man's severed arm

high in the air in a twisted display of power towards anyone watching. Women turned away, retreating into their homes to escape the gruesome sight. Meanwhile, some men lingered, their faces pale and stomachs churning, the urge to vomit rising at the horror of Adisa's act. Adisa scooped up his shotgun from the ground, casting no more than a passing glance at the writhing man behind him. With a confidence that dared anyone to question him, he strode away, the weight of countless stares trailing his every step. The boy knew he had to put on a show for the people, so they took what he was doing seriously. For the average person in South Sudan, whose days were consumed by the routines of mundane work, the sight of a boy killing a man in the street was nothing short of shocking. The man who wished he was dead in the street watched Adisa walk away into the night and felt teased with death as what was left of his arm gushed blood. Adisa had dangled the warm comfort of death before the poor soul, only to snatch it away in cruelty.

As Adisa walked through the streets, he noticed lights flickering on in more windows, and dark silhouettes gathering behind the glass. Silent witnesses to the carnage he had left behind. He knew the people were watching but he paid no mind to them and kept walking.

Everything was unfolding just as planned. With a bag of meth, six shotgun shells, a thick wad of pounds, a pistol snug in his waistband, and a shotgun gripped tightly in his hand, Adisa felt untouchable. A force no one could stand against.

Adisa's apartment, just next to the scene of the killings, had a few lights glowing from within. Only a couple of silhouettes shifted behind the windows, their shapes lingering in curiosity and fear. From what Adisa could tell his light from his home was not on which was a relief as he hoped no family would be awake to confront him.

As Adisa walked into the front entrance of the apartment, the distant sound of wailing sirens grew closer. Panic surged through him, and he quickly slammed the door shut before rushing up the stairs to his apartment.

When he entered his home, No one was in sight, making Adisa pick up his feet quickly to his room so he was not confronted. He could only hope no one had seen him enter as his shotgun was still clutched in his hands. His mother would not approve and would more than likely kick him

out onto the streets. After a nervous journey to his room, he made it and shut the door. He released a relieved sigh, his eyes drifting shut as the tension released from his shoulders.

Adisa let his hand off the cold doorknob and rushed across his small room and slid the shotgun under his bed. He quickly pulled his partially filled revolver out and tucked it under his pillow like money for the tooth fairy. His knees hit the floor, and his fingers touched every corner of his pockets to empty them, finally pulling out the shotgun shells and the bag of meth. His hand flicked the bag and the shells to the deepest part under his bed, right on top of his double barrel shotgun. As he was on his knees pulling his head out from under the bed, he heard his door slowly creak open from behind him.

Goosebumps formed along the boy's skin and Adisa's thoughts rushed all over the place and he wondered if the man he had just left for dead had trailed him. For all he knew, a gun could be pointed at the back of his head.

Thoughts ran through Adisa's head not knowing what person or thing stood behind him. He flung his hands onto the bed and squeezed his eyes shut, his posture mimicking prayer. Adisa hurried through the motion, knowing it could serve as a quick excuse to his mother for why he was on his knees. No comforting gun laid in his shorts anymore and no shotgun laid in his hands either. He was defenseless and by the time he could have reached his pillow, whatever person that wished death upon him would already put the boy down by firing shots into his back.

"Adisa? Did you hear those gunshots?"

Adisa's body turned around to his frantic mother, then he spoke, "I was just praying mother. I didn't hear anything."

"They sounded closer than usual like they came from across the street."

Adisa looked back at his mother and then said, "Well I hope whoever got shot is doing alright."

"Mhm. Goodnight son," Dara spoke unsurely.

She released her grip on the door, crossed the room, and gently pressed a kiss to Adisa's forehead. After the kiss Adisa put his head back to play the act of praying. To the right of the window Adisa faced, a shadowy and unknown silhouette emerged from the darkest corner of his room. His heart slammed to a halt, and a crushing weight, as if a thousand pounds, bore down on him. With wide, terrified eyes, Adisa yanked his pistol from

beneath his pillow. He spun towards the figure and pulled the trigger with no hesitation.

The hammer came down and no fire spit at the silhouette. Adisa knew the revolver should have held at least three more bullets. Shock washed over him, and the gun was empty, as if the bullets had vanished into thin air.

"**Looking for these**," the shadowy and familiar man asked while three bullets laid in his black hand.

He let down his hand to make a slope and let the bullets drop one by one on the floor right in front of Adisa. Blank eyes stared into Adisa's soul making him feel very uncomfortable. Adisa now recognized this shadow as the same one that was in the alley. Something was off about this being. Though the figure bore the silhouette of a man, not a woman, Adisa felt no trace of a human presence. An unsettling emptiness radiated from the spirit, chilling the child to the core.

"Who are you?" Adisa's voice trembled, the weight of his own powerlessness sinking in.

"**I am the being who gave that pistol that lay in your hands. I am the being who you made a deal with to kill those men and leave one man alive and you did. A lot of people cannot just follow orders from me, always messing up or asking too many questions. You did not do that. You are different. It is in your blood. I am the man that will make you something. Because of me, boys will become men at your feet.**"

Adisa felt a small smirk grow across his face. He wanted to ask the being who he truly was but felt an obligation not to as deep down he knew who he was speaking to. Adisa's hands which felt power from the pistol that lay in them loosened up and submitted, letting the pistol rest to the ground.

"What must I do for you next? To help your cause and to give me power?"

The being stood silent as always and then said, "**You are already setting up what you must do next. Adisa, you have the soul of a leader. You will lead those boys from your school to greatness allowing them to choose their own destiny instead of following orders or following moral obligations. Your dream destiny is not something you can wait to come to you, or something that you can pray for. You and your Soldiers must grab Destiny by its throat and to get what you want. Once you have your loyal boys, Next step is to take power within the city. This will come by**

destroying the police force and then taking the mayor's spot. You will be able to run the city as its own independent piece of Africa with no interference from outside sources."

Adisa's eyes lit up, almost hearing the distant cheers of his excited people. The thought of how much he could change in this barren, rotten land filled him with a sense of purpose. The sheer power he would wield to crush any evil that dared to rise in the area would be overwhelming.

"**I have allowed you to take revenge against your enemies and now I have given you another task. With ruling a city, for your people to follow you, you feed them for free, but to get this food you must sell drugs.**"

Adisa's smile came down as he realized the other end of the deal.

"**You must get to the point where you have labs or grow operations to sell these drugs and then you must export them. Your people cannot know of this and if anyone finds out you must put them down. This is the small favor you must do for me while I give you the power to rule. You can sell within your area, but I do not recommend it. If you export this will weaken other pieces of Africa making your land superior. Your land will be a Utopia. Just keep your business dealings quiet. The first step to this is destroying the supply of drug dealers in this area. You must attack them on a Holiday when they are intoxicated and not ready to fight. What will make you destroy them quickly is good leadership and soberness. Do not leave any men to survive from the drug dealers. Once you end the drug problem in your city you will be looked at as Heroes and then you can use their supplies in secret. You will become a king if you follow what I say.**"

Thoughts of success and living like royalty flooded into Adisa's mind. He would not have any more hungry nights; his mother would not have to suffer through a job to support his family. Adisa's father would regret leaving his son when become a ruler. His unpleasant life would turn fruitful. The people he would help and bring together would be more reason to take up this offer. If other parts of Africa got hurt, it would not matter to Adisa as if they wanted true change they could just come to his Utopia. The amount of people that would be hurt with drugs meant nothing if his people could live happily.

"I accept your offer. I will fulfill this promise and exceed your expectations while doing it," Adisa said.

The spirit then said, “Check under your bed. There is also a present in the top drawer of your dresser.”

Already being on his knees, Adisa kept his eyes on the man, then quickly turned around to look back under the bed like there were Christmas presents waiting for him. His shotgun was not visible anymore as it was covered by a wall of newfound rifles that had seemingly appeared under his bed. He rubbed his eyes with his fists then looked again to see if he was dreaming or if this was some sort of mirage, but it was not. There were so many guns under the bed they began to almost poke and stick out from their hiding spot. Adisa reached under the bed, his fingers closing around one of the many rifles by its curved magazine. With a firm tug, he pulled it free, the heavy metal in his hands. His body turned back to the being’s direction, and he was nowhere to be found. He shook his head again, almost getting used to the man’s supernatural presence. The gun was raised up from Adisa’s left hand that was holding the front grip of the gun and his right hand which was placed on the pistol grip. Adisa remembered this gun, seeing it in movies that he and his friends would watch through people's windows.

On late nights running around town back before Adisa became a slave to his job, he and his group of friends would go to the wealthier parts of their city near the mayor's house and watch movies through people's windows. None of the boys could afford a TV and not even a DVD Player. American action movies would play on the TVs some nights and the boys would lay down in the dirt and watch the tiny movie screen that was twenty feet away from them. The boys would talk about different guns in the movies and Adisa always felt left out as he did not know much about guns. A black gun with wooden furniture would come out on the screen, Adisa’s friends pointing and saying, “Aye kay! Aye kay!”

Adisa would soon come to realize that what they were saying was stylized as “AK” and not “Aye kay.”

The gun was always wielded by rebels or the villains of the movies. For Adisa it was hard to figure out who was the villain and who was the hero in most of the movies as it was not easy to distinguish the two. The only way Adisa really knew was by the guns. The Heroes would usually have more plastic blackened guns, or green guns and the villains would usually have guns that seemed older or had more wood on them.

While Adisa held the villain's gun, he lifted himself from his knees and then walked over to his window and looked down trying to see if the man was waiting down there or not. No one was at the bottom of the window besides a homeless man on a striped dingy couch that was sound asleep. The man must have slept through Adisa's gunfire unlike everyone else.

Adisa approached his dresser slowly and yanked open the top drawer, revealing a clutter of clothes, a wad of pounds, and one curious object.

A coiled-up white wire, its purpose unknown. He rested the AK on top of the dresser, its weight thudding against the wood. Then, with a curious glance, he picked up the white electrical wire, its coils untwisting loosely in his hands. Upon examining it he noticed knots tied into the long line that must have stretched a good twenty feet. It was not a thick wire but after he tugged on it, he concluded it was pretty sturdy. He had never given much thought to electrical wire before. In the days before his spirit friend gave him good luck, he would have simply grabbed a knife, stripped the copper from within, and sold it for whatever little it was worth. His hands coiled up the wire in circles then he put it back in his dresser being confused as to how that was a present, but he knew it was something important as the spirit wouldn't have gifted it to him if it was useless.

Adisa's eyes dropped to the floor, spotting the scattered bullets and the revolver. He scooped them up without a word, then hastily shoved them beneath his pillow. He hopped in bed and crossed his arms across his chest. In response to the stressful night, he took deep breaths while staring at his dirty ceiling.

This feeling was unlike anything Adisa had felt before, The power, the pain and the guilt. The power had consumed the young boy, smothering every other emotion to silence. He thought of people who looked down on him, and people who would look down on him. Whether it was the now-dead hoodlums or his uncle who had constantly stepped on him, in just one night, Adisa had disproved their belittlement. This was just the beginning as well. He would prove them all wrong even more so than he did in a night. His mind and body could not take the beatings anymore whether that be from his boss who used the excuse of being family to put him down, or the hoodlums who used their bad situation to make his situation worse. The feeling of being nothing had almost gotten to the boy's mind, but this night was a turning point, reinstating his confidence.

Adisa asked himself, when is enough, enough?

He could Dismiss what this spirit or demon was offering him and keep living his repetitive, depressing life or he could take fate by the throat and change his curse of living like many others. The others that don't change hate their lives. If anyone else had been given his opportunity, no matter the cost, they would have seized it and done the same. While staring at the ceiling he knew what he had to do. In his mind he knew the revolution had begun.

He was Chosen.

-Chapter IV-

As Adisa laid sound asleep, the police finally arrived at the apartment, where three deceased bodies lay scattered. On the street, a man lay

presumed dead while medics checked on his state, while a blood-soaked girl clung to her partner's lifeless body, refusing to let go.

Five police cars had shown up and only a single ambulance.

Chief Ameen Kuer swung open the passenger door of his police car with a wet toothpick clenched between his teeth. He flicked the wood away and with a sluggish tug at his pants, he waddled toward the apartment, exuding an air of indifference. As the Chief stepped out, he let out a yawn while the officers around him hurried to the corner of the apartment. There, three civilians, visibly shaken but breathing, stood near a young woman who was curled over an unresponsive body, her anguish etched onto her face.

The citizens all viewed over at the police and then one of the male citizens spoke, “Did the gunshots wake you up or something? There are at least two people dead here and more injured, what took you so long?”

Chief Ameen gave a laugh then walked up to the man looking him dead in the eyes. His wife held her husband's stomach as his lip quivered and his eyes opened wide like he was staring down his worst enemy. The chief walked slowly, his hand resting casually on his gun, his demeanor calm, then he spoke, “How about you go on home. Well, take care of this, this is Police business.”

The man stood for a couple more seconds and his demeanor calmed, then he spoke, “Just help this poor girl out. She is not speaking.”

The man’s fingers pointed at the body facing down with a stained and bloodied blanket over him. Ameen watched as half of his men rushed inside, then turned his attention to the body. Without a word, he knelt beside it, next to the grieving girl, his expression unreadable.

The chief’s clammy fingers reached under the first victim’s head as the woman cried down his ear. Just as he reached to pull the blanket up, the woman’s sobs abruptly ceased. With a sudden, desperate motion, she grabbed his hand tightly, her grip trembling. Aggressively, Ameen turned his attention to the woman with his eyes almost popping out his head. He planned on yelling at the woman for interfering with a police investigation but before he could the girl shakingly spoke, “Don’t. You don’t want to see it.”

Ameen shot the woman a look of pure disgust before snapping, “Back off.”

The girl knew of Ameen's reputation and chose not to argue. She quickly sprang to her feet, her movements shaky and unbalanced. As she walked away, she cast one last glance back, her tear-filled eyes lingering on the scene.

The Chief continued pulling back the damp sheet without a thought in the world until he got a view of the man's forehead that had a piece of chunky skin laid across it. He knew the sight that awaited him would be repulsive, yet he pressed on, pulling the sheet back until the major wound was fully exposed.

Ameen coughed out a puff of smoke as he was mid drag when he caught his glimpse of the busted face of the man. He quickly changed his mind, pulling the sheet back over the victim's head, only getting as far as the man's red chin. But the image still lingered, burned into the back of Ameen's eyelids, haunting him with every blink.

Murders weren't uncommon in Nileville, and Ameen had been Police Chief for years, yet he had never encountered something this gruesome. He hesitated to go into the apartment, dreading the thought of stepping deeper into the rest of the crime scene.

The chief shook his head, attempting to shake off the lingering image, then briefly rested his hand on the doorknob. Just as he was about to turn it, a groaning, silent voice echoed from the street, catching the attention of the chief and everyone else gathered around the apartment.

"Help... Help."

A dark silhouette of a man slowly approached the group in front of the apartment. It was clear he had no left arm, and as he staggered closer to Ameen, the two paramedics hurried to his side, gently placing their hands on his shoulders to stop his advance.

With a disturbed look, Ameen watched as the injured man fainted in the medic's arms and then laid limp. The two medics helped the man to his feet, steadying him before he could stumble again. With a deep breath, the chief finally turned the doorknob and opened the apartment door.

As Ameen entered the apartment, he heard most of his men gathered at the top of the stairs, talking in professional tones. However, two officers stood motionless, facing the wall just at the top of the first flight, their bodies expressions still and tensed. From Ameen's vantage point, it appeared his men were simply facing the wall, their eyes cast downward.

But with each step he took up the stairs, a streak of blood gradually came into view.

A male body laid between the officers, and his head was hunched over to the right as he held his stomach. The body was sitting upright, yet slumped to the right, as if the man had collapsed against the wall and endured the pain until death took him, and then finally leaned over in his last moments of relief.

The chief took off his hat and rubbed his bald head back and forth while standing in silence and confusion. The two men glanced over their shoulders at their chief for a moment, their eyes lingering on him before they turned their gaze back to the body, a silent understanding passing between them.

One of the men passively spoke, "Two gunshots to the body. One in the back and then one in the chest."

In silence, the chief glanced down at the young officer who had spoken, his face calm and blank. For a moment, there was no reaction, but then his expression squeezed up and a flash of anger crossed his features.

"Did I ask that boy? You think I do not have the skills to know that!"

Ameen steadied his hat on his head, then slapped the boy sharply across the back of his turned head and in a demeaning matter barked, "Huh?"

No reaction or fight back was given by the disrespected man and he kept his mouth shut.

The man next to the one who had just been slapped glanced back at Ameen, bracing himself for the same treatment. But instead of the expected anger, Ameen let out a dry laugh and his expression shifted. He then turned and walked up the stairs without a word, leaving the man sitting behind in quiet confusion.

When Ameen made it to the top of the stairs three small groups of officers stood in front of him. Two officers stood near the open window, three were inside the hoodlum's room, while the other two of the officers were speaking with the hoodlum's distraught neighbor.

As Ameen peeked over the stairs, no one acknowledged him, except for one of the female officers who was questioning the witness. She gave him a brief, knowing glance before returning to her conversation.

This woman was Ameen's Deputy Chief, Akoi Nyok, who was currently leading this investigation as Ameen was slow to do things just like

usual. She was not the Chief's favorite person, but she was his second command and was loved by the other officers.

Even though Ameen was the appointed Chief of Nileville's Police, Akoi was the most respected and liked in the force. She stepped up when Ameen didn't, taking charge during the moments, he vanished into whatever unknown dealings he had to manage.

With no eyes on him, Ameen shouted, "Another victim is alive who had his arm shot off. We do not know if he is alive or not, but he did walk up to me so that is a good sign!"

The officers exchanged looks of disgust and confusion, bewildered by their Chief's joking, out of touch tone in the face of such a gruesome crime scene. They couldn't understand how he could remain so detached.

Blood trailed all the way to the open window of the apartment hallway, where the officers stood, gazing down at the roofs of the buildings below. Their eyes squinted, trying to make sense of what they were looking at.

Ameen slowly walked over to the two officers then began speaking to them.

"This blood must be from the man with no arm. I mean you should have seen that bloody stump. The blood from him would fill a tub."

The men looked back and gave him a dirty look as they looked at their chief lazily rubbing his stomach. One of the officers then spoke, "Could be. It is interesting that he took this jump rather than face whatever he was running from."

Ameen stepped between the two officers, leaning his head out of the window. As wind hit his face, he surveyed the large drop below, his gaze tracing the top of the neighboring building, which had to be at least two stories down. His stomach dropped and he turned back around into the building and said, "Enough of that."

While he walked away one of the men whispered, "Would be just nice to push him out of the window."

The other man laughed, and Ameen did not hear this remark.

When the Chief made it to the hoodlum's room, he noticed many men taking small and cheap pistols out from every crack or crease in the room. He squeezed his way past the dresser that was now slanted so people could get in and then he turned to his left to see another laying body.

Ameen cast a quick, dismissive glance at the body, then swiftly diverted his gaze, unwilling to let the sight disturb him any further.

Across the room, an officer stood near the door that was peppered with shotgun holes, his finger tracing one of the jagged openings. He stared at it, bewildered, trying to piece together what had unfolded.

The Chief made his way to the destroyed connecting door, Pushing the officer out of the way and then he looked inside of the other room. With his head through the door, Ameen realized the neighboring room was dark and empty, and the only thing visible was a small boy who kneeled motionless behind his old couch in the living room.

The boy's wide but little eyes peeked over the armrest of the couch, and when Ameen's face appeared in the doorway, the child quickly ducked back under, fear evident in his movements, even with Ameen wearing a police uniform.

At the open door of the dark home stood a woman, looking out into the hallway with ragged clothes talking to Akoi and another officer. Ameen walked back around to where the two officers were, standing behind them with his arms crossed, silently watching as they carried out their work. When the Chief settled and stood still the mother locked her eyes on him and stopped speaking.

Her finger shakingly pointed at Ameen's face and then she passionately spoke, "Where were you? The moment the hoodlum got shot outside. Was that not enough? Did a murderer have to break into my home with my boy for you guys to come. You are the Chief, Ameen! It is your job to protect this city, and you do barely anything! No wonder no one respects you."

Akoi opened her eyes knowing the reaction that Ameen would give after being spoken down upon.

Ameen took a step towards the woman and pointed his finger back at her in between both of his officers.

"I am trying my best! Do you want you and your son to be safe? If you do, I recommend you quit talking down on me. Without me this area is nothing!"

A short laugh was let out from the woman and then she said, "Without you this area would be a haven! Everyday there is something new for our people to worry about and you police make it harder! It is wrong!"

The woman took a step back into her home, her eyes filled with tears. She paused for a moment, her voice breaking as she said, “Good day!” before disappearing behind the door.

The door slammed shut in the officers' faces as they continued taking notes. Akoi sighed and turned back to Ameen with an exasperated look. “Well,” she began, “from what the woman told us before you messed that all up, a young boy is behind this. A young boy, apparently with a revolver, but one who didn’t hurt her or her son.”

Ameen was taken back and recoiled his face and said, “A boy? Like the one in that room? What kind of joke is this? Three to four people died just from one kid? Nonsense!”

Akoi scoffed and then said, “Why would she be lying about the boy?”

“I do not believe that woman. I will say this once and I will say this again, there is no way a boy did this on his own let alone a full-grown man. Vigilante work? Not in my city…”

Ameen’s jaw tightened in anger, a storm of disbelief and frustration rising within him. He didn’t want to believe it, but deep down, he knew the woman wasn’t lying.

His ego was bruised and the medal on his chest suddenly began to mean nothing. As the officers stepped outside, they were met with the sight of three men lying in front of them in the road, each covered by a blanket. From a distance, they examined the bodies, their faces grim as they processed the horror of the massacre that had unfolded. The scene left them deeply disturbed, the brutality all weighing heavily on their minds.

In the now-handicapped man’s darkened mind, a familiar boy flashed across his thoughts. A young boy with a shotgun. The same shotgun that was stolen from his friend. The same boy who had killed his friends and ended his life. Not in the way of a heart stopping, but in the way of living, stripped of everything and reduced to nothing.

He was naked, vulnerable. His eyes snapped open in the dim and filthy hospital room. What was left of his arm was wrapped in bandages, and instinctively, he grabbed it, a sharp pain reminding him of the loss that had just happened. His breath quickened, each inhale shallow and frantic. He began to scream with his body trembling as he rocked back and forth.

The I.V. line in his inner elbow tugged loose, and without thinking, he ripped it out of skin.

Shaking, he stumbled to the window, his breaths ragged, his mind spinning. With one final, panicked breath, he stepped out of the window, not falling this time but finding solid ground with his feet landing softly on the dirt below. The cool night air filled his lungs, and without hesitation, he ran, disappearing into the dark streets of Nileville. He didn't have the strength to run but his body seemed to be filled with an otherworldly and unreal presence that pushed his weak body to its limits as he ran faster than he ever had before. His mouth exhaled the words of his attacker's name even though he had never heard it even once before. The man's knuckles began to drag and bang on any door he could see as he ran from house to house speaking of what had happened to him.

"My arm! My arm! The child Adisa took it!" The man screamed, his voice frantic and possessed. His words echoed through the night, wild and desperate. Neighbors rushed out of their homes, fear and confusion plastered on their faces as they tried to make sense of what the man was repeating and doing. His eyes, wide and unseeing, caused those who looked into them to not see a man at all. Instead, they saw something far darker, a reflection of madness, someone pulled away from reality. The very air around him seemed charged with an unsettling energy, as if his soul no longer belonged to him.

By morning, it seemed as if everyone had heard the story of Adisa's revenge. Even those who didn't know the child by name felt the weight of the boy's name itself. "Adisa" had become more than just a name, it had power, and a force that stirred deep emotions in the citizens of Nileville. Confusion rippled through the city as whispers of the child's actions spread like wildfire, leaving a shadow over the whole city.

-Chapter V-

The next morning, Adisa awoke with a gleam in his eye, a spark of something unfamiliar and powerful. From the outside looking in, his situation seemed dire, but nothing could be further from the truth. To anyone observing him without knowledge of him, Adisa might have appeared to be just another boy condemned to the small walls of fate. A boy who did what everyone else did, scraping by, working the best years of his life away in a struggle to survive. And when the body finally gave out, he would take a break, waiting for the inevitable end. To live that way, trapped in the cycle of survival was Adisa's worst nightmare. But today, he knew, everything would change. For too long, his life had been defined by suffering, not living. His body had endured the torment of hunger, from the little money he and his family scraped together, or the bruises from beatings that came without reason. There was no meaning to the pain, no purpose. And for Adisa, to make meaning out of suffering was to truly live.

Last night, he had finally taken control. The nightmare of mere survival was now over and today marked the beginning of truly living.

Adisa's feet ran around the house while he was getting ready with a pep in his step. His Mother and Brother were confused as usually Adisa was a slow riser and never wanted to get ready. Something had changed in him. By the time he and his brother were ready to leave they were on track to be early to school for once.

Adisa glanced down to ensure the cold steel of his revolver was securely tucked in his waistband, then, with a final, steadying breath, he

stepped out of the apartment, his brother following closely behind. When they both stepped outside Adisa looked across the street paranoidly and saw a group of people near the garbage can where the fire was lit last night. They were clearly talking to each other about the murder the night before and Adisa kept walking along to not stir attention towards himself. Adisa caught eyes with one of the women as he was turning his head and stared into her eyes for a second too long. She let down her eyebrows questioning what she was looking at and then pointed at Adisa to her friends. Adisa turned his head and heard from behind him, “That’s that boy!”

He ignored the woman, his gaze fixed ahead, but Abel nudged him, poking him in the side to draw his attention to her. Adisa flicked his brother's hand away with an irritated smack and with his voice low but firm, he said, “Ignore her.”

The confused look of the woman mirrored onto Abel. For the rest of the walk to school the boys did not say a word to each other. The brotherly rivalry was nowhere near its peak, but the small dispute the day before did take a toll on Abel. He wished to make things better with his brother no matter what he said. Abel looked up to Adisa but wished his brother thought about him a bit more. Although Abel was a bit worried about his brother, Adisa could not care a fraction about his little sibling. On the walk Adisa was so in his head it was almost as if his little brother was not by his side. Adisa’s tunnel vision for his dream cut off his brother who yearned to have his older brother's approval.

Before the school day started there was usually a ten-minute period where Adisa’s friends would stand in a circle and talk or run around and play soccer. Adisa usually would not make it to the period before school started as he was usually late to school. His body was usually ravaged in the morning from working and beatings so he would lay in his bed and procrastinate going to school, letting his eyes shut and return to the comforting state of sleep.

When Adisa and his brother walked into the school yard, Adisa’s friends instantly ran up to the two boys and circled them. Of course, everyone's attention was beamed on Adisa as they bombarded him with questions.

Paulo spoke first saying, “Adisa! That pistol! You were the one that killed all those drug dealers!”

Afia then spoke, “First thing this morning I heard about what you did! Everyone is talking about the boy who put down those hoodlums and I knew it must have been you.”

“Do you still have the pistol you used to kill them?”

Questions were hurled in all directions, but the boys looked at Adisa with a mix of awe and admiration, as if he were made of a million dollars. Adisa raised his hand, signaling them to calm down, his voice steady and reassuring. A wave of relief swept over the group, and smiles broke out across their faces. To them, Adisa wasn’t just a friend, he was already a legend.

“That armless man ran around telling everyone about the boy named Adisa that killed his friends and took his arm. People started running out of their house to see what the crazy man had to say after last night and now everyone knows it's you! You are a legend!”

Paulo tossed a milk crate at Adisa's feet, the sound of it hitting the dirt sparking excitement in the group. Everyone was eager to hear the story. The boys urged him to stand on the crate, demanding he share his account with the whole world. Adisa stepped up, his feet on the crate, elevating him just slightly above the others, a mere ruler's height, yet it placed him above them. As he stood there, more school children gathered around, their curious eyes locked on him. Teachers, noticing the sudden crowd, began to watch the young boy from afar with growing intrigue, captivated by the boy’s magnetic demeanor.

Abel made himself comfortable in the circle of schoolchildren surrounding his brother, settling in with a grin. But as Adisa's gaze fell on him, the speaker’s smile faltered, and his expression hardened. Adisa then shouted with tensed fists, “Go, my brother. Out!”

Before Abel could even respond, people in the crowd began to give him dismissive shoves and throws until he stumbled backward, landing on his butt with a confused and hurt look on his face. Only a few children looked behind themselves at the unapproved child who was Adisa’s only brother.

All the other kids did not pay attention to Adisa’s dismissal of his little brother who thought so highly of him. The kids around Adisa were more focused on the story the speaker had to tell.

“Alright everyone, you have heard what happened and if you have not you must have been living under a rock.”

Childish laughs filled the crowd then Adisa continued, “You may have even heard the story twice. Whatever you have heard you have heard so there is no point in retelling the story. Speaking on the past is weak as we can only go forward.”

A small group of kids surrounding Adisa left the circle and then other kids followed. Adisa had about twenty kids in front of him at this point, almost all being his friends. With kids starting to walk off, And Adisa being smart enough to realize that most of these kids would rather be playing, He knew he had to get their attention. Adisa cleared his throat and began to speak again, with a booming voice.

“I think we all have something in common. Let me ask you all a question. Are you tired of endless war? Are any of you tired of not having enough to eat before you go to sleep? Are you tired of not seeing your family rarely, as they have to work slave hours to put a little bit of food on the table? And when you do see your family, they are usually arguing about food or money. Do any of you think about the fact that even though you spend your childhood in school either way you will more than likely be another manual worker if you are a man or a teacher or nurse if you are a woman? That would be if you are lucky as the giant threat of starvation constantly floats above your head. Well let me say this, I am tired! And we are all in the same boat, so we are all tired! So instead of waiting for something to change with fate, why don't we grab fate and take control. We will become kings, and we will start by cleaning the systems that keep us down and then we will clean the scum, drugs and corruption off the streets. We will be different from the rest of Africa and become a utopia with strong leadership and good authority! Our leadership now is lacking and oppressive. They do not promote us going up, instead keeping us in the same spot living the same mundane lives our fathers lived and then our sons will live. It will never end if we don’t change things now!”

Adisa stopped for a moment looking around, breathing heavily and reading the boy’s faces that surrounded him.

“We will leave this institution and begin the revolution today!”

Most of the listeners that stood around Adisa raised their fists and shouted into the air. Only three people did not join in this yelling, two random boys and Afia, who was Adisa’s closest friend. Although the boys

were excited with the prospect of being revolutionaries, they did not think through how they would do this. Afia realized had doubts if they could start a revolution as young boys with just words so he raised his hand to Adisa. The loud yelling calmed down and then Adisa nodded his head up at Afia.

The boy then spoke, "I know this seems like a pleasing idea but how will we do this Adisa? We cannot do this with just words; do you have any Arms for us all to use?"

Adisa let out a faint laugh under his breath then spoke, "Do I have any arms? I would not have gotten you all together here today if I did not have any valid way to stop this oppression. I have multiple AK-47s from a connection. It will be more than enough firepower to supply us all. And more than enough firepower to make a change."

All the boys around Adisa stood in silence and looked at each with big eyes not believing what they had heard he said he had. Being young boys at school, they would lie and tell stories about things that could not be proven true. They were confined to the walls of school so if someone said their family member was a celebrity there was no way to prove it, and it could be the same thing with Adisa's rifles.

Two random boys looked at each other after Adisa spoke and tapped each other on the chests. They then walked out of the group not looking back. The other boys around them that were in Adisa's trance pestered the boys that walked away, and Adisa then boomed, "If you do not stand with us you stand against us!"

One of the two boys turned around back at Adisa and threw his hands up along with his shoulders and then spoke.

"You've gone insane! Anyone who stands by your deranged ass is not right in the head either."

"Too scared to change your destiny?"

Adisa shouted in a powerful manner and in return the boys kept walking, not even looking at Adisa's remark.

The speaker gave a snicker towards the boys and then spoke, "I know they will be running back to us soon and at our feet begging for forgiveness! We will change the way any person in this country grows up in this…"

The speech was cut short when a mammoth of a man pushed the circle of boys around Adisa to the side and got right into Adisa's face. Adisa stood eye to eye with the big man, his feet planted firmly on the milk crate. The small elevation gave him a surprising sense of equality, making him

feel as though he were standing on the same level as the towering figure before him. For a brief moment, the difference in size and power seemed irrelevant. Adisa instantly recognized this man as the principal of his school, Mr. Gwede, who was known for giving children beatings and showing no mercy with punishments.

"What is this outcry! This damned riot! Explain now, little one!"

The boys around Adisa had gotten increasingly rowdy unknowingly, with little blurts and shouts coming from the restless boys' mouths. But who could blame them? They were excited with the promise of freedom from this restricted way of life that they could jump up and grab. After the principal spoke, the tension broke, and the boys started to jump and scream all around. The boys hopped in circles around Adisa and the principal in a predatory manner as if they were going to pounce on the giant man and eat him alive.

Adisa realized the savagery and smirked and then shouted to the boys, "Calm down!"

All of the boys stopped right in their tracks with no more disturbance, letting complete silence fill up the air.

With his smirk still painted on his face, Adisa said, "You know what this riot is, mister? It is the rejection of the way of life you try to give us."

Adisa stood down from the milk crate keeping eye contact with the fuming and broad man who looked like he was going to grab Adisa by his shirt and pummel him into the ground. The world around them seemed to freeze, suspended in a moment of tense silence, as every onlooker held their breath, bracing for whatever was about to unfold.

The boy landed heavily on his battered shoes, the ground beneath him offering little resistance. Without hesitation, he reached into his dress shorts and drew out his famed revolver. Adisa's silver barrel gleamed as it pointed straight at the man's chin and boys watched enamored. In an instant, the tough exterior of the principal crumbled, his hard face softening as fear flickered in his eyes. He threw his hands up in surrender, his commanding state draining from him in the face of the small weapon.

Boys around the man took a step back as he could get shot in the blink of an eye and such a big man would not be fun to get crushed by.

Adisa unrelentingly advanced on the man, in response, the man stumbled backward, his steps quick and clumsy as he tried to distance himself from the psychotic young boy. The right heel of the principal's

nice dress shoes got stuck in a small hole that was more than likely made from soccer on the grassy field, then he twisted his ankle and fell on his behind. As Adisa approached the man, the boys got behind their newfound leader and followed his every step like shadows. The young leader straddled the old principal, his hands gripping the man's shirt collar with unsettling force. Without hesitation, he pressed the cold silver barrel of the revolver firmly between the principal's eyes. A shaky whimper escaped the older man as his head jerked slightly to the side, desperate to avoid the looming weapon. His eyes clenched shut, and a single tear forced its way through his tightly shut lids, tracing a trembling path down his face.

No words were spoken before Adisa pulled the trigger as the hammer clicked against the back of the gun.

Not a bullet fired out of the gun, Instead the bullets rustled around in the boy's right pocket of his shorts. Adisa knew an adult would eventually come up to the boy's riot on the field, so he took the chance to make an example of the man that kids thought of as "Powerful." They would have not taken him as seriously if he did not show them first-hand what he was capable of, but he also did not want to blow the man's head onto the field and scare the young boys completely away. Pulling the trigger would have been easy for Adisa, but despite that, he held back.

After the hammer clicked, the watery-eyed principal wasted no time and sprang to his feet and lunged at Adisa. Fueled by primal rage, the man backhanded the empty gun from Adisa's grip, stripping away the boy's power and leaving him once again as a defenseless boy he had been just nights before.

As the gun hit the ground, Mr. Gwede's hand shot from Adisa's side and his fingers drove into the boy's neck with no mercy.

Both leaders had switched their positions with the principal now being on top of the boy this time, exuding pure authority. His massive hands that were relentless, could choke the fragile boy unconscious in seconds as his grip tightened.

Adisa did not expect this to happen, but he should have known. His pistol in his hand gave him too much confidence and clouded his reality. The man wasn't just going to allow Adisa to put a gun to his head and not do anything, especially as he had been embarrassed as his place in authority had been overtaken by a child.

As the air drained from his lungs and his skin darkened to a sickly purple, Adisa clawed desperately at the man. But his frantic and small scratches were nothing more than a nuisance to the large man.

While his vision narrowed, fading from the edges inward, Adisa felt the choke tighten even more but through the haze, he noticed the man began to pour tears that fell onto him.

The boys that he knew would have his back began punching at the man's back and ganging up on him. Even though the boys were beating the man harshly his rage carried him to continue to try and kill Adisa as if no resistance was given. For a moment, it seemed that even the weight and blows of eight boys piled on top of one massive man couldn't slow him down. But deep down in that short instant, Adisa knew he would not die today.

A flash of brown streaked across Adisa's fading vision, and suddenly, the man's grip loosened, his hands falling to the sides of Adisa's neck. He fell hard on the left side of Adisa and boys surrounded him and began to tear away at his thin dress shirt. Adisa gasped for air, coughing violently as he regained his breath and listened to the sounds of the principal's grunts and wails as they filled the air, his skin being torn and shredded by the savage hands of the children.

The boys had lost all semblance of humanity, descending into a feral frenzy. They tore into their former superior with the savagery of a pack of hyenas ripping apart a jackrabbit to get its interior meat.

Blood and flesh filled the boy's dirty fingernails while they laughed with each other and flung blood into the air. Paulo had a stick that he had used to strike the man in the head to get him off of Adisa, which was now striking the man's back repeatedly. It took a while for Adisa to get up and regain his full vision and relearning to breathe was not an easy thing to do for Adisa. His vision centered on the pack of boys ravaging the man and he knew their rage would not end with any commanding words. He reached into his pocket, pulling out a .357 round, then retrieved his scratched beauty from the ground where the principal had knocked it away. Adisa flicked open the chamber, slid a round into one of the six chambers, and fired a shot into the air, the sound echoing throughout the school like a command.

"Everyone!"

The savage boys looked up at Adisa as if he would shoot them next and onlookers gasped.

“Leave that worthless man alone. We have greater matters to attend to. Next, we will grab arms from my home then go onto main street and grab supplies. After we get supplies, we will go to a hideout for the night and then on New Year’s we will go to war! A war against the scum in this land that runs deep into what we love!”

The boys looked at Adisa in a trance and so did teachers that did not want to get close as to not end up like the principal with tears in his back. No words were returned to Adisa but instead war cries that echoed through the flat land, which Adisa then joined in. The children’s new leader turned, guiding them toward the field behind the school, which led toward the city. Not one of the ten boys looked back at the school, the very place that had shaped their lives; instead, they followed a boy whose intentions were as unclear as his future. Adisa could be leading them toward certain death, but none of them questioned a single step. The bloodied principal, sprawled on the ground, had already faded into a distant memory by the time they reached the edge of the field. Only the promise of a glorious future filled the minds of these young soldiers as they walked away, stepping into a new life.

When the boys vanished into the tall grass, scared teachers ran out from hiding to the injured principal. Four teachers surrounded the injured man who laid with his face dug into the dirt. They cast disturbed glances at his thin shirt, now stained with blood and ripped open. The little demons, so driven by passion, had shredded the man’s shirt and his skin leaving wounds so deep they were certain to scar.

Worried looks passed between the teachers, and the only male among them reached out, his hand hovering uncertainly over his boss to check if he was still alive. His eyes carefully looked across the principal's body for a spot to touch that was not torn to shreds. When he finally placed his hand on the principal’s untouched shoulder, the broken man let out a sharp, rasping exhale. In an instant, he began to roll over wildly with his movements frantic and rabid. Every teacher jumped back in reaction to the injured man’s movements. His face was obscured by blood and tears, with the spaces in between filled with dirt, creating a grotesque portrait of suffering. The other teachers who were scared, stood far away when the principal began to slowly pick himself up. He wiped his face with both hands, his fingers smeared with blood, then gazed down at them in disgust.

With the last vestiges of strength, the principal staggered past the terrified teachers and made his way back towards the school, each step its own battle. Terrified children who witnessed the grotesque scene, began to scatter in panic, screaming as soon as the zombified looking man started to shuffle toward them. To them a man covered in blood was not a usual sight at school.

The principal locked Eyes with Abel who stood his ground in his view and was the only child that didn't run. Even if he didn't run, the boy looked horrified as the bloodied man stepped through the dirt directly towards him. Realizing what was happening the male teacher quickly walked behind the injured man and grabbed his shoulder again and spoke, "Stop now. That boy is innocent, alright the police will get his brother!"

The principal ignored the teacher's desperate pleas, grabbing Abel by the shirt and dragging him toward his office. The boy remained eerily silent, his body limp, as if resigned to whatever fate awaited him.

Abel remained silent as the weakened principal threw him into a chair before sinking down beside him. Kneeling in front of the boy, the principal locked eyes with him, his gaze unnervingly wide. They were so close now that Abel could distinctly smell the man's blood, thick and iron-laden, clinging to his skin.

The principal then ordered through his teeth, "Get home and tell your mother your brother's plans. You have the day off."

Abel nodded quickly, his heart pounding in confusion and fear, before bolting out of the room. This was not the Adisa he knew. The rumors of murder, the confrontation he had just witnessed, something had shifted in his brother. Something dark had overtaken him, and Abel could feel it deep in his bones.

When Abel closed the door, the bloodied principal grabbed the chair the boy vacated and began thrashing his office with it. First, he dragged it along the surface of his desk and then he began to beat the walls surrounding him with it.

A guttural scream tore from the principal's throat as he realized the chaos he had unleashed. Blood stained the walls, and shattered fragments lay scattered across the room. His frantic hyperventilation, combined with the violent smashing, sent jolts of pain through his head, particularly the front, where the blow from the wood had left its mark.

He swiped his wired phone from off the ground and flipped the chair he had just used to destroy the room. A number was dialed on the phone and while it rang, he sat down in his chair, grabbing his head in pain and looking down at the floor while waiting for an answer.

The phone answered and Mr. Gwede then asked, “Chief Ameen?”

-Chapter VI-

As the young men made their way to Adisa's apartment, cutting through the tall grass, they were met with strange, lingering looks from the citizens. It wasn't just the sight of boys walking the streets during school hours that caused the stares, it was the fact that they were all shirtless, their bare torsos an unusual sight in the eyes of the onlookers. To the outside eye the boys looked restless and eager to cause a ruckus. They resembled cavemen children who had somehow time-traveled into the modern day, their wild, untamed appearance making them look like creatures from a distant past. The predatory gleam in their eyes and their rowdy demeanor added to the unsettling impression, as if they were out of place in this world, a force of nature not to be ignored. The concept of civility had long since vanished from the boys' minds, replaced instead with a relentless instinct for survival and dominance, an attack mode that drove every step they took.

Adisa encouraged the boys to take off their shirts and shoes as it would only slow the boys down. The school uniforms were items of a failed idea of the "civilization" they lived in that had been thrown in the gutter by the young soldiers. Uniforms symbolized a state of submission, a constant reminder of living under the control of a master, wearing and doing whatever was demanded, stripped of individuality and autonomy.

The battered shoes on the boys' feet served little purpose, their mismatched sizes and instability making each step a gamble. A single thread could unravel the whole shoe, causing it to fall apart entirely. Unkempt toes peeked through the gaping holes, a silent testament to the wear and tear. These shoes had been with them for most of their lives, passed down because their parents couldn't afford to buy new ones. As children, they often went barefoot until they were old enough to receive a pair of oversized shoes that would last them through all their school years. By the

time they outgrew them, the shoes were more hole than shoe, often held together by nothing more than a thread or two. To the boys, throwing away those worn-out shoes, finally free from their suffocating grip, was a joyous act.

Mud was flung all over by the boys jumping around in the street in a temporary break from the battle that loomed before the young soldiers. Even though the boys appeared to be playing, adults couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss. The mischievous glint in their eyes, the way they moved with quiet purpose. It was clear to anyone who looked closely that these boys were up to no good.

When they made it to their leader's apartment, Adisa made his friends stay out of the building and pointed to the area under his window and said, "Wait under there and be ready to catch."

Adisa rushed up the stairs, his heart pounding as he reached his apartment door. The moment he swung it open, he was confronted by the unexpected presence of his mother, standing there with a look that stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Adisa! What are you doing home at this hour?"

"I cannot explain now mother, but I have been chosen to change this land and today is the start. You have to have faith."

After Adisa spoke, he looked around his mother and looked for ways to get around her to get to his room as quickly as he could. Adisa's mothers serious face turned to a smile then the smile turned to a bewildered laugh. She covered her mouth as she howled and then spoke, "Who the hell do you think you are? Who are you trying to be?"

The boy who did not know what to say stared at his mother in silence. The longer he stood in silence, the angrier his mother's face grew, until she finally reached her breaking point. Her parenting instinct kicked in as she realized her son was not telling a bad joke and seriously thought he was chosen. Dara swung her hand toward the boy's mouth, but he ducked beneath her stiff arm and bolted past her right side, swift as the wind. His bare feet left a trail of brown across the cracked wooden floors, from the front door through the heart of the home. Adisa's mother was hot on his heels, her fingers grazing the stray hairs sticking up on the back of his neck as she reached for him. Adisa grabbed his doorknob putting all his weight on the weak piece of metal and swung like a monkey until it slammed shut.

His mother rattled the knob from the outside, yanking it back and forth, while Adisa pulled his door as hard as he could towards himself, straining with all his strength to keep it shut.

No matter how tightly Adisa pulled the door towards himself, his mother showed no sign of giving up, her relentless pulling refusing to cease.

Not a word came from his mother's mouth while she pulled the door, almost like she was in a fit of rage just wanting to burst the door open and beat Adisa. Thoughts raced through Adisa's mind, but none offered a way to end the struggle. Visions of what his mother might do to him swirled behind his tightly shut eyelids. Minutes dragged by each second thick with fear and the anticipation of blows against the door. But then, without warning, the resistance ceased and his mother's grip on the door gave way, leaving Adisa breathless and relieved.

"I'm taking a break from you boy, but believe me the moment you leave this room you are done," Dara shouted from the other side of the door.

Even though she seemed to let up, Adisa still held the door as tight as he could. Adisa squeezed his eyes shut, and in the darkness of his mind, the image of the electrical cord his friend had given him flashed clear.

Without a second thought, he released his grip on the door and bolted across his cramped room, his bare feet thudding against the worn floorboards as he lunged toward the dresser.

As Adisa snatched the thick electrical cord, he heard his mother's footsteps returning to the door, the sound betraying the illusion of her abandonment. With a surge of panic, he scrambled toward the door, managing to beat her by mere seconds, his heart pounding in his chest.

She banged on the door while shaking with the knob and Adisa could hear her heavy breaths from through the door. While still pulling his door Adisa tied a quick clove hitch around the doorknob, then pulled the line hard and tight as he started to back up. With the line in hand Adisa yelled to the boys outside, "Grab on the wire and pull as hard as you can. I will drop supplies then and we will run off. Pull like the revolution depends on it!"

Adisa stepped carefully backward to the window, his hands shaking in pain as he tossed the knotted line out into the dirt below, watching it unfurl into the murky ground.

When it landed in the dirt Adisa's mother pulled the door again but

this time she opened it. Adisa made eye contact with his mother for a split second while she yelled, “What the hell is going on?” The door slammed shut once more, just as she reached for the crack between the frames. Outside, the line of boys pulled the knotted electrical wire, their hands gripping it with determination. The boys, a force of numbers and strength, played their own version of tug-of-war with the door, easily overpowering Adisa’s mother, who was hopelessly outmatched. Screaming her son’s name in the background was Dara who the boy disrespectfully ignored. Amid the chaos, Adisa, focused and silent, slid beneath the bed, his hands quickly grabbing the AKs. With a swift motion, he tossed them onto the bed, the weapons landing with a heavy thud. Behind the rifles, a pile of burlap sacks lay in an unexpected heap. Sacks he hadn’t noticed the night before and certainly hadn’t placed there himself. Adisa’s instincts told him they had been placed at the same time as the rifles. Without hesitation, he grabbed them and tossed them onto the bed beside the weapons, his mind racing with questions he couldn’t yet answer.

To the young boys at the bottom the guns were like gifts from God. Every boy not holding the line scrambled to gather the rifles that had fallen to the ground. They passed them swiftly to those whose hands were free or set them down carefully on the dirt covered earth, each movement driven by urgency.

After Adisa dropped the last pair of guns, he dropped all the burlap sacks in one giant ball and then looked out the window as he did not know how to escape the apartment. At first, Adisa had hoped his mother wouldn’t be home, that he could slip out the way he came in. Now, with no other option, his only escape was through the window. He glanced at the taut plastic and metal wire, still being pulled tight and his heart sank as he realized it wouldn’t support his weight. A fall from three stories to the hard ground below would likely leave him broken, crippled, a life confined to a wheelchair. Adisa’s eyes looked back and forth on the street below him, his soldiers not knowing what the hell he was doing until he raised his finger and said, “Grab that striped couch to your right!”

Two of the boys dashed over to the couch, and out of Adisa’s line of sight, a shirtless man lay sprawled across it, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, the smoke curling lazily into the air.

One of the boys tapped the man on the shoulder, and in return the man sat up and started to speak fast moving gibberish. The only thing that

the boy that tapped the man could understand through his quickly moving mouth was, “Get the hell away from me!”

Being quiet was a challenge for the homeless man, his discomfort evident as the boys asked him to get off the couch. With a sudden burst, he shut his eyes, his face contorting as he yelled, his neck veins bulging in rage.

The boy that did not talk to the man pulled back on the charging handle of his rifle and let a bullet rest in its chamber as warning.

Not catching on to the warning, the depraved man continued to yell and watched as the dirt around his feet began to fly into his face as the boy let a few warning shots off. His feet hopped up and down then a quick yap came from the homeless man’s mouth. Even though he had just been shot at, the homeless man kept the cigarette dangling from his lips, unmoved.

The boys erupted in laughter as the man fled into the forest, never once looking back. Their mockery echoed in the air, and by the time their taunts had faded, the couch had been pushed beneath Adisa's window, now positioned for him to jump onto. The filthy and stained furniture lay there, waiting, its only purpose now to catch Adisa as he made his escape.

The fall would be three stories; a height Adisa had never dared to jump before. His Doubts gnawed at him, not only because of the sheer drop, but also because of the grotesque state of the couch waiting below. Even from three stories up, he could clearly see the stains, rips, and patches of rot that marred the couches frame.

That couch had been a fixture of the street for as long as Adisa could remember, a sanctuary for old men for their morning smokes or a rotating circus of homeless souls. It had seen countless days of neglect, just like the people who used it.

Adisa’s feet swung back and forth absentmindedly as he sat on the windowsill, the rhythm of his nerves betraying his calm facade. His friends below watched him, fear written in their eyes, silently praying their leader wouldn't be too badly hurt by the fall.

Sitting there, framed by the square hole in his wall, Adisa felt a gentle breeze brush against his face, but it was quickly drowned out by the sound of his mother’s furious screams behind him. He closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep, steadying breath, and then pushed himself out of the window, just far enough to avoid scraping against the wall, but not so much that he would overshoot and crash into the hard ground below.

As he fell, he positioned his legs to land in a sitting stance, trying to absorb the shock and avoid snapping his legs upon impact. When he finally hit the couch, dust erupted around him, clouding the air.

He opened his eyes, feeling the sting in his body, and immediately grabbed his sore backside. Slowly, he pushed himself up, limping with each step, his body protesting the rough landing.

The soldiers let go of the wire, clapping Adisa on the back, their celebratory screams filling the air. Adisa let out a sigh of relief, his backside sore from the rough landing, but the tension in his chest eased.

“There will be tougher battles than falling from buildings,” he muttered, shaking off the pain.

One of his men handed him an AK, and Adisa's face broke into a grin. He raised the rifle high into the air, his grip firm and confident. The others followed suit, their weapons raised in unison, and together, they let out a primal roar, their voices rising to meet the sky for the whole world to hear. When the boys let down their guns some of them realized a small silhouette approaching in their view. The young boy approaching the gang of armed children was none other than Adisa’s brother, Abel. Adisa rolled his eyes mentally, his gaze narrowing as he watched his younger brother march toward him, clad in his school uniform. Abel walked with his chest puffed out, exuding an air of misplaced confidence that made Adisa’s lip twitch.

With a deep breath, Adisa squared his shoulders, preparing to address his little brother, who seemed determined to speak as if he belonged in the same hardened world that Adisa had carved for himself.

“Abel, what-”

Adisa was cut off by his younger brother who spoke, “You have gone out of your mind Adisa. Give up now before it is too late. This will only end in death and suffering. The principal talked with me after your escapade, you don't know what you are getting into!”

The expressions on the boys around Adisa shifted instantly from casual to sharp, their faces hardening into stern, angry scowls as they learned that their leader’s brother was colluding with the principal. A murmur of tension rippled through the group.

Adisa squinted his eyes, his jaw tightening, and began to walk toward Abel, his steps slow and deliberate. Abel, sensing the shift in the air, dropped his backpack to the dirt, the weight of it thudding heavily in the

quiet space between them. He stood tall, ready for a fight, while his older, predatory brother advanced on him.

"I recommend you stay in your lane Abel."

The older brother leaned into Abel's ear and then whispered, "Or I will end you."

Abel's first instinct was to throw a punch at his brother's stomach, but as Adisa leaned back, Abel's eyes caught the sight of the small army behind him. The group of boys with their rifles clutched tightly in their hands, stood silently in a sea of intimidation and loyalty to their leader.

Abel froze, the moment settling over him. Even though from experience he knew he could take his brother in a fight, the sight of the armed group around Adisa made him feel small and outmatched. Especially after seeing what the boys did to the principal, in that moment, the fire in him dimmed, and he stood silent and defeated.

Adisa didn't spare another glance at his brother. Without a word, he turned and walked right past Abel, heading toward the forest, his men falling in line behind him, pushing past the still figure of Abel without a second thought.

In perfect unison, the soldiers continued to follow their leader, not even acknowledging Abel's presence. To them, the message was clear. Abel had already shown where his loyalty lay, and it wasn't with them. Their eyes remained fixed forward, resolute and unstoppable, as they marched on.

Abel knew his brother would somehow disown him in his attempted revolution, but he was not just going to let his brother do whatever without a say from him. In a way he wanted to make clear to Adisa that he did not agree with him or want to be a part of whatever failed revolution he was leading.

After he watched the young soldiers go into the forest, he turned back around to his apartment window to see his mother looking over the edge and crying with her face in her hands. She was visibly shaken, her distress evident as she watched her son and his men with their rifles, unsure of what they were planning but certain it was something dangerous.

"Mother. Did they hurt you?"

After Abel yelled to her it took a minute for his mother to respond as she had to clear her throat and wipe her tears before she spoke.

"No son. Come up."

After yelling back to her youngest son, Dara felt a wave of sadness wash over her, a suffocating grief that clenched at her chest. She let out a silent cry then covered her mouth, desperate to scream, but knowing it would do no good. Her eyes could hardly believe what they saw below the window where her eldest son had stood only moments before. A group of more than a dozen boys with rifles in hand that she knew had come from her own home. At first, she tried to convince herself that maybe Adisa was just part of this group, a foolish boy following others. But no, by the way the children looked at Adisa, he was the foolish boy leading them. Her heart sank as she realized he was the leader of this pack when he walked into the forest, the others trailing behind him like mindless followers. Her motherly instinct screamed at her to run, to grab Adisa, punish him, and stop whatever tragedy was looming but that instinct shattered instantly as the truth hit her. Adisa was no longer the boy she had raised with so much love. He was a young man now, a beast, and she knew deep down that there was nothing she could do to contain him, nothing she could do to stop what he had become and what he planned on doing.

As thoughts rushed through her head a feeling of anxiety trembled her body and she broke down and sat on Adisa's bed. A tear rolled down her cheek while she sat in the room that used to be occupied by her normal little boy. After a minute of sorrow, Dara finally left Adisa's room, only to be met by the quiet presence of Abel, standing in the doorway. Without a word, she rushed to him, wrapping him tightly in a hug, unwilling to let go. This, she realized, might be her only chance now to hold onto the son she could still save. She clung to him desperately, afraid that, like Adisa, Abel would slip away from her too.

When she finally pulled back, Abel looked at her with a gaze full of sympathy, his expression heavy with concern.

"Adisa is planning something," the boy said softly, his voice thick with worry. "Something very bad."

The group of young, unruly children, their hands clutching cold steel and wood, moved cautiously through a patch of dry forestry, their eyes darting around, expecting danger to jump out from every corner. Though the likelihood of anyone ambushing them was slim, a wave of paranoia washed over their bodies, making each step feel like a potential threat. The weight of the guns in their hands offered a strange comfort, their confidence

bolstered by the weapons they carried. Each boy subconsciously wished someone would pop out just so they could exercise their power over the person and shoot them dead. It didn't go through the boys' young minds that just one trigger pull sets off a chain reaction bigger than gunpowder and blood. While Adisa walked in the front of the group, two boys were side by side walking in the back of the line. One of them poked the other and said, “What if that homeless tweak jumps out from earlier. Just like this!”

The boy put his burlap sack over his head and exclaimed, “Bla!”

His friend laughed and some of the other boys in front of them did as well.

After the joke, Adisa raised his hand in a halting motion, causing a few of the boys to flinch, momentarily believing the homeless man might have jumped out. Adisa turned his body toward his boys, and in that instant, their heart rates surged, each of them knowing what was about to unfold. The pounding in their chests climbed to their ears as they stood tall, chests lifted high with a mix of anticipation and defiance.

“You all know what we are here to do. We will rush into the city and quickly grab as much supplies as we can fit inside the sacks you are holding. This includes food, medical supplies, money and guns. We will need these things to start the revolution, and the people will be angry, but they will understand soon. If anyone opposes us, we will use our tools to put them down!”

The boys raised their guns and erupted into a wild chant, their voices echoing into the air, cutting Adisa off mid-command. Adisa stood firm and didn’t join in on the chant, his voice cutting through the noise as he shouted, “Stop!”

The soldiers, who had grown accustomed to mindlessly yelling and joining in with the group, paused, exchanging confused looks as they tried to make sense of the sudden command.

Adisa’s face tensed up and he commanded, “This does not mean kill anyone who looks at you funny or that you do not like. We will be civil as we are trying to change things! This will be quick to not deal with the pigs. So, no messing around.”

Adisa turned toward the hill that led down into the city's center, where numerous markets stood, their outlines visible through the trees. He raised his gun again; his gaze fixed on the distant scene. He shouted as he sprinted

down the hill, leading the way in front of the group. As they watched him, his soldiers exchanged quick, understanding glances, realizing they had no choice but to follow his lead.

The boys' feet pounded the sloped ground, their strides heavy and urgent, until they reached the level dirt street, where they were met by the bustling heart of the city. They didn't slow down as Adisa didn't pause, and the group followed relentlessly, charging into the center without hesitation.

Three different groups formed and split off from each other while looting the street dry. As soon as the boys came into view, many people on the street fled in panic, while others stood frozen in place, petrified. They watched in terror as the primal-looking boys stormed into businesses, their movements loud and full of menace, spreading fear with every step. No words could break the tension. There was no reasoning with the boys. The sight of young children wielding military-grade weapons and charging through the streets was so far beyond the ordinary that it left the people speechless. Mothers clutched their children tightly, shielding them from the chaos as Adisa and his group of followers wreaked havoc on the streets. Grown men did not even do anything because even though they may have been bigger, an AK would put them down even if they were ten feet tall. The older folk hurried as fast as they could, their steps scattered but driven by fear, as they tried to distance themselves from the berserkers tearing through the streets. Random businesses were overtaken by the young boys, their guns raised and pointed in every direction, fingers dangerously hovering over their triggers, ready for anything.

Adisa and two other boys ran into the first indoor market they saw that had an open door. The two boys with Adisa started to grab fruits and medical supplies while their leader rushed to the counter and pointed a gun right to the old store owner's face. Due to the store owner's old age and his weariness with life, he offered no reaction. The chaos unfolding around him seemed to occur without leaving a trace of concern or care on the man's face. He gave a smirk over the rifle of the boy pointing a gun at him while Adisa had a hard face and then the man asked, "What do you think you're doing? Do you think this will make any difference to your livelihood? You will have to keep stealing and robbing to support your choices and it will always come back to you. Your problems may be solved but they will only carry on to others and burden them."

Adisa chuckled darkly, shaking his head as he contemplated blowing the aged man's head against the wall right then and there, but in the end, he refrained with the tension still lingering in the air.

The leader of this robbery realized he did look like a hoodlum as he was up to no good, but he knew this would not last for long and his people would forgive him. While Adisa contemplated what the man said his train of thought was interrupted by the thieving fingers of one of his soldiers.

“Let’s go Adisa!”

Adisa looked at the old man one last time and sarcastically said, “God Bless!”

Halfway through exiting Adisa realized he forgot something and turned around facing the man again. His soldiers stood outside patiently as Adisa ran back over to the counter and reached over it to get into the cash register. His fingers on his left hand tried finagling the buttons to release the cash box but he failed to do so. The AK in his right hand remained pointed at the old man, making it awkward to reach over and grab the cash. With a quick motion, he used the rifle's attached sling to throw the gun onto his back to free up his hand for the task.

The moment the rifle settled onto the boy's back, the old store owner seized Adisa's robbing hand, now halfway across the counter, and with surprising strength for his age, dragged him harshly over it. Adisa's small body slammed onto the cold tile floor, and before he could defend himself, the old man was on him, delivering harsh punches that landed with much force. The man gave slow hard punches that knocked the wind straight out of Adisa’s airways as fists crushed his lungs through his skin. While taking the beating, Adisa lay motionless and gasping for air, his chest heaving as he fought to catch his breath. Through blurred vision, he saw the old man reach beneath the register and pull out a pistol, its blued steel glinting under the dim store lights. Before Adisa could react, the cold barrel was shoved against his cheek. Panic surged through him as he struggled and squirmed on the floor, but the man’s grip was steady.

“It will never be enough,” was uttered through the old man’s mouth while he struggled to keep the young boy down with one hand.

The door chime at the front of the store made a distinctive noise and the man looked over his counter and at the door, turning his head to the side in Adisa’s view. The man turned his head away, the temptation to pull the trigger lingering as he wished to kill the boy for being a thief. As much

as he wanted to punish the boy for his attempted theft, he knew that if the police arrived, the sight of an old man standing over a lifeless child would not work in his favor.

Instead of suited-up officers demanding answers at the door, the shopkeeper's eyes met a far more unsettling sight. That being a small boy with his rifle raised its barrel aimed directly at him. The boy's steady grip and hardened gaze left no room for hesitation, then a flash of light came into the man's view.

In an instant, a red mist erupted as the shopkeeper's face exploded, showering Adisa in a gruesome spray of blood and flesh. Thick, chunky droplets splattered across the boy's face, the metallic warmth clinging to his skin as the lifeless body collapsed on top of him.

Once again, Adisa's breath was ripped away, his ears ringing from the deafening blast. Panic surged through him as he struggled beneath the weight of the lifeless man. The shopkeeper's face that was touching his was now unrecognizable and mangled like a crushed watermelon. With trembling arms, Adisa pushed aside the heavy corpse.

The boy at the door, who had pulled the trigger, was Afia. He stood frozen, his chest heaving with ragged breaths as the weight of his first kill settled on him. Adisa wiped the blood off his face and tore the rifle that he had been lying next to off his body.

Thoughts raced through Afia's mind, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't shake the image of the man's head exploding beneath the counter. It replayed endlessly, seared into the forefront of his thoughts.

While the boy at the door thought heavily and could barely keep standing, Adisa slowly walked his way towards Afia who had just saved his life. Afia and Adisa's eyes remained locked as Adisa inched toward the door, each small step dragging time into an agonizing crawl. Every movement felt like an hour, and with each passing second, Afia's nausea swelled. His leader reached him, and it felt like the boy had just appeared in front of Afia who was so out of it. Adisa gripped Afia's shoulder with a firm, almost possessive hold and Afia stepped back in reaction, a chill creeping up his spine as he recoiled, disturbed by the cold, careless demeanor of the boy covered in blood.

"Good Job Afia."

Afia was pushed to the side by Adisa who walked out the store in a flash. Afia glanced to his side, his eyes landing on the bloody handprint

smeared across his black shoulder. The weight of what he had just done settled heavily on him, his grim reality sinking in. Killing was not something Paulo was too familiar with, he had never seen a dead person let alone kill someone and he would have never expected to shoot someone in the head. Killing did not feel good to Paulo, his stomach feeling the weight of a hundred pounds after he did it.

Afia's feet began to drag him forward, each robotic step feeling forced, like an invisible chain was pulling him towards his victim. The room was eerily silent, yet a deafening ring echoed in his ears. Every stride felt like a mile and the weight of what waited ahead pressed down on him.

At the counter, his trembling fingers met the cold plastic surface. He clenched his fingers down tightly, with tension in his hands and his mouth not breathing. No amount of bracing could prepare him for what lay ahead. Face down, the man's lifeless body sprawled in a dark and bloody pool. The exit wound at the back of his head gaped wide, surrounded by fragments of dark pink brain matter. The blood, thick and glossy, spread like a stagnant lake beneath him.

Afia's gaze stayed locked on the gruesome sight. The longer he stared, the louder the ringing became, as if the weight of his actions was crashing down with every beat of his heart. Noise gnawed at him, dull and consuming, until it was shattered by a hand that came firm and deliberate, resting on his shoulder, right where Adisa's trembling grip had been moments before. This time, it came from behind and before turning around Afia's mind wondered if the hand touching him, was Adisas. Or if it was something else. Maybe a disturbed police officer, ready for him to turn around and lay him out. Or it was the hand of God himself ready to send Afia to the deepest pits of hell.

Paulo knew that killing another man and robbing him of his belongings was a quite a hefty sin. Even though his imagination ran wild it was Adisa who stood behind him with a worried and annoyed face.

Adisa shouted down Afia's neck, "The authorities will be here any moment! The other boys are probably already done it's time to fucking go!"

Afia, who was scarred beyond repair, blinked and silently followed Adisa's lead towards the outside of the store.

The largest of the three groups of boys charged into the busy outdoor market towards the end of the main street, snatching up fruits and other foods without hesitation. No resistance was given against the boys as people ran stood still and did nothing against the boys and the owner, who was a middle-aged woman threw her arms up and ran away screaming down the street.

This stretch of the main street was busier than most, with people of all ages going about their day trying to stop peacefully. As the child soldiers raided the market, snatching whatever they pleased, the onlookers' gazes shifted. Whispers stirred, and anger formed in their eyes. People started to talk and yell for the boys to stop, which of course was useless. Around twenty people got around Paulo and five other boys who were stealing produce. Shouts erupted as the crowd closed in, their outrage boiling over. Some tried to grab the armed boys, while others formed a tightening circle, forcing Adisa's soldiers back. The child soldiers, now trapped against the rough stone wall of the outdoor market, clutched their weapons with shaking hands as they looked down the many eyes of the angry mob they had caused.

Paulo with his back against the wall yelled to his comrades, "Aim your rifles! If they try to grab us, hit them. Shoot them as a last resort, we don't need a damn bloodbath!"

In the front of the line a man tried grabbing Paulo right after he spoke which in return the boy swung the butt of his rifle like a baseball bat right in the man's teeth.

A mother, clutching her young son, flinched as the man beside them was struck. Panic surged through her, and she tried to push her way out of the growing mob, but the crowd had thickened, bodies pressing from every side, making escape nearly impossible. The closer the mob pressed; the tighter the boys' grips became on their weapons. Fear and panic jerked in their eyes, their fingers twitching near their triggers. Every shout and movement pushed them closer to the edge, a moment when they might unleash a deadly spray into the crowd. More furious onlookers pushed into the crowd, hurling mud and shoes at the boys. The air grew thick with shouts and flying debris. Paulo, his eyes darting frantically, ducked behind a stack of old wooden food crates. He threw up a hand, signaling for his men to follow.

“Get back!” Paulo barked, his voice barely cutting through the chaos. One by one, the boys scrambled for cover, their retreat hastening as the mob closed in.

Desperate hands clawed over the crates, fingers grasping and straining to seize the boys, their rage-fueled intent clear to drag them out and tear them apart.

Paulo knew he had to get some of the people to back off but not kill them all, so he pointed his AK into the air and let off a round. After the crowd backed off a little a step, he let off another round to let them really get the message.

“You get it now!”

Paulo’s shout broke the chaos, causing the crowd to momentarily falter. But it was only a brief pause. The mob exchanged wary glances before charging forward again, their fury reigniting as they rushed back to their positions with their hands outstretched towards the child soldiers.

Paulo’s mind raced, desperately searching for a way out without bloodshed, but every thought felt futile. Just as the pressure of the moment threatened to swallow him, a sharp burst of gunfire erupted from his side, shattering the tense silence and pushing his soldiers into action. To Paulo's horror, another shot rang out, followed by a rapid succession of others. In an instant, chaos erupted, and citizens crumpled to the ground like flies, while others scrambled frantically over fallen bodies, their movements resembling quick moving rats in the dirt.

Two vengeful men, untouched by the gunfire, lunged toward Paulo. In a split second, his instincts took over and he squeezed his eyes shut and fired blindly, the sharp crack of multiple rounds flying through the men.

When he finally dared to open his eyes, his heart sank as he gave a quick look to the twitching bodies he had put in the dirt. Panic surged through Paulo as his eyes darted around the chaos then his voice cracked with desperation as he shouted, “Stop shooting!”

His words cut through the madness, and, to his relief, his boys lowered their weapons. The air was thick with uneasiness as the deafening gunshots gave way to the raw, guttural wails of pain, each cry echoing the horrors unfolding around the people. Violence’s rhythm shifted, replaced by a haunting silence, broken only by the desperate sounds of the wounded and grieving.

Three bodies lay morphed into the ground, their forms twisted by the force of their fall, while others limped away, blood pooling beneath them and bullets embedded in their flesh. The air was filled with bloody screams, some cries marking the final blurts of life for some people.

Paulo wanted to smack his colleagues across the face in rage as he had no idea who fired the first shot. Before anger could take root in Paulo, something else gripped his attention. A skinny child, lifeless in the dirt. He appeared as though he hadn't seen a proper meal in ages, his ribs jutted out and two bullet holes punctured his fragile frame. The blood, a vivid red against his dark skin, pooled around him, blending into the muck that clung along his tiny body. Despite the chaos surrounding Paulo, his gaze remained fixed on the boy, yet, what truly shattered him was the grieving mother hunched over him. She rocked her son's limp form, shaking him gently, desperately trying to coax him back to life. Her mouth remained silent, though, no screams escaping her, just the quiet, harrowing sound of a mother's broken heart.

In her silent grief, the woman slowly rose from her boy's body and fixed her unblinking gaze on Paulo. Her eyes, wide with an intensity that seemed to strain against her skull, locked onto him. No expression was given on her face, only the raw weight of loss. Around him, Paulo's men breathed heavily, their eyes narrowing in caution as they watched her approach. They tightened their grips on their weapons, prepared for her to lash out.

Each step she took through the dirt was a hollow trot in the tense silence. When she finally stopped, she dropped to her knees before Paulo, her movements slow and shaken. Despite the heat of the day, her hands felt like ice as they gripped onto his, a chill that sent a shiver up his spine.

Paulo's gaze remained fixed on her eyes—empty and hollow, as if all life had been drained from them. He braced himself for the sob story he expected her to tell, but when she spoke, the words that followed were nothing like what he had imagined.

"Thank you... Thank you young child. With the food you and your friends stole my son would have not been able to survive another night. You put him out of his misery."

The mother's cold lips brushed against Paulo's hand in a ghostly kiss, sending a shiver through him. He recoiled, yanking his hand away from

her and stumbling backwards. A wave of dizziness washed over him as she remained motionless, her stare still piercing through him.

Though he couldn't be sure if he was the one who had killed the boy, the guilt gnawed at his insides. Desperate to shake the weight of it, Paulo forced his hands to snatch up the bag of stolen fruit as the distant wail of sirens crept through the air, growing louder with every second.

Adisa sprinted down the main street, the pounding of his feet drowned by the distant wail of sirens. When he reached Paulo and his boys, the scene that greeted him was grim as bodies scattered across the ground, lifeless and twisted. The metallic stench of blood mingled with the dirt, invading everyone's noses. Faces twisted in disgust, the sour tang of death forcing grimaces from even the most hardened among them.

Paulo and his men stood frozen; their faces etched with distress.

Adisa's eyes swept over the carnage and though the sight unsettled him, he cast the feeling aside with chilling ease. Whatever remorse tried to claw its way to the surface of Adisa's mind was buried without a second thought.

Even if Paulo looked distressed nothing compared to the look in Afia's dead eyes. He was on Adisa's hip like a dog out of all the other boy's and looked beaten and empty. Paulo's glance towards the disturbed Afia was interrupted by their leader shouting, "Soldiers! The sound of sirens is getting close! We must run now!"

After the brief exchange, Adisa turned and sprinted in the opposite direction they had come. One by one, the boys followed, their feet pounding over the bodies of their victims without a second glance.

The only boy that did run with his leader and instead stayed exactly where his feet stood in the middle of the road was Afia.

His arms laid loose on his sides and his eyes emptily gazed at the ground where his comrades' footsteps ran through. The rifle he held in his hands was barely grasped by his fingers as his body felt numb.

Before they knew it, the boys heard the screech of tires grinding through the dirt behind them, prompting most of them to glance back in alarm. They quickly realized Afia hadn't moved. He stood frozen, his back turned in oblivious defiance, as three wailing police cars skidded to a stop right behind him.

Adisa's eyes locked onto his friend, who had left himself behind and now stood helplessly right where the officers wanted him.

Even though the sirens blared, Adisa yelled to his boys, “halt!”

When the boys stopped and looked to their leader, they watched as took in a deep breath of the chaos. The massacre he had unleashed was laid bare before him, bodies gored in the streets, Afia trembling in front of their enemies, and terrified civilians peeking from behind walls and alleyways, too afraid to move.

But none of it was more worrisome than the site ahead. The police stood firm, lined up behind their cars, weapons drawn and ready, their eyes burning with the look of authority, prepared to put down the young soldiers who clutched their guns as if they could never put them down.

The two opposing groups both had guns pointed to each other as the world stood still.

Adisa’s eyes narrowed as he spotted a man standing alongside the officers dressed in a black button-up with body armor strapped over it, yet no badge in sight. Unlike the other officers, his pistol wasn’t aimed at Adisa and his boys, Instead, it was steadily fixed on Afia’s back.

The nicely dressed man slowly crept behind Afia making a loud noise with every step because of how quiet the whole area had gotten. As he got closer, boys began to grow wide eyed as they realized this man was none other than their own mayor, Cyril Kuer. A man shrouded in mystery, neither well-known nor well-liked by his people much like his brother Ameen, the police chief.

Cyril closed the distance, stepping within mere feet of Afia, the barrel of his pistol now pressed against the child’s back. Panic surged through Adisa, his anxiety peaking as he bellowed, “Don’t touch him! We will shoot you all to red mist, you are clearly under armed. My men are not afraid to die at any cost! How about you turn around before it is too late.”

Adisa’s men looked at each other with big, surprised eyes feeling as if Adisa had let death crawl right down their back.

The Nicely dressed man then spoke loudly, “Adisa Moses. What is your goal with all of this? To kill more and more to make you and your little men feel more powerful? Will you try to murder and rob every person that crosses your vision? Whatever your childish plan is, it will not work. Drop your guns or else I will kill this young man in front of my pistol and then after that I will kill every last one of you! As the mayor of this city, I have run it quite well and will continue to, with or without little scum like you!”

Adisa stayed silent then quietly spoke to his men without turning away from the mayor.

"I am going to talk for a second then after I do give them hell and run into the alley to the left of us. He won't kill Paulo, trust my instinct."

His men glanced uneasily at the dim alleyway, then exchanged worried looks. Without a word, their fingers tightened around their rifles, as the clock ticked until they had to fire the first rounds

Adisa cleared his throat and then said, "Ran the city good? Look at all the children starving clutching their stomachs hoping for food. The kids who do eat well have both parents working jobs that they hate just to get by! Getting by is what our people do, and it ends now!"

After Adisa spoke his last words, the first rounds of this fight were fired by his men. Bullets tore into the cop cars, ripping through their exteriors and striking the officers who cowered behind them. Adisa's men fired relentlessly, unleashing chaos as they shuffled sideways toward the alleyway. The officers returned fire as Cyril took in his hostage behind his squad car. Their pistols cracked through the air before they ducked for cover but the flimsy car doors, they hid behind offered little protection. Hopes of safety vanished in an instant as the boys' 7.62 rounds shredded through metal, leaving nothing but ravaged wreckage and fallen bodies.

The boy's feet ran across the dirt until they reached the alleyway with Adisa leading the way. Despite the rounds whizzing past them, the soldiers refused to relent. They fired relentlessly, their shots wild and scattered, smashing into walls and windows.

The last boy of the bunch was running into the alley trying to squeeze in past all the boys then A crack went through the air while the boy was halfway through the entrance of the alley and his eyes opened wide. His body dropped to the side and his comrades looked down at him as they realized their comrade had a bullet tearing into his right side.

He grabbed the wound in anguish as it gushed blood. In return his angry friend stuck his AK out of the alley not even aiming and let loose towards the cops. The boys crowded around the wounded soldier, hauling him to his feet as others joined their vengeful comrade, firing from cover. Gunfire erupted once more; the sky being filled with the sound of bullets.

Adisa stole a quick glance at the carnage, four officers lay dead in the mud, while three heads peeked from behind the remaining squad cars. Something caught his eye, not all of them were cops. Among them was his

friend Afia, his face twisted with fear, and beside him kneeled the mayor. The officer next to the mayor exchanged tense words with his leader, their voices lost beneath the chaos.

From Adisa's side, A worried soldier exclaimed, "Adisa, what are we going to do about the injured soldier? He will die if we keep fighting and do not move."

A response came to Adisa's mind, but his thoughts were interrupted with even more sounds of sirens that seemed to itch closer than the ones before. This parade of sirens must have been four to five cars coming from the other side of the street which would completely close the boys in if they didn't run.

Adisa's worried eyes grew bigger as he exchanged glances with his soldiers.

"Grab the boy. They will not kill Afia. We will save him within the next couple of hours; I have a grand plan just trust me. We are not abandoning him; we are simply removing ourselves from this battle and getting forces ready. If we do not move now, they will surely find us as there are more police cars than last time and with the damage we have done, they will surely be more armed. We must keep moving forward!"

Two boys hoisted the injured soldier between them, his feet dragging as they hurried after the rest of the group. Without looking back, they sprinted down the narrow alley, shadows swallowing them as they made their way toward the next hideout. While Adisa led his boys, he asked himself if he was doing the right thing. Then he realized he realized at this point he didn't even know what the right thing was anymore.

-Chapter VII-

When Adisa and his hoodlums fired their first shots towards the police the mayor kicked the lightly gripped AK out of Afia's hand and grabbed his hair, pulling him behind the cop car. Cyril moved his pistol from Afia's body towards his enemies and shot at the boys running across the street with no mercy. Bullets zipped past his head, landing instead on police cars sending ricochet all over him and his officers. His police officers who thought they stood a chance against the children who had as much firepower as the military quickly were riddled with bullets and fell into the dirt. Although the mayor was firing his pistol his eyes were not fixated down the sights of his gun and instead on the fallen bodies all around him.

Men around the mayor dropped like flies, never standing a chance. One of the last officers, crouched behind his car with his pistol aimed through the window, was struck in the chest as a bullet tore through the door like butter. He collapsed onto his back, clutching his stomach and writhing in pain.

In a swift, desperate move, the mayor raised his pistol over the car's trunk. His aim locked onto the grinning boy who had just taken down his friend and who was also the last boy scrambling for cover in the alleyway. Without hesitation, the mayor pulled the trigger, shooting the child right in the side.

Cyril saw him drop his gun and fly into the alleyway in agony which he got satisfaction from. The mayor looked at his brother, Ameen crouching behind the cop car to the right of him, then he shouted, "Adisa knew I wasn't going to kill this little prick. He is smarter than he looks."

Even though the mayor thought the shooting was over as all the boys had disappeared, he was proved wrong when bullets started to fly again. Cyril hardly threw Afia into the dirt to protect him and then shot more rounds towards the alleyway. Another round of gunfire came but did not hit anyone as the dead and the living were all on the ground. The chaos had quieted, leaving only the faint sound of approaching sirens and the eerie silence of a battle lost.

Ameen locked eyes with his distressed brother and loudly spoke, "We can't pursue them alone. Reinforcements are right around the corner; they must be!"

The wail of sirens grew louder, and the gunfire fell silent. Cyril exhaled in relief as his allied cavalry approached. The brothers and the

prisoner of war cautiously lifted their heads, careful to keep low enough to avoid the bite of stray lead. Cyril's gaze shifted to the front of his brother's police car, where a dead officer lay sprawled. Two pied crows were already at work, their sharp beaks tearing into the exposed coils of his intestines. The mayor grimaced at the sight and quickly looked away, only to glance back at the distant flashing lights of three approaching squad cars.

Cyril tapped Ameen on the shoulder, nodding toward the reinforcements. Rising to his feet, Cyril hauled Afia up, using the kid's body as a shield as he stepped from cover.

The police convoy arrived, officers clutching wooden rifles as they rode along the sides of the cars. Four of them leapt to the ground, their heavy boots striking the dirt in unison.

Both brothers knew their peers would blindly rush past the alley, oblivious to the swarm of child soldiers waiting there. They pointed furiously at the alley, signaling the officers toward the dark corridor.

The officers understood what they needed to do and without hesitation, they marched toward the alley's mouth with their weapons ready.

Ameen clenched his jaw, his mind flashing with the grim image of his men stepping forward only to be torn apart by a storm of bullets. Dread pooled in his gut, yet beside him, the silent boy had a different hope, one that welcomed the bloodshed.

In reality, the rifled officers pointed their guns down the alley ready to put down any little armed scum they saw but were only met with nothing of anyone's imagination. The tension eased and a heavy silence fell in the alley only broken by the scurrying of rats across it.

The officers lowered their guns and strode down the street toward their superiors. As they neared, one of the men with his voice laced with doubt said, "Sure that was the spot those little fuckers were in?"

Cyril gave a firm nod with his arms crossed and then assured, "That's exactly where they were. I've got one of them under arrest right here."

A grin twisted across the officer's face, and he asked, "Oh yea?"

He looked down on Afia and without warning, he drove the solid wood stock of his bolt-action rifle into the middle of the hostage's chest. The sickening thud sent Afia keeling onto the ground as he clutched the space between his ribcages.

Chief Ameen wasted no time in asking questions as his face dropped down towards the boy and his hands were put on his knees as he shouted, “Where are you sons of bitches headed?”

Afia paid no mind to Ameen’s spit that was shouted from his mouth and picked himself up from the dirt and looked at the Chief with a disdain in his eye, but he still spoke no words. The officers surrounding the boys shook their heads because they knew this boy was going to stay silent. Deputy Akoi finally got out of her car and caught the attention of the other policemen. She was the only woman in the whole police department, so she stuck out like a sore thumb, but she used that to her advantage.

Deputy Akoi finally made it to the group of men surrounding Paulo and asked, “So we are taking P.O.Ws now?”

Cyril looked up at her and responded, “This is war, not a joke. These boys are planning something evil. We must rip out the roots from under their tree of violence.”

Right after those words left the mayor’s mouth, townsfolk piled out from hiding and began asking questions to the authorities.

“Why are you not running to find those boys! Who knows when they will come out and strike again!”

“How many did they kill?”

Most of the questions poured into the officials’ ears without much thought, but one woman managed to catch Ameen’s attention. She burst from a shop on the left side of the street, her face twisted in anguish. Tears streaked her cheeks, and her face was a mix of rage and grief.

Without hesitation, she stormed toward the police chief through the crowd and drew her trembling arm back, before she slapped Ameen hard across the mouth. The sharp crack of the blow echoed through the street.

The townsfolk went wide eyed as officers rushed to restrain the woman, seizing her arms as she wriggled against their grip, still desperate to strike the chief again.

As she turned her body from side to side she wailed, “My husband! His- His Face. It is gone! Blown to bits! How could you let this happen? Why did you not come sooner!”

Ameen sharply wiped his hand from his injured mouth and spit a little blood out into the dirt.

“What did you want us to do? Teleport here? We got word of this attack and rushed here. We did the best we damn could. My men were killed too; How do you think I feel?”

The chief’s breaths got heavier, and his top lip started to quiver as he looked at the woman. Officers around him gave a scared look towards their leader who they knew had an awful temper. They wouldn’t even be surprised if he attempted to hit her while she was restrained.

“You are an awful excuse for serving and protecting. I pity your soul and the people that are forced to be around you, you dog,” the woman exclaimed.

Ameen's hands tingled with lingering humiliation as her words echoed in his mind. Without a second thought, he yanked his gun from its holster, gripping the barrel tightly. In a swift, brutal motion, he swung it across the woman’s mouth, a mirrored retaliation, but unlike her slap, the force of the metal dislodged her teeth and sent them to the ground.

She began to fall over, the officers releasing her as her body collapsed in the dirt, not knowing what to do.

A heavy unsettling silence followed. Civilians and officers alike stared in disbelief, their faces bent and their stomachs feeling queasy. Disgust rippled through the crowd, and one by one, heads shook in quiet condemnation of Ameen's merciless act.

Cyril was the first to react and tightly grabbed his shoulder and turned him around. He then looked deep in his brother's eyes and screamed, “What in the hell are you doing?”

Ameen shook him off and turned around to the woman to see her one last time. Right when he turned around, he was met with the smiling woman throwing bloody yellow teeth right at the bottom of his chin. Blood splashed on his uniform as the teeth fell to the ground. His eyes widened and he switched the hold of his pistol from the barrel to the grip.

Officers noticing what was about to happen tried rushing to him and even his brother put his hand on his shoulder to stop him, but it was too late.

He raised the shaken gun at her head and pulled the trigger.

Cyril managed to hit the gun down while Ameen fired, and he thought this would have deflected the bullet but instead it just turned the head shot into a neck shot.

Blood gushed from the gaping wound on the woman's neck, and her trembling, ashy hands wrapped around the wound in a desperate attempt to stanch the flow. Panic flashed in her wide eyes as blood seeped through her fingers, but she remained smiling.

In a flash the mayor finally wrenched the pistol from his brother's irresponsible grip, his face filled with disbelief and anger.

The townspeople, once frozen in shock, erupted into chaos as screams pierced the air as civilians scattered.

Their fear mirrored the terror that had gripped them when Adisa and his men first stormed onto the street.

The poor woman with a bullet lodged in her neck, smiled faintly as her bloodied hands fell off of her neck. She reached toward her attacker who was now forced to the ground by his brother, and who now was on the same level as his victim. While Cyril wrestled to restrain his murderous brother, he caught eyes with the woman who for some reason wanted to grab his brother so badly. Her life slowly left her eyes as she tried her hardest to latch onto Ameen then she abruptly calmed into the mud around her and passed.

As Nileville's main street had cleared itself out again Cyril got off his brother and ordered his officers, "Pick this fool up."

The mayor met Ameen's gaze, his eyes heavy with shame, as officers struggled to support his brother's heavy body. Ameen was clearly on a violent power trip, one that no amount of blood could quench or satisfy, though this was hardly unusual for the Chief. He had always been one to overstep his reach, pushing boundaries with an insatiable hunger for control.

The Chief smiled and sarcastically said, "What is this about ruckus, brother? It was just some friendly discourse."

From the right a hook came into Ameen's temple that was thrown by his brother who didn't think his joke was very funny.

Ameen fell out of the officer's grasps and slid and slammed into the dirt. Cyril quickly got on top of the Chief and sternly wrapped his hands around Ameen's neck as he breathed out stiffly.

For thirty seconds with no mercy the brothers stared deep into each other's eyes as the mayor choked his little brother out and occasionally slammed his head against the ground. The chief's face got more and more purple until he seemingly had let his last breath of air out. After that last

breath the mayor unclenched his hard hands and got off his brother realizing he had gone too far.

Out of nowhere, Ameen gasped back to life, taking a deep breath as if he had forgotten how to breathe. Pain throbbed in his head where he had been struck, and he instinctively pressed his hand to his temple. Curling into a ball, he groaned in agony as his brother, relentless, leaned over and flipped him onto his back. Once Ameen's chest was exposed to the sky, Cyril seized the Chief's badge and ripped it from his uniform, the fabric tearing with a harsh snap.

"I've given you too many chances. I thought maybe you would change but what a fool I was. You are just as bad as those no-good children," Cyril spoke in a disappointed tone.

Ameen did not respond and instead continued to grab his head and rock back and forth.

A last civilian stood on the sidewalk watching the whole ordeal between the brothers then she walked over to their surprise. On her walk to the group of officers, two men turned around and pointed their guns towards her and asked her, "What is your business?"

Most of the officers thought it was just another crazy widow ready to chew into one of the officials but even so, the mayor turned from his brother and gave her a look. He saw that she didn't look angry, maybe just a bit disturbed and instead of being suspicious he said to his men, "Stand down."

They pointed their guns to the ground and the woman spoke, "I know where those boys went. When they left the store that the woman's husband got killed in, I overheard the leader boy say that they were going to hide in the church south of here to hideout."

The mayor looked at her with an appeased look in his eye.

"Thank you, if that is true, we will set reinforcements to kill these damned terrorists. Those boys will be dead before midnight. Spread the word and tell everyone there is nothing to fear."

With no expression the woman shook her head yes and ran off back towards her home.

The mayor then turned around to his men and focused his eyes on Afia who had been standing and observing throughout this entire ordeal.

“We must search this entire city to find those hoodlums and if that fails, we will head to the church at night fall and end this once and for all. If they try anything fishy, we will use this little piece of crap as leverage.”

Cyril adjusted his finger from Afia to his brother and then said, “And for my brother do not give him a ride. Leave him here for the townsfolk to feast on. Then go to his house and get rid of any guns that he has.”

The lower ranking officers shook their heads in obedience then walked towards their still running cars. The mayor hauled Afia to his car, dragging him with a cold determination.

Before he climbed into the vehicle, he paused and spat on his beaten brother, who still laid helplessly sprawled on the floor.

Adisa and his boys emerged into the forest, their eyes falling on the abandoned church, its wood walls draped in the embrace of long, gnarled branches. The church had boarded-up windows, yet a faint light escaped through the cracks between the weathered two-by-fours. Broken stairs led up to the front door of the church that had also been boarded up. An open area took the left side of the church where no trees or long grass grew but instead was occupied by wet soil.

The only entrance to the church that remained not covered was a narrow, weathered screen door, its hinges creaking under the weight of time. It was equipped with an automatic closer that clicked softly with each gust of wind.

A rotted cross was also laid on top of the church which had its right arm broken off.

Adisa knew from the light that someone had to be inside of this run-down church but that someone was not a threat in his mind.

“Soldiers, we must get this boy inside and help his poor soul. We have a lot to talk about.”

His men looked weak after holding their rifles and bags of supplies for a mile or two.

Adisa led the charge and pulled open the screen door then pointed his gun into the church while walking in. A couple of the pews down to the right of the church were busted down and had a group of raggedy men surrounding a fire in the clear area.

“Cops,” one homeless man yelled.

The homeless people surrounding the fire scattered out and fell, not realizing the police were not there but instead a group of children. The two men didn't spare a glance at the soldiers as they darted past them, disappearing into a room to the right of the center pulpit. The echo of wood crashing to the ground reverberated through the church, leaving it empty except for Adisa and his soldiers. The boys behind Adisa hurried to the fire, setting the injured man down beside it. Adisa approached, his gaze falling on the barren, dirt-streaked floor. There, amidst the grime, lay a blanket, a glass of murky water, a green lighter, a pipe, and a bag of cloudy meth.

Adisa swiftly threw all the items away out of a crack in the wood covering a window except for the bag of meth which he secretly pocketed. The other boys that were not helping the injured soldier were sitting around the fire eating food that they had just stolen as they were hungry as wolves. A pile of medical supplies and food that they were not eating sat in the pews to the side of them. Silence was loud inside of the church while boys looked at each other and did not know what to say. Adisa broke the silence saying, "Today was exactly how I expected it to be. I knew we would have to put up a fight and that people would get hurt and even killed. No matter what we do there will always be opposition against us. Even though that is not fun, people will change their minds on us soon, I promise. We will create a Utopia even for the people that hate us."

The boys around Adisa wore expressions that spoke volumes, none of them showing any trace of happiness. Some appeared numb, their faces stone-cold, while others burned with anger, ready for the fight ahead. A few of Adisa's soldiers nodded in quiet agreement, but many simply stared blankly at the floor, lost in their thoughts. Most of them had taken their first lives in the city, and the weight of that lingered in their eyes. Adisa knew their spirits were low, and he steeled himself, determined to rally them for the battle that lay ahead.

"Tonight, we will have to fight again! I told a street woman that we would be staying in the church outside of town so that she would tell the police and then they would come straight to us. They will come after sundown and it will be an easy fight compared to today in town, I have a plan."

Some of the boys next to Adisa stopped eating and looked at each other in shock after realizing there would be two battles in the span of only

a couple of hours. A lot of the boys were weak and did not know if they could fight again but they knew they had gone too far to turn around now.

"We will kill every officer that steps in our way then take the Chief to use as leverage to get Afia back! A hostage for a hostage!"

Silence rang for a moment then Adisa continued, "If we stop now because we are too tired then we may never get Afia back or watch our dreams come true. This is the point where most people give up. It is a dark time where men have the option to give in. We are not those men though. The hero in the story never gives up, instead he uses the hard times to make him stronger!"

The energy in the room rose a little compared to the minutes before and some of the boys even cracked a darkened smile.

Paulo sat straight across from Adisa and as he watched his friend over the fire, he cracked the biggest smile out of anyone. He would always be loyal to Adisa, and he knew even if times were tough, it would be worth it to follow the boy who he looked at as a prophet.

After Adisa tried to wake his men up from the tiredness of battle, he excused himself from the circle. He shoved the screen door open and stepped down onto the wooden steps, unzipping his pants as he began to relieve himself. Adisa hadn't used the restroom all day, and he closed his eyes, allowing himself a moment of relief. Behind his eyelids, his mind played the upcoming battle, or the uncertainty of it and nothing else. When he opened his eyes again, he was startled to see beside his stream, stood the shadow, the same one he had seen the night before. The spirit was the reason he had to seek shelter in this abandoned church. Adisa painfully stopped mid-stream and took a step up backwards as he quickly zipped up his pants in embarrassment. He then watched the shadow, without taking a step seemingly moved into his puddle of pee that laid right in front of him.

"**You should be drinking more water; your pee looks quite yellow. You are doing quite well my boy but remember there will always be unexpected obstacles that you will face. You will overcome them though as long as you follow my rules.**"

Adisa slowed down his heavy breathing and responded.

"I won't forget. Now tell me who you are and how do you appear out of nowhere to me? You have helped me a lot so far so even if I don't know I do not mind."

"**You know exactly what I am.**"

In the blink of an eye the shadowy man disappeared before Adisa to which the unfazed boy shook his head and returned to his quiet soldiers inside of the church.

-Chapter VIII-

A man staggered down an alleyway, his body battered and broken, the weight of his injuries dragging him down with every step. His vision swam, his mind a blur of pain and anger. He gritted his teeth, forcing himself to keep moving despite the dizziness threatening to pull him under.

The loss of his badge and his life, as he knew it weighed heavy on him as he didn't have any family besides his brother to prove something to. Just his people. At first in his mind, it was all over, a final fall from grace but that was before he decided to rise from the dirt and clung to the last shred of hope that still flickered within him.

Even without his badge, there was still one way to redeem himself. He had to reach Adisa before anyone else did and stop him. He had to capture the child before it was too late. If he could bring the boy in, Ameen's badge would be restored and the town would forget his mistake, and he would be seen as a hero.

Massacres were a rarity in Nileville, but this one, the one Adisa had caused, would mark the city forever and if Ameen could bring down the infamous child, he would become a legend.

The pain in his body screamed with every step, but still, he walked on, knowing where he had to go next. Time was running out, and if he didn't stop Adisa now, everything would slip beyond his reach.

Behind one of the markets on the main street stood a familiar, angled wooden trapdoor, the kind that marked the entrance to a shady but reliable person's hideout. Ameen stumbled through the dingy alley until he reached the door and with a swift motion, he used his heel to knock sharply on the wood, signaling that someone was there. The sound of feet scurrying from beneath the trapdoor reached Ameen's ears, and he stood still, listening intently. He lowered to the ground then pressed his elbows against the dirt to get closer, peering through one of the warped wooden slats with a practiced eye.

Beneath the trapdoor, concrete steps led downward, and a faint light flickered from the left side of the corridor. Then, a voice echoed from the same direction, scratchy and familiar, "Who is it?"

Ameen heard this and then threw his words down a hole that was in the wood of the trap door.

"It's the Chief, open up."

Down the stairs the man started to scurry again but this time the sounds of metal moving around echoed up the stairs.

"I ain't doing nothing bad Officer I promise," He exclaimed up the corridor, then he continued, "I stopped with all the arms dealing stuff I swear! Now please, Leave me alone."

Ameen laughed and then shouted, "This is official police business so open up the damn door. I am not here to give you trouble, just let me talk to you."

More noises of metal rang up the stairs then the scared man muttered, "Alright."

He turned the corner where warm light emitted then peeked his head out up the stairs. The man scuffled up the steps worriedly then pulled a ring of keys out from out of his pocket.

As he watched, Ameen gave a mocking shake of his head at the worried man who was stupid enough to pull out keys to unlock a door from the inside. The chief quickly pushed himself off the wooden trapdoor, making sure it opened naturally, as if he hadn't been crouched there as he stalked.

While the door creaked open, the short, pudgy convict cautiously poked his head out, scanning the area for any officers or threats. He darted his head back down after paranoidly looking around then he waved for the chief to follow.

"So Chief... What do you need from an innocent man like me? I do not sell guns anymore, so bring me no trouble please," The worried man spoke shakenly.

"*Ah*, you are not an arms dealer anymore you tell me. So, what has this hidden lair become? Seems kind of out of place for anything that is under the law," Ameen mockingly returned.

Out of nowhere the dealer turned around as he led Ameen down the stairs. His eyes immediately caught the absence of the badge and pins on the chief's once-ornate uniform. The bare and busted up fabric seemed out

of place, as though it had lost its purpose. Ameen's uniform, now dirtied and stained, carried splashes of blood. Dark reddish-brown clashed against the blue, a stark contrast to the symbol of protection it was supposed to represent.

"Where did your badge go, officer? I don't mean no trouble seriously, just tell me what you want."

Looking again at the chief the dealer noticed how the spot where the badge was supposed to lay was distressed and seemed as if the badge was not taken off normally but instead torn off. Each step the dealer took down into his own basement he felt more and more in danger. Ameen jabbed his finger into the man's side, forcing him to halt on the narrow stairs. The gun dealer stiffened, but before he could protest, Ameen's voice cut through the dim space.

"I ask the questions here, not you, criminal!"

They both began to walk again, each step the man took down into his own basement he felt more in danger.

When the two men took the corner into the warm light Ameen looked around at the room that was full of crates and such that were covered by big blue and black moving blankets. A small bed laid in the left corner of the tightly packed concrete room and next to it stood a dirty dresser with a bottle of cheap vodka sitting on it.

The dealer leaned against one of the crates with the blanket over it obviously trying to hide whatever was in the crate he was leaning on and started to talk again.

"What do you want? If this is not official business, then I would like you to leave my premises. That is under the law, I know of it…"

After the dealer's frantic words, the chief lunged forward, his hand gripping the man's side. With a forceful shove, he sent the dealer stumbling to the left. The man hit the ground with a grunt, but Ameen's and focus had shifted towards the box.

He tore the blanket from the crate the dealer had so desperately tried to conceal and without hesitation, he slid the wooden lid off, the heavy slab landing with a thud on the curled-up man.

Before Ameen's eyes could lock onto the contents, the man scrambled to his knees, his voice trembling.

"There's nothing in there, I swear!"

The chief gave an unapproving smirk at him and then grabbed what was inside of the crate and raised it high. In his hands, Ameen held a black FAL rifle, its sleek barrel having a gleaming bayonet tucked below it. He turned it over, examining it from every angle, his fingers tracing along the cold steel. The weight of the weapon felt right, powerful and commanding.

To the chief, the FAL was a rifle meant for the righteous, a symbol of authority and justice. And in his mind, despite everything, he still believed he was one of the good guys.

"I didn't know they were in there chief! Please you can take whatever you want just not me back to prison!"

The dealer got up on his feet after his plea and started to walk backwards looking behind himself as to not trip. As the paranoid man turned his head in front and then behind him, he locked eyes with Ameen who aggressively slid his bayonet into the skittish man's stomach. The chief had a blank face, and a blood lusting look in his eye while the dealer struggled to push the knife away from him. Struggling did not matter though, as every time he struggled the blade ran deeper. Finally, after a moment of struggling the man's survival instincts kicked in, resulting in him grabbing his own knife that stuck out on his hip. He slashed the Chief's arm that was holding the rifle letting his blood splash all over, but Ameen did not seem to care or even notice in his trance of savagery. The man finally reached his arm out a bit more and began to slash at Ameen's stomach, ripping his uniform up. It took a while for the pain of the blade to get to Ameen's brain but when it did, he let out a grunt through his gritted teeth and then jerked his gun forward then back, letting the dealer slide off his blade then onto the wall. The man's limbs had gone numb and the knife which he used to cut Ameen, flew out of the struggling man's reach. He grabbed his knife wound and laid against his blood smeared concrete wall. Blood coughed out of the man's mouth into his hands which laid below him.

Ameen watched the man struggle in ecstasy while he then pressed his blade on the man's cheek. He teased the man with the blade moving around his face but not touching deep enough to cut him. The face of the

man was scrunched up with his eyes closed and the last words its mouth spoke were, “Damn You.”

The Chief swung his rifle back like a baseball bat, then brought the bayonet down in a brutal arc. The blade tore into the dealer’s face, sending blood splattering across the walls. Stroke after stroke, the knife carved through flesh, up, down, side to side. The man’s face became a twisted canvas, painted in red by Ameen's merciless hand.

Each cut drew louder, more desperate screams until, at last, the cries ceased. The dealer's head slumped forward, his lifeless body sagging against the Chief’s blade mid-swing.

The sudden silence was loud; Only Ameen’s ragged and warm breaths filled the room. He lowered his gaze at his once uniform that was now shredded and soaked, barely clinging to his skin. With a sharp tug, he tore it away, exposing the deep, jagged slashes across his stomach.

A heavy, trembling exhale escaped his lips as he stared down at his wounds, his exhaustion crashing down on him.

The adrenaline that had dulled the pain began to fade, and the burning sting crept in. Each heartbeat seemed to pulse through the gashes, a reminder of the savage exchange that had just taken place.

In the crate that he picked the gun up from he picked up a loaded .308 magazine then stuck it in his gun. There were three other magazines which he grabbed and put in the cargo pockets of his black pants.

A row of 1911’s laid in the packing straw within the crate right in front of Ameen who of course grabbed it and examined it just like he did with the rifle.

Slowly, he put his rifle down while examining the blued finish of the 1911. While keeping his eye on the pistol, Ameen pulled out his small pocketknife from his pants and put the blade to the steel. Along the slide he unprofessionally etched: “AMEEN,” in a show of pride.

The only thing he didn’t pick up from the crate was a black balaclava that laid on top of another crate next to the one that held the rifles. Ameen pulled the balaclava over his face, its dark fabric swallowing his expression then his hands tightened around his rifle.

Slowly, he approached the dealer’s lifeless body to examine it. The man lay sprawled in a dark pool, the blood seeping from the gaping wounds across his face, Yet, as Ameen knelt closer, the dealer's wide and glassy eyes snapped open. They disturbingly locked onto Ameen’s own, and the Chief

wondered if hell had rejected this poor soul. The man's bloodied palms quickly lifted, trembling, and reached for Ameen. With a final, gasping effort, his hand pressed against the Chief's masked face, smearing it with the warmth of his fading life. A choked breath escaped the dealer, a sound of lingering anguish. Then, his body slackened, collapsing once more into the blood-soaked ground.

Ameen remained still, the ghostly imprint of the man's bloody hand staining the dark fabric.

The once Chief got up and away from the body and then walked in front of the only mirror in the room which stood to the left of the dealer's body. His eyes looked at his own stature up and down and looked at the blood running down his stomach, then his balaclava which had five bloodied fingers right on top of it. The long black rifle which he held high seemed to morph into his body like it was just another limb. He stayed in his victim's pool of blood still looking at himself in the mirror, questioning if what he was doing was right. His appearance looked vigilante-like which is not what he liked but he knew if he didn't stop Adisa no one would. Ameen had been the Chief of this town for too long to be undone by a boy like Adisa. Fifteen years of hard work couldn't just be thrown away.

He was certain the officers sent to the church would meet their deaths. Adisa wouldn't fight fair as the child had abandoned all rules, resorting to guerilla tactics that would tear through any semblance of order. The Chief knew the brutal truth that sending officers into that savage territory was a death sentence.

But he could stop it, and he would stop it.

Killing Adisa before the massacre happened would make him a hero again. The town would return to its uneasy version of normal, and in time, the bloodshed would be forgotten. His vigilante justice wouldn't be condemned; it would be celebrated. After all, what other choice was there?

These thoughts circled in his mind, tightening their grip as he stared into the mirror in front of him.

Even in the moment of wishful thinking for the future, his own reflection began to mock him as it was distorted and smeared with the blood of a man he had just butchered.

With a sudden angered jerk, Ameen raised his pistol, the barrel trembling in the dim light. The reflection of the gun met his eyes, then, without a moment's hesitation, he pulled the trigger.

Three deafening shots rang out and the mirror shattered, collapsing into a thousand jagged shards. Each fractured piece glinted with what remained of his reflection as broken, scattered, and irreparable.

At the police station, an hour before their planned assault on Adisa, officers braced for the fight of their lives. Twenty officers gathered in the armory, strapping on body armor and loading rifles, each knowing that Adisa's surrender was unlikely. The weight of uncertainty pressed down on them. Many held little hope of surviving, scrawling final goodbyes on scraps of paper, words that would only reach their families if they died. Others, fueled by bravado, scoffed at the notion of death, leaving no letters behind. After each officer got ready, they stormed out of the department's armory and into the main lobby of the station.

All the officers stood in perfect lines out in the lobby and awaited their briefing from Cyril about what they must do against the little terrorists.

While the officers stood waiting for the Mayor, Cyril was in a dark corner of the station, mid conversation with Afia.

They sat across from each other in a dim, suffocating room, the only light seeping through the barred window, casting their faint shadows along the cracked wall behind them.

Cyril stared at the young boy and looked deep into his disturbed eyes that didn't gaze back.

"I see a lot in your eyes, child. Pain and suffering are what I see. It will only get worse if you stick around and help Adisa's anarchy. This journey does not have to be painful for you if you just help us out."

As soon as Cyril wrapped up speaking, a series of bangs at the metal door to the side of them diverted their attention.

The mayor looked over at the door of his interrogation room and annoyedly shouted, "What is it?"

A voice from outside the room spoke, "The officers are ready for your briefing. They have been waiting for you."

The mayor scoffed and then scooted out of his seat.

"Alright I am coming," Cyril longly said.

He looked back to the handcuffed Afia before exiting the room and said,

"There is still a lot to do for you. We will see how tonight goes and that will determine what you do next."

Cyril shut the door on his hostage, the heavy clang echoing through the narrow hall. Stepping into the light, he squinted against its glare, his eyes adjusting to the sight of the officer who had knocked. Without hesitation, he jabbed a finger toward the man and said, "Make sure he doesn't leave that room. If he does, there will be hell to pay… After the Briefing I must attend to some business outside of the station. Even though the rest of the department is heading out, you will be here with two other men. Do not disappoint me."

As the Mayor finished walking the hall to the lobby two officers standing at the end joined him and strutted behind him while he walked.

In the Lobby one of the officers leaned over to Akoi and whispered, "This will be a bloodbath, but not for us."

The mayor stepped onto his makeshift stand in the lobby, and the crowd instantly straightened, falling into an obedient silence.

Again, the man trying to impress Akoi, leaned over to her and whispered, "We will crush those little dumb children, and they will be forgotten about in no time."

Clearly hearing what the pompous man had said to Deputy Akoi, as the room was dead silent, Cyril boomed out loud and broke the silence.

"These are not dumb little children! At least I know Adisa is not. They are armed to the teeth with AK-47s, and God knows what else. I have no clue how these Children got such arms but that is not the worry right now. These are Savages who will do anything to watch us, and our people suffer and die. Although we are armed as well, some of you might have a hard time killing children if you have to. But to anyone questioning if they can or if they can't, let me ask you this, are they afraid to kill adults? Whether that be the people who raised them or even our own families. If we do not stop this madness now these little beasts will overtake our once beautiful city and turn it into a wasteland! We are our people's only hope!"

Instead of the room filled with cheers or war cries like Adisa and his men, it was filled with silent obedience after their leader's speech. Cyril looked around at his officers, cracked a smile and then said, "It is with pleasure that I tell you all that this operation will be formally led by our new Chief of Nileville, Akoi Nyok. I know it is unofficial, but she will be sworn in by God once this operation is finished!"

Other officers patted her on the back in excitement and clapped their hands as Cyril threw down his brother's old badge towards her. The throw he made was not the best and missed the new Chief's fingers by a couple of inches. It made a clinking sound on the stone floor then the mayor gave a small friendly laugh.

Chief Akoi then said, "Excuse me," and put her hand down to pick it up in front of her colleagues' feet. When she put her hand down to grab the piece of metal, she noticed blood smeared across it, which disturbed her, but she still picked it up. She had no idea whether this blood was Ameen's or the woman that he murdered in broad daylight out in the street. Chief Akoi wiped the blood off of it on her pant leg and gulped. Her hands pinned it on her uniform top with a fake smile. Something about this in her mind felt weird. People around Akoi gave her approving smiles at the new chief who for sure would be better than the last. The last smile she got was from Cyril who then turned to a stern face to finish his speech.

"You all will drive to the outer forest and then walk until you reach the church. You will approach the building but not too close as we do not know if this is a trap. The Chief will ask for Adisa to come outside with his men. If they oblige and come outside you will all arrest these children and take them back to the station. Now if these children do not come outside or oppose arrest you have my full permission to kill every one of them. Now go!"

Officers filed out of the lobby one by one, their footsteps echoing through the tense silence. The mayor, flanked by the two officers who had stood by his podium, then they began to follow him. He watched as his officers climbed into the police van, his hand raising in a half-hearted wave. Whether they would be massacred or manage to survive, he couldn't say. But no matter the outcome, he always had a plan.

Settling into the back of a police car, the seat creaking beneath him, a thought crept into his mind; He wondered if he could turn Afia into an instrument of Adisa's death.

-Chapter IX-

The huge van full of officers ready to give their lives parked not too far from the church full of savages. When the officers' feet touched the ground outside of their van that was safe and sound, the reality of their situation hit them hard. The cold night air hit their faces in this new alien world that they had stepped into. These men knew that they were entering a forest where the lingering feeling of death would follow close behind. Even though taking Adisa non-violently was an option, they knew that this would not be an easy or likely task.

The officers stomped through the long road leading up to the broken church twenty deep side by side armed with old rifles and other outdated arms. A warm light spilled from the crumbling remains of the church, its glow beckoning the peacemakers closer.

Little did the officers know, while they faced the church in front of them, the eyes of death were staring right down their necks. With each step closer to the church, the officers' fear grew. In their minds, the shadows within hid soldiers foaming at the mouth to tear them apart. The officers tightened their grips on their guns, their bodies tense as they stood in the open, dusty stretch beside the church, every muscle coiled and ready.

Chief Akoi settled her feet and gulped before speaking, fearing that these could be her last words.

"Adisa! We are here to arrest you and your men for the terrorism you have inflicted on this great land. If you oblige and come outside with no arms you will be arrested and put into jail and then your friend Afia will be free to run off. The rest of your soldiers can run off back home to their mothers after giving up their arms. They will receive a beating from their parents, but it will be far less of a terrible fate than facing our fire if you do not come out. If you don't listen, your parents will not have a chance to beat you. Instead, they will scream at your little corpses that will be laid out in the mud in the city as an example to scum like you!"

Akoi looked down at her watch then said, "You will all have five minutes to come out. If you exceed this, we will light up the church with firepower that you have never seen before."

No branch behind them broke and no wood plank in front of them squeaked or settled as the officers stood in silence for a long minute. After what felt like an eternity of silence, Akoi glanced at her watch again,

convinced that the full five minutes had passed, but when she saw the time, only thirty seconds had gone by.

In the midst of the unfamiliar forest, the officers began to shift uneasily, their heads swiveling at every sound. Faint rustlings of trees moving echoed through the stillness, and they couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched by something. Another stiff thirty seconds passed by, and a squeak came from the bygone church. The sound of a squeak shattered the stillness, causing the officers' heart rates to spike again. Their hands instinctively pointed their guns toward the holy site. Another squeak, then another, each one drawing closer, amplifying the tension. Through the cracks in the boarded-up windows, a shadow emerged, cast by the flickering light of the small interior fire. It was clearly the silhouette of a young boy. The boy was revealed to be Adisa as his body became visible to the officers through a single glass window, the only one that remained not boarded, positioned beside the lone unsealed door in the house of God.

When Adisa reached the doorway, he paused for a moment, his features hidden in the shadows, unrecognizable to the officers. Then, without a word, he began descending the wooden stairs, each step creaking under his weight.

The leader had his hands shot up and it was clear he was not holding any weapons. Despite the uncertainty, the officers kept their guns trained on him, wary of any trick or plan Adisa might have hidden up his sleeve. As he drew closer, the sounds of the child sniffling reached into their ears and then he spoke, “My men. My men who I thought would ride to the death with me have left my poor soul. I have caused a lot of trouble in this dear place. Let Afia go free and take me… Please!”

Adisa gave off a defeated cry while looking at the ground. His tears hit the dirt and fell on his arms after he thrusted them out in front of him with his palms facing the night sky.

Akoi did a double take at the boys surrendering hands and was highly confused. Only hours ago, when she arrived in the middle of town with reinforcements for Cyril and Ameen, her eyes could not leave the many bodies that laid lifeless on the ground. She had seen what Adisa was capable of and what he had done. The thought of him giving up so easily and his men abandoning him was out of her head. A lot had been said about Adisa and the last thing Akoi would think she would see of him was tears rolling

down his face. The fearful feeling in the air was lifted off all of the officers and the fear of death being right behind them was erased.

From The new chief's mouth came a snarky laugh that was infectious to the rest of the officers. In their minds all that fear walking through the forest was for nothing. Akoi, taking her chance, took her steps towards the defeated Adisa and put his hands from the front of his body to his back. Her partially rusted handcuffs clicked on the child and the officers in the group got out of side-by-side formation then started to laugh and speak down on Adisa. The child was turned around to be more easily laughed at and the thought of being fearful of a little child got thrown out of their mind in a unanimous happiness.

His head was kept down while officers traded jokes and laughed at the sad boy who they were supposed to be fearful of. The mocking stopped for a moment and Adisa took advantage of that. In a normal tone, devoid of sadness or tears, Adisa then said, “Let me say one last thing to you all... The dumbest thing about all of this is not the fact that you all thought I would give myself up without a fight. No, no, the dumbest thing about this is believing that my soldiers would give up on me.”

Adisa finally looked up at the officers with his face wet from tears and opened his eyes wide. A smile struck across his face that sent a shiver down every one of his enemies' spines. He started to laugh maniacally while the officers shook out of their temporary happiness.

The air thickened with the scent of death, pressing in on the officers as if it were closer this time. Panic surged in their eyes as they spun around, guns raised at nothing, their paranoia spiraling. Every crack of a branch, every rustle of leaves made them jump, the oppressive silence amplifying their fear.

Finally, the gust of death hit the officers, making them open their eyes wide like they had seen a ghost.

Muzzles flashed from the trees surrounding them, and in an instant, bullets rained down on the officers, who stood frozen in terror. Their guns fired wildly in response, but they couldn’t see where the opposing shots were coming from.

Adisa threw his weight to the ground, slamming Akoi down with him. Blood splattered in all directions as officers fell, some dead before their bodies even hit the ground. Bodies jerked violently as they were struck from every angle, a blur of violence and death. The child soldiers in the tall

trees had evil smiles that flashed in the dark from the muzzle flash of their rifles. A sense of power came over the boy's while shooting, giving them a demonic smile.

As the gunsmoke settled in the air, in mere seconds, almost the entire police force laid on the ground, either dead or on the brink of death, their bodies twisted in the aftermath of the brutal ambush. Guns laid in the mud next to their lifeless officers and bullets riddled on their dirty bodies from head to toe.

The only officer who survived was Chief Akoi who was next to Adisa on the ground, squirming around. She writhed like a trapped worm, finally freeing herself from Adisa's grip. As her eyes fluttered open, a chill ran down her spine, and goosebumps prickled on the back of her neck. She gazed down at the nineteen officers sprawled across the dirt, some still twitching, desperately clinging to life. A suffocating weight settled on her chest. She felt responsible for leading them to this massacre, deceived by Adisa's lies. A single tear traced down her cheek as Adisa, still bound, pushed himself up and sat with an eerie calmness. Without thinking, her hand moved to her pistol, the cold barrel now aimed squarely at him. By this time Adisa's soldiers had jumped down from the trees they were perched in and were already on the way to Adisa.

Akoi sniffled and with peeled open eyes she said, "You are done for. No more following Cyril's orders, you are a dead child!"

Adisa smiled and said in return, "Make your decision wisely because you pull that trigger, they will shoot you dead. We are not here to kill you!"

Akoi's hands trembled and her distress was visible. Adisa, for the first time, felt the weight of genuine fear. He could see the conflict in her eyes as she was on the edge, and the wrong move could send her over. His pulse quickened, realizing just how close he was getting to death.

Adisa's soldiers surged forward, trampling over the fallen officers with ignorance and ease. They circled the Chief, their guns aimed at her, but understanding passed between them as they knew they could not kill her as she was useful.

Paulo, standing just beside Akoi, seized the moment and fired. The shot rang out, striking the pistol in her hands with deadly precision. Her gun flew from her grasp, landing near another fallen body. Akoi shouted a bit and grabbed her hand, questioning if it got shot or not. In an explosive burst of motion, she launched herself at the defenseless Adisa, her body

propelling forward with sheer anger, but before she could reach him, five of the soldiers lunged, tackling her to the ground. They slammed her into the dirt, their grip hardening into her skin as they pinned her down with ruthless force.

"Grab her handcuff keys," Adisa yelled over the rustling of his soldiers.

The soldiers kept her thrashing body pinned to the ground, their strength overpowering her resistance. One of them, his fingers moving swiftly, searched her side cargo pocket. He pulled out a ring of keys, their cold metal gleaming as he held them up, a grim smile crossing his face. The young soldier hurried over to Adisa, quickly unlocking the handcuffs that had bound him. As the others stood around, eager to recount their kills or boast about their actions, Adisa rose to his feet, his movements slowed. He rubbed his sore wrists, and then said, "I knew they couldn't keep me in those for long."

He smiled and gave a chuckle to which his men joined in.

After a laugh, Adisa walked over to Akoi with the clinking sound of his old handcuffs swinging on his finger. With a quick motion, he fastened them around her wrists, the metal snapping shut with a finality that echoed in the tense air.

Adisa then remarked down on her, "You must admit woman, that was a good one. My acting was pretty good, you think?"

Akoi grinded her teeth and gave a sharp exhale out and said, "Go to hell, demon child!"

A line of spit was put down on the only surviving officer by Adisa, then boys took advantage of the silence and started to share stories of who they killed or what they did, each boy speaking over the other.

"You shoulda seen the way this officer danced while getting riddled by my lead!"

"Well, you shoulda seen the way one of the officers head turned to nothing!"

"I got two officers with one bullet!"

Stories rang off the air with each boy trying to outdo the other to impress their leader. Akoi sat there in pain and hearing the stories made her think about how lost and immature these boys were. They were savages and had no compass for right and wrong. Taking lives did not matter to

them as they shot men in their backs from treetops not giving them a fair chance. The soldiers talked of taking lives as if it was a playground sport.

After listening to the war stories and responding with laughter, Adisa's gaze shifted to Akoi. His eyes locked with hers as he walked toward her, his presence looming over her as she knelt on the ground. His small hand reached down and touched her chief's badge, and he examined it.

"So, you replaced that old piece of shit. What happened to him?"

"He's as good as dead just like you are."

Adisa smirked, then shook his head back and forth.

"I am seriously trying to be nice to you chief, but it doesn't matter as we will not have you for long."

Adisa then looked at the closest two boys by her side and ordered, "Drag her inside."

When Adisa entered the church, his ears started to ring out of nowhere and he picked up a faint and familiar voice as he grabbed his head.

"**Go into the backroom**"

His men looked at him weird but ignored his clear pain. He looked around and knew the voice he heard was not any of his men that stood with him in the church. Clearly this voice was the shadowed spirit inside of his head. Adisa worriedly looked at his men and then said, "Take care of our injured friend, then handcuff the chief anywhere it doesn't matter."

After speaking the leader rushed across the church and into the backroom where the homeless people ran into.

When Adisa made it inside of the small storage room with a broken bulb above his head, he looked around for the spirit, but didn't see anything.

Adisa spun around, his eyes scanning the empty shelves that lined the room. In the blink of an eye, the familiar spirit appeared before him. Despite having encountered this entity countless times, it still caught him off guard. The unsettling presence never failed to rattle him. He couldn't decide if he would ever grow accustomed to its eerie, otherworldly existence.

As soon as it appeared out of thin air Adisa's stomach sank to the floor and his hands became shaky.

"**Ameen is nearing close; He will stop at nothing to take you and your men in dead or alive. Act swiftly or else your friends will be gone in mere seconds. Do with this as you will.**"

Adisa took a deep breath in worriedness. He gulped and squinted his eyes hard then looked back up at the spirit, waiting for him to disappear into the night again.

The spirit had not strayed Adisa wrong yet so he knew he should listen to it.

Both of Adisa's hands stacked on top of the cold door handle, and with a sharp turn, he thrust himself out of the backroom. Rushing around the corner, he froze. His body went numb as his eyes widened in shock. What he saw was beyond comprehension.

Sitting in the pews of the church were his soldiers, their bodies bloodied and disfigured. Rigor mortis had set in; their lifeless shells riddled with bullet holes and their faces that were once full of life were mangled beyond recognition. Some mouths were open, others completely gone. The once vibrant boys now resembled grotesque statues, frozen in their final moments.

As Adisa stood at the pulpit, a single tear rolled down his face, though he didn't remember walking there. It felt as if he had simply appeared, his gaze never leaving the horrific sight of his fallen comrades. They stared back at him, their eyes vacant yet seemingly fixed on him as though he were their preacher or their god.

In front of the main doors, a pile of broken rifles lay scattered then the front door was ragefully busted down by Ameen. Adisa stood motionless, rooted to the spot, as the old chief walked down the church's aisle with his rifle pointed directly at him. Despite the bloodied black mask obscuring his face, the chief's eyes bulged with emotion, his anger most visible. The dried blood on the mask had turned brown, cracking like old earth.

Suddenly, the sound of a loud gunshot pierced around the tall walls of the church, and Adisa's eyes snapped open, revealing that he had been standing in the backroom the entire time.

The child, trembling, looked down at his hands, disoriented, unsure of what was real. Slowly, it dawned on him. What he had just seen was a premonition, most likely conjured by the spirit. His heart pounded as the weight of what could happen sank into him.

Adisa exited the backroom feeling the same cold metal his hands were seemingly on only a second ago. He left the backroom for real this time and ran to his men with his revolver in hand. Even when Adisa saw his

men standing like they were when he last saw them, their lifeless bodies still flashed into his eyes sitting in the pews.

Adisa looked like a plain crazy person with a revolver in his hand and breathing like he had just ran a marathon. The boy then shouted, “Ameen is almost here! He could strike at any time! Everyone get down!”

The boy’s looked at Adisa for a second in a state of confusion with some of the boys not knowing what Adisa meant.

Ameen was a name that was known around Utopia, a figure who held power. The boys couldn't understand why he would come after them and why he would attack them after being stripped of his ranking.

In Adisa's mind, the reason was clear, Ameen was trying to reclaim a glory that he never truly had.

-Chapter X-

Outside the church, hidden in the surrounding shrubbery, a vigilant silhouette raised his rifle, prepared to fire blindly into the rundown building, ready to kill any boy who might be inside. Thoughts ran through Ameen’s head, questioning if putting down children was morally acceptable. This thought was buried when he realized that child or not if he killed Adisa or dragged them into the department, he would be given back his badge. He would return to being the Town’s hero.

In Ameen's mind, they were savages without age, mere blips in time that ended in a painful flash that faded into nothingness if he pulled his trigger. The vigilante took a deep breath, steadying himself as his fingers tightened around his rifle. With a sharp exhale, he closed his eyes for a moment, centering his focus, then, in one fluid motion, he began to fire, the gunshots ripping through the church as he swept the barrel from left to right, relentless in his assault.

When the sudden barrage of bullets tore through the church, boys were sent scrambling for cover. They threw themselves to the ground, some already bleeding and others diving to the ground even if they hadn't been shot yet. One bullet ripped through a boy's leg and the next bullet went into the head of the injured boy who sat around the fire.

The church's sacred walls were shattered as glass flew in every direction, the violent storm of gunfire punching through windows and walls alike, turning the once holy site into a warzone.

Big colored glass pieces fell on the boys cutting their back sides as they breathed at the ground. Most of the glass fell under their bodies which they had to crawl on top of, trying to dodge bullets and get into cover. Boys started to fire blind rounds into the right wall of the church hoping it would luckily hit whoever was shooting them.

Adisa screamed to his boys, "Soldiers, Crawl to me!"

Boys dragged their injured friends and rubbed their bare skin against large sharp pieces of glass on the wooden ground. There was no way to avoid the glass, and the little soldiers just had to accept the slicing. Boys screamed or clenched their jaws to power through the pain of blood gushing from bullet holes or cuts on their skin. The rain of bullets did not seem to stop no matter how many rounds went off.

The gunfire from outside ceased only when Ameen paused to reload his rifle, the brief silence giving way to frantic chaos. Any boys who were fortunate enough to have a gun in hand when the shooting started laid on their backs, desperately firing through wood in a panicked frenzy. The shots flew wild, scattering into the empty space, but none found their mark. Noticing through the shot open windows that the boy's heads were not popping up like he expected, Ameen lowered his rifle and aimed at the foot of the church to let his bullets bite more victims.

Adisa while waiting for his men to crawl to him scanned the interior church with his fuzzy eyes for Chief Akoi who was nowhere to be found.

When boys started to catch up to Adisa's position near the pulpit, he waved them on as his army crawled towards the back room.

Dodging bullets Adisa's soldiers followed their leader in a concealed straight line on the floor. If any of the soldiers did not know where to crawl to, a red blood trail led them to the backroom. Even when bullets would halt for the camouflaged chief to reload, the boys still were alert on the ground. Their little hearts thumped through their ears while trying to not make too much noise as to not give away their position.

Adisa and a few other lucky boys made it into the backroom to look for an exit out of this church. Knowing that the homeless people entered this room and seemingly disappeared into thin air, Adisa knew that there was a way out of the room besides the door. Crawling across the blood-soaked floor, Adisa's gaze fell on a dark trail of blood seeping into a crevasse, vanishing into a hole in the wood. His curiosity piqued, he crawled closer, peering through the gap. Beneath the hole, he could see a loose dirt hill, leading into a shadowy, underground space. A smile crept across Adisa's face as he felt a surge of hope. Without hesitation, he shoved his index finger into the tight, warped hole. His finger bent awkwardly, but with a sharp tug, he pulled up the heavy plank. The loose floorboard revealed an unexpected passage, a hidden escape, their ticket to safety, and possibly a way out of the nightmare that had enveloped them.

"Hurry down before the shooting starts again," Adisa whispered.

The child leader hopped down onto the slippery dirt pile and waited at the bottom of the heap. One by one the boy's army crawled, then threw their body weight down the skinny hole onto the dirt pile and then slid down. Gunfire erupted once again, shattering the tense silence. The boys flinched, their bodies instinctively recoiling with each bullet that whizzed dangerously close, or as splinters of wood ricocheted around them.

By the time every boy had made it into the dirt basement, their breaths came in heavy gasps, the weight of their narrow escape sinking in.

The dark, cramped space offered a brief moment of respite, but the reality hit them hard with the loss of the injured boy leaving a heavy silence in the air. It stung deeper than any wound, the grief pooling around them, a reminder of the brutal cost of their survival. Boys were brutally injured but the adrenaline running through their bodies covered up their screaming pain.

There was no time to dwell on the pain from their battered bodies or the devastating loss of a comrade. Adisa knew that hesitation could mean death. Gritting his teeth, he let the surge of adrenaline take over, pushing his aching limbs forward as he plunged into the dark, dirt-lined tunnel. The shadows swallowed him whole, but the pounding in his chest reminded him that survival was the only option.

The group followed Adisa without question, their footsteps echoing in the narrow tunnel. They had no idea where he was leading them, but no one had a better plan

Adisa could very well be leading the lost boys to their deaths yet fear and desperation left no room for doubt. In truth, Adisa wasn't certain of his path and as the dark earth closed in around him, and though uncertainty gnawed at his mind, a faint plan was played with in his mind.

Leading his men deeper through the church basement, Adisa looked at his running feet and questioned what he was doing.

If someone had told him a week ago that he'd be crawling through a dark tunnel, hiding from a disgruntled ex-police chief hell-bent on killing him, Adisa would have laughed it off. Yet here he was, every frantic heartbeat reminding him just how quickly life could twist into something unimaginable.

While running, Adisa's thoughts derailed as his eyes locked onto an odd sight ahead.

Both homeless people from earlier were huddled together in a filthy, rust-streaked bathtub, their bodies tense and eyes wide with fear. The bathtub was probably used at one time for baptisms but was now occupied with vagrants.

In hard silence, the man shifted, instinctively pushing his woman behind him in a feeble act of protection. His trembling hands rose, palms open in surrender, though the confusion in his eyes remained.

Adisa's gaze, however, wasn't on the man's fearful expression but instead it was fixated on the braided chain hanging around his neck. A circular wooden pendant dangled from it, carved with intricate markings that radiated a spiritual presence. Something about it held Adisa captive, stirring something within him.

Around Adisa, the soldiers watched as their leader looked strangely at the homeless man and took the chance to catch a breath.

A faint sentence quivered off the vagrant woman's mouth, “Your soul is cursed. I see the *Devil* right behind you.”

Adisa stood in silence with the homeless couple forgetting about his army of men following behind him. His eyes examined the down and out man like he was another species of human. A species of human that had been done wrong by drugs and their government that had to go into hiding, leaving the normal way of life. In Adisa’s mind he could not do anything but feel bad for them. Him and his men were just as homeless as they were.

Adisa looked deeply into the man’s eyes and then spoke, “Tell me where we can get out here besides that back room or else the evil spirit will infest your soul.”

In a shaken voice the man responded, “Keep running where you are heading and there is a ladder that will lead you to the front room… Cursed one.”

Adisa gave the man a side glance and kept running.

After the Chief fired his third magazine off, he realized that there was no movement inside of the church. Rising from his kneeling position, he shoved aside the tangled brush that had concealed him. The leaves and branches snapped and rustled as he walked through them. Ameen moved with purpose, his rifle steady in his hands as he closed the distance to the church. His eyes locked on the side door, the only way in or out. Every step was pressed hard as his mind consumed with the certainty that his prey had no other escape.

His bayonet slid between the screen and the door frame and pulled it open, Ameen ready to be met with anything. He swept his gun from left to right; his eyes locked on the sights. Only when he reached the main hall did he pause. The rows of wooden pews loomed before him, their shadows stretching across the floor. Unease crept in as at any moment, a boy, or perhaps several, could spring from behind Ameen and send him to his maker. While clearing the pews his feet crunched on broken glass alerting whoever was listening for him right where he was. The sight of the dead injured boy shocked Ameen but he quickly dismissed it like it was nothing.

After methodically clearing each pew, Ameen’s focus sharpened as a faint, feminine grunt echoed from the far end, near the boarded-up main door. The sound was slight, but enough to set his nerves on edge.

Not knowing what was behind the seats, Ameen didn't let up on his gun and pointed it right at the distressed woman who was sitting handcuffed to the bottom of a wooden pole.

After recognizing this woman as Akoi, he let his gun down in a soft moment that was unlike the vengeful chief. His feet led him right in front of her view to which she then looked up into his eyes.

Red stains leaked through both sides of her dark uniform and when she looked into his eyes Ameen didn't expect her to remember who he was.

"Ameen. Why did you… Do this?"

Ameen set his rifle down with a soft thud, kneeling to her level. His eyes darted around, paranoia gripping him as he scanned the dark corners of the church, waiting for an ambush that never came. His gaze shifted to her chest, and his heart skipped as he noticed the badge pinned there, his old chief's badge, now worn by someone else. This deeply angered him, and he was confused as to why they couldn't have just waited for him to redeem himself before awarding someone else the reward of being chief. The redemption of his actions should have been inevitable, but the department was not faithful enough in his actions. Ameen remembered the good things he had done in his community and in his mind a woman taking his place was disrespectful. Not just any woman but Akoi, who was an ass kisser to the higher ups. He could not think of anything that she had truly done to help the community; all she was good at was pleasing other people and buttering them up. She did not have the fighting soul of leadership that he had. The amount of people that he had punished and arrested should have been enough for them to show more respect to his legacy. Although people may have liked her better, it shouldn't have mattered because he got things done in the city.

Ameen with her unrestricted hand grabbed her right side which had a bullet shot through it. Her teeth clenched while keeping eye contact with the barely recognizable Ameen. From her struggling body she ordered,

"Get me back to the station."

No reaction or movement to help his poor colleague came from Ameen who just stared blankly, watching her suffer and choke on her own blood. Akoi's eyes glanced over to the left of Ameen where movement lingered. The old chief could not take his gaze off the struggling women even when life slowly left her eyes.

Noticing that Akoi's view looked to his right, Ameen turned his shoulder only to be met with a gun barrel right in front of him.

While Ameen was squatting to examine Akoi slowly dying, Adisa had climbed the ladder with his men and unsuspectedly crept behind the wannabe vigilante.

Adisa kicked the gun that Ameen had stupidly put on the floor and then pressed the cold steel of his gun barrel to the man's cheek.

The boy childishly yelled, "Get the fuck up. Look what you've done to this woman! Your own officer!"

All of Adisa's men surrounded Ameen with their guns pointed in a circle in the open area of the church right before the pews. The old chief turned his head toward the lifeless woman and a heavy sigh escaped his lips.

He picked himself up and kept his hands by his head as he gave the armed boys all an unforgiving look. Adisa walked up to the man slowly and when he made it right in front of him, his little fingers grabbed the bottom of Ameen's mask and pulled it clean off of his face. Adisa got off his tippy-toes and when the vigilante's face was revealed, he looked ashamed, and a spout of laughter came from some of the boys who expected someone harsher looking.

The unseen demon that had killed two people and injured others was just a midlife everyday joe that had nothing special about him. His eyes blinked quickly and glanced at the floor instead of the boys mocking eyes right in front of him.

Ameen knew if he pulled out his pistol and shot Adisa right then he would be put down quickly, so he gave into whatever plan the children had.

Adisa gave a laugh at Ameen just as his men did even though they were injured and grieving.

"This is the man, who wears a bloodied mask to hide his weak face. He is no leader, instead a coward… Look upon the man who shoots from the unknown at boys with injured men!"

The Chief looked around seeing boys looking angered shaking their heads at the coward.

Adisa turned away from Ameen, his back now facing the man as he turned his attention to his own soldiers. His voice rang out, steady but filled with purpose, as he began to speak to them.

"We have no time to waste with getting this man to the station and retrieving Afia. Grab the woman and our fallen comrade to show the

department what this man has done. We will show them Akoi, then tell them in exchange for Paulo we will give them the man who killed her."

A thought popped into the chief's head while he stared down the neck of Adisa's defenseless head.

The boys were so enamored at Adisa that not one of them looked at Ameen as he quickly pulled out his 1911 from his back waistband and pressed it on the back of Adisa's skull.

Every soldier who had pointed their guns at the ground and relaxed now tensed up and pointed all their arms at the chief who was outnumbered but still deadly.

"Everyone drop your guns! If any of you try to stop this, I will blow your leader's little head off!"

Adisa slowly put down his AK-47, put his hands up and then spoke,

"Hold your fire, friends. Everything will be alright!"

The eyes of Ameen opened wide again and then he screamed into Adisa's ear, "And drop that revolver of yours too!"

Adisa had a soured face as he stared at his men and lifted the pistol out of his pants and let it drop on the floor.

After the revolver clattered against the wooden floor, Ameen slowly retreated, walking backwards with his hostage along the center aisle.

His 1911 pressed firmly against the back of Adisa's head, stuck to it like glue. Soldiers were stuck in place with their guns still pointed at Ameen not knowing what to do to save their leader. Ameen kicked open the side door with his heel and then exited the church while he held Adisa on the shoulder.

Paulo, who knew with Adisa gone he would have to temporarily take up the role of leadership, yelled to his comrades, "Rush to the broken windows and keep your guns locked onto the chief!"

The newfound leader picked up Adisa's revolver off of the ground as he scurried with his men across the floor and put it into his waistband.

In haste, the boys rushed across the shattered glass, their guns raised as they pressed them through the broken windows, aiming down at Ameen, who stood with Adisa still in front of him, a gun trained on the boy's small figure. With deliberate steps, Ameen began to back away, moving down the dirt road where the police had first entered the battlefield. Inch by inch, the figures of Ameen and Adisa grew smaller, swallowed by the encroaching darkness, until they vanished from sight entirely.

From inside the Church Paulo felt an awful sense of dread come over his body as soon as his leader disappeared. This group was only a few hours old yet had suffered a death and a kidnapping of their leader. Again, the thought that they had gone too far came over Paulo. But if they stopped now, they're group would be for nothing and their dead friend would never be avenged, just forgotten.

"Soldiers... Clearly this madman is taking Adisa to the police station and trying to turn him in for some sort of recognition. I know we are hurt but we must act now! If we do not push through and Save Adisa and Afia, we will crumble. We must beat them to the police station and stop any more of our men getting hurt."

A second wind came over the boys and they screamed once again and raised their guns. All the boys didn't have any time to waste; two boys grabbed the light body of Akoi then threw her out of the broken window which the rest of the men jumped out of.

After running in the forest for about only a half minute, Paulo stopped and silently held his hand up to halt his men.

His eyes caught sight of a police van, strangely still, sitting abandoned on the side of the road. It stuck out of place on the side of the road as it was a giant white block in the night.

Paulo moved cautiously toward the police van, his gun raised and aimed at the driver's window. The other boys closed in around the vehicle, their eyes scanning every inch, checking for any sign of life within. The air was tense, each of them ready for whatever might emerge from the silence.

At a certain point it was clear no one was in the van, so Paulo shot out the driver's window and reached his hands inside trying to grab the interior door handle and not cut his arm on glass. Once Paulo finally pulled open the door, he climbed inside, then shoved the side door open wide for his men to pile in. After they were all inside, they carefully placed Akoi on the van's floor. As she settled into place, Paulo's voice broke the stillness.

"Check if she has the keys!"

One of the boys who had dragged Akoi's limp body to the van pulled the keys from his pocket and tossed them across the van, landing them on the dashboard. Paulo scrambled to grab them, fumbling slightly before he shoved the keys into the ignition. The engine roared to life, and he quickly adjusted his seat as close as he could to the wheel for comfort.

Without hesitation, Paulo slammed his foot onto the gas with the van lurching forward. He jerked the brake hard, sending some of the boys tumbling toward the front of the van. Even Akoi's body slid across the floor, but a caring hand reached out and steadied it.

Though the soldiers had taken their fair share of bullets and returned fire in equal measure, it was Paulo's driving that seemed to be their nail in the coffin.

-Chapter XI-

The mayor sat in the back of his old Ford sedan, the vehicle a symbol of luxury to Nileville even if it was not that nice. With a meticulous motion, he opened the wooden cigar box sitting on his lap, its rich scent filling the car. He stuck a big dark cigar in his mouth, so dark that it looked black then he pulled out an elderly, scratched up Bic lighter to light it. His lips clasped around the cigar, pulling in a deep drag while lighting it before quickly unclasping, releasing a thick cloud of smoke into the air.

Cyril basked in the smoke that was calming to him as the car approached

the biggest house in Nileville which was located on the White Nile.

A man sat in front of the main large gate of the compound, and he held an Uzi in one hand and a pack of cigarettes in the other.

As the Police car approached the man shoved the pack of cigarettes in his front shirt pocket and yelled something unintelligible towards the inside of the compound.

The man wore an oversized cream-colored button-up shirt, paired with skinny blue jeans that clung to his frame. His eyes, a sickly yellow, squinted as cigarette smoke stung his vision. With a lazy wave of his hand, he signaled for the mayor's car to enter. The steel gate in front of them creaked open, its movements slow and uneven, as they rolled through, the sound of the metal groaning echoing in the quiet night air.

A cop car rolling into a drug dealer's compound was a very unusual sight and more than likely would have distressed an average citizen who saw it. While the mayor strolled in, the guards who walked around the compound locked eyes with the car. The glances they gave the officers were not friendly but also not completely malicious.

From the front door of the house a big silhouette waddled from the light and stepped down a couple of marble stairs.

Smoke came from the man's face while the mayor's men opened his car door. Once the mayor stepped out, he adjusted his loose tie and then turned his head to the big drug dealer who had his arms up. The mayor took the cigar out of his mouth and put his arms up as well as they gave each other a warm hug.

Cyril spoke first saying, "Rakeem! You big son of a bitch good to see you!"

Rakeem returned, "Mister Mayor you as well. What is the topic of discussion today?"

Both friends shook hands and then started to walk around the compound.

Rakeem rested his hand onto Cyril's back and then the mayor began to speak.

"Everything you are doing is good. Money is coming in nicely so no problems there. But I thought being that me and you are associates I would need to tell you some bad news. I know it has been the talk of the town about the child terrorists led by Adisa wreaking havoc but there are some distressing things I know about them that involve your business."

Rakeem let go of his hand lying on Cyril's back, then the large dealer looked in his eyes and started to laugh with a cigar in his mouth.

"What about those little pee-wees?"

“The child leader Adisa began speaking nonsense on his plan for this city. He said that he wants to clean the drugs off the streets. My good friend, who is a principal, overheard this and then confronted the boys. He was then brutalized by the little terrorists. He gave my brother a call before he was rushed to the hospital, and he told him about what they said. So, I feel it is my duty to warn you on what these boy’s plans are as it could be a risk for our dealings together.”

The whole time the mayor was speaking, Rakeem gave, “Uh-Huhs,” and “Yeas,” in response to what he had to say but did not really understand the severity of the situation.

His big body then stood in place, and he said, “Risk to our dealings? This is a joke, right my friend? A kingpin like me fearing some runts… C’mon you know me better than that.”

The mayor then sprung his finger into Rakeem’s belly in a show of power.

“These are not any children. They are armed to the teeth with AKs from God knows where and will kill anything that moves. My men are confronting them as we speak, and they could be dead. I have no clue. But in all honesty, I don’t have a lot of faith. They are demons!”

By the time the mayor had finished his sentence his voice had gotten louder, and his eyes had opened wider. The powerful kingpin blew smoke to the side of the mayor, then Cyril let his finger off his belly.

Cyril blinked a couple of times and shook his head, then he said, “I’m sorry friend, this has been a stressful ordeal for me and my men. I am simply warning you that is all I have to say.”

Rakeem kept a straight face and realized the mayor was not joking and was one hundred percent serious in what he was saying.

The big man then jokingly said, “Okay, I will take your advice Cyril. I will watch out for a dozen children with AK-47s. I hope what you're saying is true because my men will kill them with ease.”

Cyril turned his back to Rakeem and muttered from behind him, “If you take my warning as a joke your ignorance will end up killing you.”

Rakeem did not respond and took this as disrespect as Cyril and his officers entered their car and drove out of the gate.

He stood still in the dirt then he slowly walked over to his men standing at his front door. Rakeem wiped his sweat from his forehead as

one of his Narcos walked over to him and asked, “That lowlife seemed mad at you. Do we need to take care of him?”

Rakeem squinted his eyes and prepared a response to his goon.

“Everything is fine, nothing for you to worry about. Just those runts and the mayor being scared as usual and trying to scare others,” The man stopped for a moment as his underling shook his head, then he continued, “What the hell do you mean taking care of the mayor? You are dumber than you look.” Rakeem smacked his thug across the head with a sharp crack, then muttered a string of disrespectful words, his voice dripping with disdain.

Ready to turn Adisa in and reclaim his badge, Ameen dragged the cursed child through the forest nearing closer to the police station.

Adisa, struggling to think about how he could get out of this situation, knew he couldn’t convince the crazed chief to simply let him go.

“What are your plans with me once you take me in? You think they'll just take you back? Nileville’s police force is corrupt but even you are too stained for them.”

Ameen nudged his pistol into Adisa’s spine harder and exclaimed, “You do not know shit about us terrorist! You have caused more problems for this city than any soul in the force… Soon you will beg for forgiveness from God for your actions and for what we will do to you.”

Adisa knew that even through whatever the department had planned for him; he had to remain confident. Any sign of weakness, and his people, or anyone in the city, would cast him aside without hesitation.

For the rest of the walk to the police station, the boy smartly chose to remain silent.

As they passed the small fence encircling the station, Adisa caught sight of a pair of blinds shifting. Behind them, a curious officer stole a glance, his eyes narrowing as he observed the approaching pair.

Before Adisa and Ameen could make it up the steps to the door, the entrance busted open letting the dim light of the office shine out. Two officers emerged from the station, their wooden rifles leveled at Ameen, a clear response to a man armed when he shouldn't be. Both officers immediately noticed that the bigger man holding the gun to the head of the young boy was their old chief.

“Stop playing vigilante Ameen and give the child over,” One of the officers spoke.

“I have the pest you have been looking for. The terrorist known as Adisa Moses, who has killed our entire police force. I am here to bring him in as a token of my loyalty to this department and my want to show that I am ready to take back my god given right of being chief.”

The two officers exchanged a tense, knowing glance, the gravity of the moment etched in their eyes. They were all that remained, the last surviving officers in Nileville that could give any sort of order.

Gripping his rifle tight, the officer who spoke before shouted, “Give the child over now! Then you will-”

Halfway through the sentence coming from the officers mouth a set of bright headlights shined on all four of the men standing outside of the department.

A massive van packed with child soldiers careened through the dirt, skidding dangerously near the department’s fence. Its tires dug into the ground, nearly sending it onto its side before it violently veered left, kicking up a cloud of dust in its wake.

The van fishtailed wildly, nearly regaining control as it squeezed through the narrow fence opening, but its erratic momentum persisted, and its metal side screeched against the fence, leaving a trail of sparks as it tore along the barrier.

After dragging its side along the fence, Paulo slammed his foot on the brake, desperately trying to stop the van before it collided with the station. The boy had no grasp of the force it took to halt something so massive, barreling forward at that speed so the inevitable struck and the van crashed into the front of the station, narrowly missing the stunned officers.

The impact sent a thunderous crack through the air as the station's brittle stone wall crumbled. Chunks of jagged rock broke loose, cascading over the sides of the van and partially burying its dented body beneath the rubble.

Adisa observed the chaotic scene with a tense, almost amused smile, though worry lingered beneath it. The other men, however, stood rigid with their faces twisted with stress as the dust settled around the wreckage.

From inside the van Afia yelled, “Rush to the back!”

Which from the outside sounded like loud mumbles.

The two officers paid no attention to Adisa or Ameen and now pointed their rifles on the van. As its unburied rear door burst open, one by one, the disoriented boys stumbled out, their movements unsteady from the whiplash, each clutching an AK-47.

Noticing his comrades had diverted their attention to the line of armed boys, Ameen followed suit and aimed his pistol at them.

The boys, tense and ready to fire at the slightest movement from the officers, paused as a faint but unmistakable, "help," drifted from the crushed remains of the room, barely audible yet heavy with desperation.

A couple of boys directed their attention to the broken room then noticed a small black silhouette of a boy handcuffed into a metal chair that was now on the floor. One of the boys, his mind clearing from the haze of the crash, recognized the voice and silhouette. A wide grin spread across his face as he snapped out of his disorientation.

"Afia," he shouted, his voice crackling with relief and excitement, the name echoing through the air.

All the boy's looked over to their friend who for all they knew could have been dead and then Adisa shouted to everyone, "No one needs to die here! Save Afia before you save me!"

Ameen then pistol-whipped Adisa across the back of the head making his vision go black for a second and making his soldiers want to open fire right then.

The officers were outnumbered yet they kept their rifles aimed silently at the line of rebelling children in a standoff in the night air.

Two boys stopped aiming at the officers unlike the others and stepped over the rubble into the broken-down room to retrieve their friend. Both of their eyes were attached to Afia who looked battered as shattered stone laid around him. One boy aimed his gun down as he crept over to his handcuffed friend on the ground.

As the child's fingers grazed against the dusted stone below him, his attention was diverted to the metal door in front of him that busted open and revealed another officer who had his gun pointed right at him.

Noticing that the officer was not going to let up his pistol and his friend had his hands up, the boy across the room pointed his rifle at the officer and resorted to shouting, "Don't shoot! Hand us the handcuff keys and we won't kill you!"

The boy ordering the officer felt a sense of power surge over him, his eyes looking different.

Without a second thought as he was engulfed in fear the officer slowly began to put his gun down and thinking quickly, the boy who was closest to him rushed at him with a small knife he had in his pocket. The man pointed his pistol back up and before he could pull the trigger, the boy shoved the blade into the man's neck in a primal lunge and then moved out of the way of his blood. It would have been easy for one of the boys to shoot the man, but they knew if a bullet was fired it would alert the other officers outside and possibly lead to shooting.

His body dropped to the ground and quickly the boy ripped a ring of keys from his back pocket and rushed back over to Afia.

The boy with his rifle still pointed at the man felt jealous as he thought he would be the one to put the officer down.

Afia let out a sigh as the handcuffs were loosened off of his contorted arm. The boy on top of him then said, “Are you alright?”

Afia shot him a broken glance, his eyes showing a deep vulnerability, as if the weight of everything was about to crush him. He looked as though he wanted to cry, but the tears were buried beneath a mask of restraint.

His friend understood the unspoken message, releasing his grip on Afia’s arm with a quiet resignation.

As Afia struggled to his feet, the three boys both slowly made their way out of the room.

The sound of rocks being pushed against each other alerted the worried boys’ eyes back to the room and when Afia revealed his face most of boy’s wanted to let down their guns and throw him into the air in excitement. Nonetheless they knew a battle could ensue at any moment, so their rifles stayed straight, pointed up towards Ameen and the officers.

Afia sank into the back of the van, his movements heavy with exhaustion. Behind him, Akoi's lifeless body was hauled out by other soldiers.

At first the officers watching were confused and angered on why they had her body and saw it as a sign of disrespect from the savages.

Before any of the officers could yell anything to the children, Paulo shouted and let down her body into the dirt after she was recognized and said, “The man who brings you Adisa is the same man that took this poor woman's life. While she and the officers came into the church peacefully to

talk to our group, this wannabe vigilante started to shoot from outside, killing her and the rest of your officers while we hid. We children will not hurt people unless they hurt us! This man is the true terrorist! Killing his own officers! Give us Adisa and we will leave bringing no harm to anyone else. You reject this offer, and we will have no choice but to take him by force. This is not a battle you will win!"

Paulo knew what he was saying was a lie, but he said it with pure certainty that truly got into the officers' heads. The two officers looked at their old chief for a minute and gave him a judging look with bulging eyes.

Ameen shook his head around and then responded, "This is a complete lie! How will you trust these terrorists! They killed every officer and even Akoi! Why would I do that!"

Paulo then butted in, redirecting the confused officer's attention to him.

"You were jealous of Chief Akoi. Your motive behind all of this is to be chief again and let your violent reign continue! You are a liar and a shell of a man!"

The two officers knew that this was a battle they would not win and a battle that they did not even want to be involved in. Both of their eyes went hollow then one of the officers began to squat down and lay his rifle below him.

The other officer whispered to him, "What the hell are you doing! Giving up?"

The officer who gave up then responded, "If you want a chance to see your family when the sun rises, I recommend you put your gun down. We are outnumbered!"

The officer had planned to deliver a rousing speech to his comrade, urging him not to give up, to fight until the very end, even if it meant dying in battle. But as the moment settled in, an unexpected wave of realization washed over him. In a quiet, almost imperceptible gesture, he lowered his gun, his inner voice screaming louder than any words could.

Still in a line, Adisa's soldiers approached the front of the station with their rifles now only pointed at Ameen.

Chief Ameen, angered at what was happening while these officers gave up, looked down at Adisa's smirking head debating if he should put a bullet into the boy's head or not. In his mind if Adisa was dead this group would crumble even if he wasn't taken back as chief.

The thought of his Adisa's soldiers' morales being crushed as their leader got killed in front of their eyes appeased Ameen's violent mind.

His eyes closed right before the boys drew closer and he planned on pulling the trigger of his pistol resting on Adisa's head. Instead of a bang and blood splattering all over his arms, he was met by Paulo's wooden stock hitting right on his mouth.

Ameen had stalled for too long, his ego clouding his judgment. As the moments behind his eyelids had dragged on, he realized that while killing Adisa would offer a twisted satisfaction, it would ultimately seal his own fate. The thought of his own end was too much for his pride to bear, and with that, his finger stayed off the trigger resulting in him being knocked to the ground.

With Ameen's pistol helplessly on the ground, his once friends watched from the top of the stairs as the former chief was demeaned and kicked at. Adisa shifted his stance, watching as Paulo and two other boys wrestled to lift the chief, who thrashed and fought against the dirt outside the station. The station that was once Ameen's happy place and his kingdom to rule over was now being entered into by armed boys who he had sworn to kill.

Ameen and the two officers, defeated and disarmed, trudged through the station with guns aimed at their backs. Around them, young soldiers rampaged, smashing and shooting at the remnants of what had once been their pride.

The one cell that had not been broken down by the van, was now occupied as the three officers were thrown into it by the children to rot and to tear each other apart. Adisa watched silently through the bars of the cell as the two officers looked at Ameen with large eyes and tensed fists. Ameen sat in the corner, knowing that they were rightfully pissed at his mistake of killing Akoi.

As Adisa studied the three tense captives, the thought of killing Ameen for his humiliating attempt lingered. But he knew the wrath of the enraged officers would bring a fate far worse than death.

Adisa and the rest of his men gave smirking glances to the last officers as they walked by their cell and went into Afia's old holding cell.

The boys sprang from the crumbling wall, loose stones tumbling beneath their feet, before slipping out of the station.

By the time all of the boy's had left Ameen had segregated himself to the right side of the cell against the wall and the other two officers stood tall on the opposite side of the cell looking down upon him.

A small sigh came from Ameen's mouth while he was down against the wall. He realized his death, or a brutal beating awaited him as the officers wanted to appease his brother, so sarcastically said, "Good job surrendering to those delinquents. I bet my brother will be proud."

Without a word, one of the opposing officers rushed to the right side of the cell, bracing his left hand against the wall. With a swift motion, he drove his foot into the chief's barely covered face.

Blood splattered across the concrete wall as Ameen folded farther towards the ground, instinctively clutching his stomach in a futile attempt to shield his lingering injuries. Before he could fully brace himself, another kick struck him, this time from the second officer. Then, without hesitation, both men descended on him, relishing the opportunity to pummel their disgraced chief.

Ameen spat blood onto the floor, a bitter laugh escaping his lips, meant only to stoke their fury. The sound of his amusement, faint and taunting, made them hit harder. But soon, the kicks to his face dulled into a single numbing ache. Each blow landed on the knots and bruises already forming, the pain folding into itself like an endless echo. Between the violent impacts, he strained to draw breath through his fractured nose, knowing all too well that unclenching his jaw to breathe would invite a devastating, bone-snapping strike.

His grunts faded. The satisfaction his tormentors once drew from his reactions diminished, replaced with frustration. Determined to wring more agony from him, the first officer hoisted Ameen's limp body, locking his arms beneath the chief's bare and slick, blood-streaked armpits. The other officer seized the opportunity, driving his fists mercilessly into Ameen's abdomen. Each blow forced more blood from his mouth, spattering across his attacker's uniform. Yet the officer barely noticed as he was too consumed by the intoxicating rush of dominance to care.

Ameen's body sagged. He understood now that resistance was pointless.

His eyes fluttered shut, retreating from the grim reality. Behind his eyelids, fragments of his former life as chief played like distant memories.

The power, the respect, all of it slipped further away with every punch that drained what little strength remained.

And still, he couldn't see that any of this was his fault. In his mind, there was no shame, no guilt, only Adisa to blame.

The officer who was punching the defenseless man realized that there was zero reaction from Ameen so stopped and said, "He's gone numb. Let's just kill this motherfucker!"

From behind Ameen, the officer holding him told his ally, "Grab him."

Then, both officers switched places then the Officer who now stood in front of Ameen looked him up and down. His eyes noticed that even though his victim seemed to be asleep with his eyes closed, his jaw still stood tensed.

Noticing that the beating had stopped, Ameen opened his eyes wide and spit a long and thick stream of blood on the chest of the officer. The officer then punched the side of his already ruined face. His jaw still stood tensed no matter what the officer did.

He looked up and down his victim's body again and locked eyes with Ameen's barely opened eyes.

His entire face was grotesquely swollen, as if pumped with helium, with knotted lumps the size of mountains along the right side of his face and forehead. Though the left side fared slightly better, his swollen eyelid sealed his eye shut. His lips, unnaturally plump and distorted, jutted out like a botched attempt at plastic surgery, exaggerated to the point that it seemed he could kiss someone from across the room.

But what truly caught the officer's attention were the gashes carved into his stomach, stark and noticeable against the bruised canvas of his dark skin.

Without hesitation, the officer hovered his fingers just above Ameen's gashes, then slowly applied pressure. As his fingers sank into the wounds, the pain escalated, far worse than the blade that had carved them. The weakened skin felt as if it would give in beneath his touch, and the officer felt as if he could rip Ameen's stomach wide open.

Ameen finally gave in to the pain, exhaling sharply through his mouth as if trying to expel the agony from his body. Exhaling from his mouth felt fresh but he could practically taste his own blood in the air.

As the officer met his old chief's gaze, he saw Ameen's jaw finally loosening. In an instant, the officer yanked his fingers away from the wounds and balled his fist. Without hesitation, he charged his fist behind his head and hooked it into Ameen's jaw as hard as he could.

A loud pop echoed down the whole station and into the officers' ear which made them both cringe at the sound as Ameen's jaw was now out of place. The old chief collapsed to the floor, clutching his jaw as he grunted in pain, squirming on the cold ground.

His swollen lips and shattered jaw struggled to form words, but all that escaped was a string of incoherent gibberish. With his tongue he felt the teeth in the back of his mouth that were very loose. He then spit them out with blood drooling along his huge lips.

The two policemen looked down on the defeated Ameen who was as good as dead.

A surge of power, tinged with a hint of guilt, filled their minds as they hoped Cyril would be proud of what they had done. The officers cuffed the unmoving Chief to the bottom of the crappy metal bed on the right of the room and waited for the mayor to show up. They both had become tired and wanted to shut their eyes after a long day, but their minds could not stop. The guilt had started to set in, and Ameen laid on the concrete of the cell speaking nonsense, making them feel even more disturbed.

As both officers drifted into an uneasy sleep, they were repeatedly stirred by the sound of their victim still alive, his broken mouth muttering to himself in the dim cell. Each time he spoke, they would shout at him, desperate to silence the noise as they tried to rest for just a moment. The officer who remained more alert listened intently to Ameen's fractured speech, attempting to decipher the unintelligible language. He yelled for him to shut up, but nothing seemed to stop Ameen's ramblings. Despite the chaos, Ameen's eyes stayed shut, and he continued talking through the night, never once giving in to sleep.

For reasons he couldn't explain, Ameen didn't feel like this was the end. Behind his closed eyelids, he envisioned a guardian angel, reaching out, offering salvation from the damnation that seemed certain against his soul.

-Chapter XII-

Past midnight, the mayor abruptly busted through the door of the destroyed station.

He shouted through the slightly cracked front door with a pistol in his hand, “Is anyone here!”

The only sleeping officer woke from his short rest at the mayor's voice. He rushed to the bars of the cell, his partner right behind him, both of them banging desperately on the steel. From the floor, Ameen's laugh echoed, a low, unsettling sound that only deepened their fear and frustration.

One of the men frantically yelled, “In the first cell! Get us the hell out!”

The mayor and one of his officers ran through the ravaged station with his underling leading the way pointing his pistol and checking for any children ready to blast them.

When they made it to the cell with their friends in it, everyone locked eyes with each other in silence. The other officer that was with the mayor opened the metal door to the left and came out of the busted down room. He silently locked eyes with Cyril and dreaded telling him the news.

“Afia is nowhere to be found.”

The mayor lowered his gaze to the ground with a heavy sigh before looking up at the men in the cell. His brother lay motionless on the floor, seemingly unfazed, while the other two officers stood pressed against the bars, fidgeting like impatient children waiting for the bell to ring. With a swift motion, the mayor shoved his keys into the lock and spoke coldly to the officers.

“Where the hell is the rest of the department and why is my brother here?”

The cell door creaked open, and the officer who had stayed awake most of the night spoke up, sensing his friend’s hesitation to deliver the news to the mayor. His voice was quiet, his eyes fixed on the ground as he spoke, avoiding the harshness of Cyril's gaze.

“All of our officers on the operation to capture Adisa were killed… Ameen brought Adisa to us in exchange for a return to being Chief then Adisa’s soldiers crashed into the side of the station while we were speaking with him and then took back the hostage. They stole the police van from our operation after the death of everyone at the church. The children told us that Ameen killed our officers while they were in conversation with the children. Of course, Ameen said he did not do that and instead that the children killed everyone. The children forced us to surrender our arms, and we did as if we did not, the last of our department would have fallen.”

Silence in the room was loud after the officer gave a recount of what had happened.

The officer's words were quickly cut off when Cyril turned sharply, slamming his fist into the stone wall behind him. His neck tensed, and his knuckles bled profusely as his hand bounced off the hard surface. His anger cooled down and he turned around then ordered his officers, "Let me speak with my brother."

They didn't resist and quickly jumped out of the cell, never wanting to leave work so bad. Ameen could not talk so the surrounding officers thought maybe the mayor would take pity on his kin and put him out of his misery. All four officers marched down the hall of the ruined station, preparing themselves to clean up whatever mess the terrorists had left behind.

In the cell, Cyril stepped inside, approaching his brother with an offer. Ameen, broken and battered, wished for mercy, hoping his brother might show some kindness to his depraved soul, though deep down he knew that death was more likely than salvation. The old chief groaned, a wave of frustration and helplessness welling up inside him.

Each step Cyril took toward him only intensified Ameen's dread. He braced to be picked up and thrown around, or worse, being kicked once more on his bruised stomach. His bloodied body trembled in anticipation of his brother's wrath, but instead of the anticipated violence, Ameen felt Cyril's breath close to his face. The mayor knelt beside him, offering a brotherly tap on the shoulder.

Ameen's body recoiled at the simple touch; his mind unable to reconcile this normal, caring gesture with the torment he had just endured.

"Brother, you are a warrior like no other. Even though everyone may have died, you are still here and that is what matters. You went out of your way to attack Adisa and his troops even though you were not supposed to. That shows your leading spirit shining throughout everything!"

At this point in the mayor's talking, he almost wanted to laugh at how much he was lying as in reality he was spitting lies to lure his brother back under his wing.

"Ameen. You will be the one to kill Adisa."

The struggling Brother's head raised up, scratching against the dusty floor to look up at his guardian angel. His shattered mouth uttered a happy, "Wau," trying to say "What."

“My brother, you will lead Adisa astray tonight and hold his dear mother hostage. When he enters the building, you will kill her and her demon son. Once you do this, you return to me and regain your badge. You will save Nileville and then we will rebuild our department.”

In pure glee, Ameen put his arms on the ground and shakingly raised himself up. Cyril backed away and then Ameen looked at his brother and tried to tell him to give him a gun, pointing at the mayor’s holstered hip. Even though his tongue sounded like an alien language, Cyril still knew exactly what he wanted and that was to kill Adisa and anyone who stood in his way even if he was extremely injured. The pleasure of killing and feeling that spark of power from within would carry him to complete any task.

The mayor looked at his brother’s face and then said, “Open your mouth and keep still.”

Ameen was confused at this command but still achingly opened his dislocated jaw the best he could. Cyril placed his thumbs at the two tops of Ameen’s jaw and then felt around with his eyes peered to the side and then pushed in hard, reseating Ameen’s dislocated jaw.

Ameen wiggled his jaw around and tried his best to be happy even if he still looked like his face had been pumped up. His brother started to dig in his pocket and then Cyril said, “One more thing.”

From within his suit pants pocket, he pulled out an old, cracked Swiss army knife that he had owned since he was a little boy. He unclipped the Knife and then held the left side of his brother's head. His blade, which was recognized by Ameen, sliced the giant blood sac that filled his brother’s left eyelid. Blood splashed on the old blade and the mayor’s hand, which he then wiped off on his pants.

He expected his brother to grunt, to show any sign of pain from the slice, but instead, silence hung heavily in the air.

In a rush to get his brother out of the station, Cyril placed a hand on Ameen’s back and hurried him toward the exit. As they passed the shot-up walls, Cyril glanced at the destruction, appalled by the devastation. Reaching his car, the two brothers stood in the stillness, only the distant chirping of crickets breaking the silence. Cyril reached into the backseat and retrieved Ameen’s etched pistol, handing it to him.

The moment the cold metal settled into Ameen’s hands, a familiar surge of power flooded through him, just as it had in the past. The feeling

never lost its grip on him. He checked the magazine — fully loaded, as expected.

With a final glance toward his brother, Cyril then scribbled a note with the address of Adisa's apartment written on it and handed it to his brother.

"Don't Disappoint me brother. Reclaim your spot."

Ameen did not turn back to see his brother, only focused on getting his spot back as Chief, walking deviously into the night.

When he walked away, his old Colleagues gave him dirty looks from the front of the station, but he did not care. He could have easily shot the two officers who beat him in the cell, but his mind was not on that.

As scurried further from the station, Ameen fantasized about how he would kill Adisa and his mother. The thought of Adisa seeing his mother fall lifeless to the ground tingled his inner sense of depravity. Then the cherry on top would be watching the young terrorist's life be sucked out of his body right after.

From the outside looking in, Ameen looked defeated and on his last limb while he limped and scuffled through the city streets. But on the inside Ameen felt like he had never felt before. He was one hundred percent sure that this would be Adisa's last dance.

While the New Year's Eve sun rose, Ameen's soul became more and more depraved on the hunt for his unsuspecting prey.

-Chapter XIII-

Adisa stood in the shadows of an underground chamber, the air thick and heavy. The dim light barely reached the edges of the room, where the familiar spirit awaited him. This was the being that had granted his desires, elevating him to the position he held now. Yet, there was no trace of anxiety within him, only an overwhelming sense of triumph, a satisfaction that coursed through him.

He couldn't grasp the specifics of their conversation, the words slipping away like whispers in a dream, but he knew it was important. Then, without understanding why, his gaze dropped to his right hand. His fingers curled tightly around something; strands of short, curly hair tangled in his grip. The severed head he held dripped blood onto the darkened floor, which he seemed to not care about. He didn't even think to see whose head it was. The spirit's presence was far more compelling.

They spoke a while longer, the spirit's voice reverberating in the silence, and then, it said loud and clear the only words Adisa could remember.

"**Show them**."

To his right, a staircase flared to life, bathed in an ethereal glow. From above, a cacophony of screams and shouts echoed down, not of agony or despair, but something gleeful and ravenous. The sounds beckoned him. Step by step, he ascended

As Adisa emerged, the searing sunlight assaulted his eyes, the brightness unnatural, as though the world itself was set ablaze. The wooden floor beneath him creaked with age, its planks haphazardly scavenged from

forgotten places. When his vision cleared, the sight before him struck him harder than the light ever could.

A mass of people stood; their faces contorted with feverish delight. They howled and cheered, their teeth bared, their eyes unsettlingly white. The people craned their necks, reaching for the spectacle Adisa held in his hand. The sound of their shrieking grew unbearable, a symphony of madness that pierced his skull. Yet still, they cheered for him as he was their champion, their deliverer.

Desperate to end the tormenting noise, Adisa lifted the head high above him. Instantly, the crowd hushed. A wave of eerie silence swept over them, but their twisted grins remained. Mouths gaped wide, as they yearned for the head's skin.

It was then that Adisa turned the head towards himself, and the face revealed its dreadful truth.

The head was his own brother Abel.

His brother's vacant eyes stared back at him; sorrow embedded deep in their lifeless depths. The expression was devoid of anger—only resignation.

A wrenching sickness twisted Adisa's gut, panic surged through him, and without thinking, he flung the head into the crowd.

Like starved dogs, they lunged, and hands clawed desperately, each one intent on claiming the gruesome prize. Silent arguments broke out, limbs flailing in the struggle. Then, as if on cue, one person emerged victorious, clutching the head aloft. The crowd's hungry stares fixated on it and then, in horrific unison, they descended.

Teeth tore into flesh. Skin stretched grotesquely before snapping apart. The head jerked and twisted, consumed piece by piece, but no sound escaped the mob. Only the visceral gnawing of jaws and the wet tearing of sinew filled the air.

Adisa's knees threatened to buckle. The monstrous spectacle unfolded before him, yet the spirit's words echoed again.

"**Show them**."

The young leader woke up in a sweat with the hot morning sun hitting his skin through the van's front window. He looked around sharply and saw his army of men laying in the dented-up police van on top of one another

asleep. His mouth let a sigh of relief out, realizing that his dream was just a dream.

No matter how much he dwelled on the dream, he couldn't grasp its meaning, especially since Abel hadn't crossed his mind in so long.

The last time he'd even thought of his brother was when he passed him and his men on their way out of his home. He never sought conflict with Abel, but if his brother ever stood in his way, he wouldn't hesitate to handle him swiftly.

After thinking about his brother, he knew that it would be best to write a letter to his mother before he went off to another battle with his men against Rakeem. It would be easy to stop by and speak with her, but he knew she'd try to stop him as she was likely already worried sick. He couldn't fault his mother for that, but he still knew she'd only stir up trouble. Instead, Adisa decided to write her a letter and leave it at the apartment before they rode off to battle. The only problem was finding paper and something to write with.

Adisa looked over the dash and saw the smashed in hood of the van. They now hid deep within the forest, far from the church and the police station, praying no one would catch sight of them. Survival had been a stroke of luck. The boys were fortunate to have made it this far alive.

It was New Years Eve and Adisa knew that tonight would be the night that they would win the people of the city over with the body of Rakeem, the biggest drug dealer in the city. Everybody knew who Rakeem was and what he was about so Adisa knew if he showed his dead body to the people they would see him as a savior. He would then promise them his plan for the area and how he would lead Nileville to a brighter future.

On the van's dashboard rested a red and white pack of cigarettes with a matchbox loosely secured to it with a rubber band, a remnant left behind by an officer. Being curious he grabbed the pack, which was light, probably holding less than half of the cigarettes that it came with.

The pack rested on his lap as he reached over to the passenger-side glove compartment, carefully angling for a glimpse inside, hoping to find paper to write on. He eased the latch open, mindful to keep it as quiet as possible as Afia was lightly asleep in the passenger seat, his breathing steady.

Inside, a clutter of police documentation filled the compartment, with a blue pen clipped to the topmost sheet. Without hesitation, Adisa pulled

the stack free, then softly shut the glovebox. The papers landed in his lap with a faint rustle, joining the pack of cigarettes.

Adisa quietly exited the van with his newfound pack of cigarettes and police papers, flipping around papers, trying to find one that had a blank side.

He sat down in the barren dirt and sifted through papers until he found one blank side of a yellow ticketing paper. His hands carelessly threw the other papers down in front of him, then he opened the top of the pack of cigarettes to reveal only a duo of lonely cigarettes standing side by side on the right of the pack.

Adisa freed a match out of the box then lit the wrinkled cigarette which hung now off his mouth.

In most of the action movies he and his friends would sneak and watch the hero would usually smoke a cigarette which Adisa never fully understood why. For a moment, he considered what his mother would think if she saw him drawing smoke into his lungs, but quickly, the thought passed as he didn't have to worry about her judgment anymore.

When he sucked the smoke into his lungs, he gave a cough out and then took the cigarette out of his mouth. He stared at the white stick, the burnt, earthy taste still lingering on his dry tongue. For a moment, he considered crushing it into the ground, ending the bitter experience right there.

Now he really questioned why in god's name someone would smoke these. He snapped the long cigarette in half, crushing it into the dirt, before steadying himself to write.

As he took out the blue pen from his pocket, a slight warmness went over his hands and head which felt quite nice. An unexpected urge to give the cancer stick another try swept over him, and before he knew it, he was lighting the last one in the pack. With the cigarette dangling from his lips, he began writing to his mother, each puff of smoke swirling in the air as his thoughts took shape on the paper.

'*Dear Mother,*

This may be the last time we speak but that is a maybe. I have been fighting the evil in this town for the last couple of hours and I will not stop until I destroy it all and rebuild a new beautiful city as it should be. By the time you

get this letter I will be on the way to kill the kingpin this town knows as Rakeem. Once I do this, I will restore balance, and we will all live in heaven on earth. I am sorry it has to be this way, but I have been chosen. I love you. -Adisa'

The cigarette had been smoked down to the filter and Adisa flicked it away. He then folded the letter and threw it into his back pocket.

Adisa made his way to the back of the van and opened the back door swiftly. He looked at the pile of flesh in the back holding their rifles like stuffed animals and screamed in authority, "The sun has risen! Soldiers get up!"

Boys raised up, some pushing their friends over and unsticking their sweaty bodies that were glued together. The boys that did not get up were quickly shaken awake by their comrade who laid next to them, as they showed them mercy not wanting Adisa to get angry. One by one they held their rifles up and scooted out of the spacious van. All of the boy's exited the van and wiped their eyes from tiredness. They got into their natural formation of a cultish circle around Adisa. For some reason to most of the boy's unknown Adisa had a glowing aura to his being as the sun beat down on his skin.

Adisa had become the morning star.

He drew the boy's close with everything he did and made it hard to say no. It was almost supernatural.

"I know I have woken you up early but today is a big day. As most of you know, today is New Year's Eve. This night usually is a night where people gather around and are excited for the planet to make another loop around the ring. People make wishes for their year that are never fulfilled because they don't have faith within themselves. That is the difference between us and Them! Tonight, we will make a change! We will kill Rakeem and clean the streets of drugs which flow through it like a river. We will bring his head to the people and show them that change is possible! Our force will be seen as heroic, and the people will finally see what we are about. We may be children, but we will not stop at anything to achieve what we want! Let us train now!"

Adisa knew that while his men had proven themselves decent shooters so far, the battle ahead would demand more than just luck. They needed training.

Deep in the forest, he carved rough body silhouettes into the bark of the trees, shaping crude targets for the boys to aim at. The drills were simple yet relentless, a test of speed and accuracy.

Shot after shot echoed through the woods, the crack of gunfire mingling with the rustling leaves. Before long, the carved figures had all but vanished, the relentless bite of 7.62 bullets splintering the thick trunks until little remained but shredded bark and scattered wood chips.

Before the boys knew it the day had flown by like it was nothing and the sun began to set. The soldiers had enjoyed just practicing in the forest and shooting guns with their friends on tree silhouettes instead of actual people. Some of the boys, haunted by the weight of the lives they'd taken, saw the faces of their victims even as they practiced. Every pull of the trigger sent a pulse of dark nostalgia crawling beneath their skin. A reminder that the cursed metal in their hands could summon death with a single twitch. Everyone was dreading the battle that was before them when the sun fell. Rakeem was a well-known and feared drug dealer who had hurt the lives of a lot of people.

You had to be living under a rock to not know of his travesties. When he would come onto the main street, he would be in nicer cars than everyone else, even nicer than the mayor's and go into stores with men who would openly carry firearms. No normal person could do this in the city, and it was clear to anyone with half a brain that they were in cohorts with the police department. In broad daylight Rakeem would walk on the sidewalks with his men on the side of him holding Uzi's and police officers would walk by and act as if he was not there. Rakeem was clearly not a rich man by hard work and good favor, instead it was well known that he was a drug lord. If you were a man who worked hard and showed kindness you would not have a fraction of the wealth that someone like Rakeem had.

Rakeem's home was on a long road outside of the city while Cyril's was right outside on a hill but still separated. The fat house held two

wrap-around porches on the top and bottom story where armed men walked in circles.

What made the house most outlandish was its obscurity, few even knew of its existence, and if you ventured close enough to glimpse the towering walls that hugged the compound, it was said you would vanish.

Adisa had never seen Rakeem or his compound, but the countless legends surrounding the man painted a picture of what he would be up against.

According to stories, Rakeem was a secretive figure who had lived in the house since the city's first days. Though the years had supposedly piled on, his body remained stubbornly youthful, as if time itself dared not touch him. This myth thrived because, in Nileville, every trace of the

never-ending drug trade was linked back to Rakeem. His name was whispered like a curse, and parents wove cautionary tales about him, warning their children of the misery his poison spread. In this city, drug use wasn't just a problem, it was part of its bones. It felt as though Nileville had been born with addicts already slumped against its cracked sidewalks.

The more fantastical rumors claimed that Rakeem maintained his youth through the sheer force of his power. They said he fed off the ruined souls of his victims, draining their will to live as they surrendered to his drugs. Some even compared him to a vampire, cursed to linger for eternity, sustained by the destruction he sowed.

Adisa didn't buy into the idea of Rakeem as some immortal creature. He knew better. The truth was far simpler, and more terrifying.

Power, unchecked and absolute, had twisted the man into something monstrous. The people believed every whisper about him because fear had left them no choice.

Legends aside, Adisa was certain of one thing, this would be no easy battle. Rakeem's compound would be fortified, and the man's influence would ensure a fierce defense, but Adisa had made up his mind. No amount of myth could stop him now.

Adisa hopped into the driver's seat of the silent and tight police van full of young warriors and started up the car. Behind him his soldier's readied their rifles and made sure they're magazines were loaded to the maximum. A somber silence consumed the whole van, and the boys had looked as if they had been through hell in the last few hours. Little sleep, guilty consciences and warfare made them look as if they had been hit by a train. The warriors had dirty pants and bloody skin making them look even worse than they felt. Age on the boy's face had faded away and they at least looked five to ten years older.

Even though the drive from the random spot in the forest to Adisa's apartment was not a long one at all, the anxiety in the air made time slow. On the short but long drive to the apartment not one word was exchanged between the comrades.

-Chapter XIV-

Still limping down the street, Ameen passed many cars and pedestrians along his path. Cars would speed past, tires screeching, while pedestrians shot him nervous glances, their faces twisted in fear as they caught sight of his unsettling silhouette. His demeanor was violent, and blood was dried all over his body. The face on his head was so twisted and contorted that it seemed almost deformed, with every knot and crease giving the impression of a grotesque, disfigured mask. Walking all the way across the city was a long route and his pounding head did not make it any better. His body felt utterly useless, every muscle screaming, but his mind refused to relent. It urged him forward, pushing him to continue despite the exhaustion. If he didn't press on, his status as chief would slip away, and that thought alone was enough to drive him. Him giving in to the grueling pain and stopping would put him on the level of nothing. With no drive to move and take his spot back, he was as good as dead. He would become just another forgotten soul, wandering the streets, homeless and invisible.

Before reaching Adisa's apartment, Ameen passed the building where Adisa had claimed his first victims. As he walked by, his eyes lingered on it, and memories of his past life as a regular chief flooded back, a time when things were simpler, before the darkness took hold. The transformation had been swift, from a respected police chief to a shirtless man, aimlessly walking the streets in search of his enemy's mother to take hostage.

In his mind, it was for a good cause no matter what.

When he made it in front of Adisa's apartment, its shadow engulfed his body.

Deep inside, Ameen knew what he was doing was wrong. His stomach growled, a reminder of his actions that were yet to come, but that part of him was quickly silenced. The thought of the outcome, his restoration of power, overpowered any sense of guilt. The angel on his shoulder had been crushed by his own hand, leaving only the darkness to guide him as he made his way to Adisa's final resting place.

Without hesitation, Ameen sprinted up the flight of stairs, reaching the third floor where Adisa's mother lived. The climb was a blur, his mind consumed with one singular thought, the look on Adisa's face when he saw

what had been done to his mother. That moment would satisfy him in ways nothing else could.

Ameen's index and middle finger knuckle knocked on the old door of Adisa's apartment. He knocked three times, each strike against the door louder than the last, but there was no response. Frustrated, he turned his head to the left and noticed a short hallway next to the stairs. The silence was thick, and with no one in sight, he walked over to the window at the end of the hall. From there, he peered down at the front of the apartment, waiting, waiting for an answer to his knock or for Dara to return home from work.

In a blur of over three hours of waiting Ameen did not think she was hiding in the room. It seemed more likely that Dara would stumble up to the door after her workday, as if she had been hiding in the room, unaware of the danger outside. Adisa would have come to save her in the time Ameen waited, but neither he nor his mother could have known what was about to unfold.

Before Ameen knew it the sun had taken a rest, and the night moon took over the sky. For hours, he stood there, frozen, doing nothing but staring ahead, trapped in a trance, his body trembling and his eyes wide. He had left behind the ordinary reality that most people lived in, slipping into a fantasy world where he replayed every twisted scenario of what he would do to Adisa and his mother in that apartment. Ideas flooded his mind, one after another, each more brutal and satisfying than the last. The thoughts were intoxicating, but he knew that the real act, when it was in his hands, would feel even better.

His deep, vengeful trance was stopped when the sound of innocent heels clicking up the stairs from the bottom corridor pierced his thoughts, each step echoing closer.

Throughout the day, countless footsteps echoed in his mind, and people passed by his motionless form without sparing a second glance. To them, he wasn't a person, instead just some lifeless body, propped up by forces beyond understanding, but for some reason, these particular steps, the sound of heels stood out.

His ears seemed to twitch, like a wolf sensing its prey, as each step drew nearer. With every sound, his heartbeat quickened, pounding in his chest, until finally, her figure emerged into his line of sight.

Dara had a dark blue dress with dark stripes along it and short black heels. In her hands held a brown burlap sack of fruits. It appeared from her outfit and her powdered up face that she had not come back from work but instead some sort of New Years gathering which she must have left early. Even if she looked dolled up, her eyes were red, and it was evident she had been crying a lot.

She walked right past Ameen and didn't bat an eye and then stuck her keys into the front door of her apartment and unlocked it.

Ameen slipped out the moment she unlocked the door, stepping swiftly to her side. Her wide eyes locked onto his, terror swelling in them. Dara opened her mouth to scream, but before a sound could escape, Ameen's large hand clamped over her lips, swallowing the cry.

With a forceful shove of his foot, the door swung open, and he dragged her inside her own home.

Footsteps echoed from the staircase that made Ameen paranoid. He cursed under his breath and quickly shut the door, twisting the lock into place as his victim squirmed around.

Dara thrashed in his grip, her dirty heels kicking wildly and falling off, but his hold was unrelenting. She tried to scream again, anything, any sound, but it was strangled against his palm.

The apartment swallowed them whole, shadows stretching as Ameen tightened his grip. Ameen unholstered his 1911 and pressed its cold steel against her temple. His swollen lips curled as he spat a quiet, "Shh."

Dara sniffled, shaking her head frantically no.

A sudden knock at the door froze them both.

Ameen's grip tightened, his breath hot against her ear as he whispered,

"If you scream, I'll shoot you first. Then I'll shoot whoever's out there."

Keeping the gun pressed to her head, he dragged her toward the door. His pulse hammered as he leaned down, peering through the peephole.

After a quick examination, he realized the hallway stood empty.

Ameen's gaze darted around, suspicion creeping in. With a sharp inhale, he yanked Dara backward, retreating into the dimly lit living room.

Without warning, he hurled her onto the couch. She landed with a gasp, the cushions barely softening the impact.

The barrel of his gun never wavered as he continued to aim at her defenseless body.

Ameen then walked backwards with his gun still pointed at the defenseless woman. Paranoia gripped Ameen as he glanced through the peephole once more. His pulse hammered.

Without hesitation, he flung the door open, using the doorknob to propel himself into the hallway, pistol sweeping left to right. His vision wavered, hands unsteady, but the hall was silent and empty.

Still wary, he scanned up and down, searching for any movement, seeing nothing. Except, his eyes caught something. A yellow piece of paper, folded and covered in writing, laid on the floor.

His gaze scanned around once more before he snatched it up and slipped back inside, shutting the door behind him.

The dim glow of the apartment's single light flickered on, casting long shadows. His stomach knotted as he looked at the couch that was now empty. Ameen tensed, pistol raised, anticipating an ambush from Dara. He crushed the letter in his fist, shoving it into his pocket as his legs carried him toward the living room.

Then in a blur of movement, Clay shattered against his face. Dara's vase slammed into his head, exploding into big, dull shards. Pain ripped through his already battered features, but he barely flinched.

Dara staggered back, thrown off balance from the force of the hit.

With a grunt, Ameen swung his pistol at her, but she ducked, his strike slicing through empty air.

She then bolted for the door.

Her exhausted fingers brushed the handle but missed, then Ameen lunged, seizing the thick braids at the back of her head. With a vicious yank, he wrenched her backward and hurled her to the floor.

Her back slammed against the ground then she screamed, "Somebody, help!"

As Adisa stepped out of his apartment, a distant shout echoed from above. He froze, squinting up the corridor.

For a moment, he hesitated, stepping back toward the stairs, ears listening in.

Only silence came.

A breath later, he shook his head realizing it was nothing. Just his mind playing tricks on him.

Without another thought, he turned and left his apartment.

Ameen grabbed Dara by her throat and raised her up, making her swing her legs back and forth. Her vocals stopped and reverted to unintelligible cries as she struggled to break free of his violent grasp. Ameen let his arm's strength go down a bit and let her feet touch the ground while still dragging her. His feet stepped over the broken vase on the floor and made it to the kitchen where he sifted through cabinets. The second drawer he checked was a junk drawer and had exactly what he was looking for. Ameen grabbed the roll of black tape and yanked his captive back toward the living room. This time, he set her down less violently, but the cold barrel of his gun never wavered, aimed straight at her. With his teeth, Ameen tore off a long strip of duct tape, the harsh rip slicing through the silence.

Dara whimpered, silent tears spilling down her cheeks as she watched, helpless. Ameen's hands wrapped around her head, binding the tape over her mouth in tight, suffocating loops. Not once did his body resist—not a single nerve told him this was wrong. He moved methodically, taping her hands behind her back, then her legs, securing her like a trapped animal. She lay motionless on the couch, stiff and helpless, her breathing shallow. Ameen rolled her onto her side, then reached into his pocket, retrieving the crumpled letter. He smoothed it out, scanning the paper which he recognized as an empty police ticket. Flipping it over, he found the message.

A slow, eerie chuckle rumbled from his throat as he realized what he was looking at, his fingers tightening around the page. What was written there rattled something deep inside him. Piece by piece, he shredded the letter, letting the torn scraps drift to the floor like discarded ash. Not another word left his lips.

He sank onto the couch beside Adisa's mother, his grip firm on the pistol, his hollow gaze fixed on the door, waiting for his small enemy to come inside.

-Chapter XV-

Adisa got back into the police van with his soldiers inside. He let out a sigh when he got in, regretting not even checking on his mother.

When he set the letter down and knocked on the door, he felt guilty. In his mind, He wasn't man enough to even speak to his mother in what could be his last moments. Feeling awful, he again debated running back up to his apartment and speaking to his mother but ultimately decided not to. The thought of this decision would stay in Adisa's mind forever.

The van, packed with boys ready to die, crept closer to Rakeem's compound on the outskirts of the city.

Through the dark night, Adisa and his men passed homes where people gathered outside, drinking in celebration of the approaching new year. Laughter and music drifted through the air, blending with the sharp crack of gunfire. In Nileville, firing rifles into the sky was tradition as it was

cheaper than fireworks but just as loud. Bullets rained upward in bursts of reckless joy, filling the night with chaos. Sleep was rare on New Year's Eve. It was easier to join in on the noise, and tonight, Adisa knew he would add to the thunder.

Before the van reached the long straight road leading up to the compound, Adisa parked to the side of the stretch and ordered his men to, "Follow the trees leading to the compound!"

Each one of the boys hopped out of the van and then began going into the darkness of the forest leading to the compound. Moonlight was the only thing illuminating the boys as they moved, their footsteps light, their breaths measured. They ran through the trees, staying low, swallowed by the darkness. As they neared the compound, still hidden within the forest's shadows, they spotted a lone guard standing at the entrance gate.

He was of medium build with an Uzi clutched in restless hands. His body swayed slightly, unable to keep still, as if he had started drinking long before the New Year had even arrived.

The boys moved closer to him, getting as close as they could to the ground without crawling.

Paulo set his rifle against the thick trunk of a tree and wiped the sweat from his brow. His fingers raked through his hair, tousling it further, making himself appear even more ragged.

Then, from the dense void of the forest, he stepped forward. Hunched slightly, arms wrapped around his torso, he walked toward the narco guard, shivering like a stray. The man, dressed in a gaudy, flower-patterned shirt, stiffened. His Uzi snapped up and his barrel leveled at the child.

"What's your business, bum child?" The guard slurred, his voice thick with drink.

Paulo faltered, his voice shaking. "M-Mister… I'm cold. Do you have any food?"

The drunk man barely holding his standing stance pointed his Uzi down and began a long laugh.

As the man was laughing at the homeless boy, Paulo stepped slowly closer and closer to the man trying to see how stupid he was. The laughing man's chuckling stopped when a blade began cutting into his soft stomach like butter. He opened his eyes to see Paulo stabbing into his stomach repeatedly with a demonic smile on his face. Blood came from the man's

mouth as he choked on it and then he fell to his knees in the dirt not making much of a sound.

Adisa and his soldiers exchanged grins before darting forward, pressing themselves against the tall stone wall beside the gate. From his cover, Adisa peered into the compound, his eyes locking onto the imposing square mansion at its center. He scanned the area and saw no guards, no movement. It was almost too quiet.

The boy reached for the massive gate; its iron frame mounted on heavy wheels. He gripped it, testing its weight, pulling it back and forth. To his surprise, it shifted. No lock. No chains. Nothing to stop them.

With careful precision, Adisa cracked the gate open just enough for the smallest boy to slip through with their rifle in hand. One by one, the others followed, moving like shadows into enemy ground.

Inside, they raised their weapons, sweeping them across the empty courtyard, fingers twitching at the slightest flicker of movement.

Right as the last boy made it into the compound a loud, “Hey,” was shouted from on top of the mansion’s roof. Adisa was the first to react. Without question, he fired, the loud shot cracking through the night. The alerting man dropped over himself, his long rifle clattering to the ground.

Moving in a tight, single-file formation, Adisa and his men advanced toward Rakeem’s house, with weapons raised, but on the rooftop, the wounded narco wasn’t finished. Gritting his teeth, he scrambled to his feet and staggered toward the door leading inside.

Pain lanced through him and his legs almost quit from beneath him.

He tripped down the narrow staircase, limbs slamming against the rough but thin walls. By the time he reached the bottom, his body was wrecked, blood dripping from his mouth. Still, he forced himself forward, dragging his body back up against the wall. He knew he had to warn his men, before it was too late.

In the room where the shot man was trying to get to, Rakeem and the rest of his men played poker unsober letting the room fill up with tobacco and weed smoke. The men sat around a table, drunkenly playing poker in a bright room as they did most nights, guns resting casually in their hands. They drank like sailors, but tonight, New Year’s Eve, was different. Tonight, they swigged their bottles like it might be their last night alive.

A static-filled TV played in the background; a channel tuned to the reporters preparing to show the famous ball drop in New York City.

Then, out of nowhere, a gunshot that sounded like it was right outside the walls shattered the night.

Rakeem, sitting at the head of the table, put down his cigar and almost scooted out of his chair in disbursement. He then shouted, “What the hell? Was that outside?”

He was the only one visibly shaken. The other men barely reacted as they knew the drill. It was New Year’s, after all and Gunshots were a part of the celebration.

“Boss, it’s just New Year’s. Nothing to worry about,” one of them said, dismissively.

Rakeem smirked, pointing at the man with his cigar reclaimed in between his fingers.

“You know what? Even if someone *is* outside… who gives a shit? We’ll crush them like ants!”

Laughter erupted around the room, but it was short-lived.

In a split second, the door leading to the rooftop exploded open. A man, blood pouring from a gunshot wound to his stomach, fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

The room went still.

Men scrambled out of their seats; confusion written on their faces. They looked around, not sure what was happening. Rakeem, still holding his cigar, pushed past his soldiers and towards the fallen man. He grabbed his crony by the collar, shaking him harshly as if he was his enemy. The big man showed no sign of care for his suffering subordinate, just cold anger and questioning.

“What the hell happened!”

After his boss screamed in his face, the shot dealer let blood spill out of his mouth in a structured line then he spoke.

"Kids..."

As the crony gasped out his last words, the room was suddenly hit with a violent crash. The door burst open, little feet kicking it in, and in an instant, Adisa and his men stormed in. They kicked down the main door and jumped through windows, filling the space with chaos.

Their rifles unleashed a torrent of bullets, their shots striking the drug dealers with cold indifference. Before any of the men could even react, they were gunned down by the full-auto fire coming from all directions. Beer bottles exploded in mid-air, and poker chips and cards scattered like confetti across the room.

Adisa's men flooded the space, some shooting over their comrades' heads, relentless in their assault.

In the chaos, Rakeem scrambled toward the staircase, hands trembling as he tried to open the door. A bullet slammed into his side, sending him stumbling forward with a howl, his body tensing from the impact, but the big man still waddled up the stairs.

Every man in the room was on the floor and had quickly died. Adisa and his men redirected their fire to the white stairway door that was now shut. A drunken Rakeem continued his climb up the stairs with a bullet in his side and leg.

The door to the rooftop slammed shut behind Rakeem as he sprinted across the shadowy rooftop. His eyes darted below him, where a shed sat just beyond the edge of the roof. He could make the jump, but he'd have to slide down his slanted roof first and he wasn't sure how much weight the shed could take when he hit it.

He readied himself; eyes fixed on the shed's top as he prepared for the leap. Before he could move, the door behind him creaked open and slammed shut. Rakeem closed his eyes and spun around as his heart raced and then he came face-to-face with Adisa. In the darkness, the child's

silhouette loomed like a shadow, rifle aimed straight at him, the barrel unmoving.

Adisa was so still that Ameen wondered if Adisa was even breathing, questioning if the almost supernatural child was a demon spawn.

With a quick but painful reflex, Rakeem yanked out his pistol and prepared to fire, but before the shot could reach its target, Adisa's return fire struck him square in the stomach.

The pain was immediate and blinding.

Rakeem dropped his pistol, eyes wide with shock, and he staggered backward, his breath coming in dry gasps as he stumbled toward the edge of the sloped roof.

"God damn you," uttered from Rakeem's mouth as he kept his eyes on the boy, not feeling as if he had enough strength to turn around.

With his rifle still trained on Rakeem, Adisa studied the man and thought about how he expected to be at least a bit intimidated by the man. What he saw instead was disappointing as Rakeem wasn't the legend Adisa had imagined. He wasn't a powerful figure to be feared. He was just a big, greedy man who had the power to make a difference for his people but chose not to.

Adisa childishly laughed in his realization and then said, "Your reign is over fat man. You now will be forgotten by people and not feared. Once they see you dead in the dirt of our city's streets, they will see you as the sad talentless man you are, not an immortal kingpin who will infect the streets of our city till the end of time. A new era of flourishing is upon us. A Utopia will be built on top of the scraps and ashes of this old, depraved age!"

Rakeem took a final look down at his bleeding body then responded, "I have been running these streets for too long just for some child to stop me. A child who thinks he can do whatever he wants! An ill child who thinks he is going to change this city. I am a king around these parts, with legends surrounding my name! Even if you kill me, you will never truly get rid of the need for my product, even if it comes from different hands! I truly am immortal!"

Adisa, tired of listening to the man's rambling, raised his rifle with cold precision. He fired, the bullet tearing through Rakeem's thick arm, the force of the shot cracking the bone.

Without hesitation, Adisa pulled the trigger again, the bullet sinking into Rakeem's stomach. Then, he fired seven more times, each shot pushing Rakeem further back, his body stumbling and flailing in desperate attempts to stay upright.

With a final, painful stumble, Rakeem's back hit the sloped roof. The momentum sent him sliding, tumbling off the edge.

He landed with a sickening crash onto the metal shed below, but it didn't stop his large body. Instead, his weight broke through the roof, sending him plunging into the shed in a tangle of rusted metal. Inside, the wreckage of the shed his body was impaled and lifted up by, a pitchfork, a jagged piece of rebar, and a shovel. As he fell, the sharp tools impaled his torso and sliced the bottom of his left leg off.

Blood pooled on the concrete beneath him, his lifeless form propped up on a metal bucket, surrounded by discarded gardening tools and machinery.

Adisa peered over the ledge, watching his prey. Rakeem's eyes stared blankly up at the sky, devoid of life, as his body lay motionless, impaled and broken.

The man who had once struck fear into the hearts of everyone who heard his name was now nothing more than a corpse, trapped in a grave of rusted metal. Riches, power, and fear, everything he'd built, meant nothing now. The wind whispered through the night, carrying Rakeem's soul into the unknown, leaving nothing but silence behind.

The front doors of the mansion exploded open, and a wave of small boys rushed out, drawn by the loud crash they had heard to the right of the mansion. They sprinted across the yard, adrenaline fueling their curiosity, until they reached the broken shed.

Their eyes widened in awe at the gruesome sight before them, but their excitement quickly turned into a race as they fought to be the first to

get inside and see what lay within. Above them, on the mansion roof, Adisa stood tall, watching. With a grin, he shouted, “Now the fun begins!”

At the sound of their leader’s voice, the boys erupted in cheers, their spirits lifted. They danced around, throwing their guns into the air in celebration, letting the cool night breeze whip through their clothes.

Adisa turned, ready to descend into the mansion and regroup, but just as he approached the door that would lead him downstairs, something caught his attention. A sudden gust of wind brushed down his back, sending a shiver down his spine. Instinctively, his hand tightened around his rifle, and he pointed it toward the door. From the shadows, a familiar figure emerged.

“**You’re so close, Adisa**,” the spirit’s voice echoed, wispy and haunting.
“**The people will be consumed by your energy, drawn to your leadership. They’ll put their trust in you once they see this, once they witness what you’re capable of. This house—this place, it will serve your trade, a foundation to support your people.**”

The figure stepped closer, the shadows swallowing his form, but his words lingered.

“**Your crown is within reach. It’s right on the horizon, waiting for you… But there is still the head of this city. The mayor will try to wrap his snake’s tongue around you; around everything you love. He is the final obstacle between you and Utopia.**”

Adisa looked at the friend’s shadowy figure then the boy spoke, “It is closer than ever, I feel it. The mayor will be gone next.”

Melting back into the shadows, the spirit left, its presence fading like a wisp of smoke. The uneasy feeling that had gripped Adisa’s spine began to lift, the air lightening as the figure disappeared. Without a moment's hesitation, Adisa sprinted past where the shadow had once stood. He flung open the door to the stairs, his feet pounding against the floor as he descended into the staircase below.

Inside of the folded tin flat of the shed's roof lay the dead Rakeem who was thought to be unkillable. Boys awed at the sight of the legend dead with metal struck through his entire body. A soldier grabbed Rakeem's severed leg, lifting it off the ground, and pointed it toward his comrades, expecting them to recoil in fear. To his surprise, none of the boys flinched, even as he jokingly brought it closer to them. One of the boys, unimpressed, casually smacked the leg away. The soldier blinked, shocked by the lack of reaction. Five boys worked together, trying to slide Rakeem's body off the jagged metal stakes, each move causing more blood to spill across the floor. The task was a heavy one, as Rakeem weighed well over two hundred and fifty pounds. With a final, strained effort, they managed to free him, the blood pouring out of him in waves.

To transport the body, two boys grabbed each of his arms, their hands trembling under the weight as they began dragging him toward the van. They switched off often, giving each other breaks, but the task felt endless. Finally, the boys reached the mansion's large white doors. As they swung open, Adisa stepped through, his eyes scanning outside, a quiet authority in his presence. The boys quieted, then Adisa began to speak.

"You are dragging that fat son of a bitch? You all are out of your mind. How about we grab the van, then we drive it here and put the body inside."

Adisa started to laugh and even the boys that were struggling to drag the body with a sweat on their foreheads started to laugh as well. Rakeem's body was dropped onto the dirt, then the group split in half with Adisa taking a couple of boys to the van and the rest staying at the compound. While walking to the van feeling victorious, one of the soldiers asked Adisa, "Is this our house now?"

Adisa responded and said, "After we get rid of the mayor, yes. We can refurbish it, and anyone can live in it."

The questioning boy shook his head up and down. As Adisa glanced at the boy, a sudden realization hit him. He had forgotten this soldier's name. The boy's face, like so many others, had become a blur in Adisa's mind. It was as if, over time, everyone in his group had blended into an indistinguishable force, each boy becoming just another faceless soldier.

Names and identities had faded, replaced by a singular, overwhelming purpose.

Adisa found himself momentarily disturbed by the thought. How had he allowed himself to lose track of them? His friends who he had played with most of his life. The boys were no longer individuals in his eyes; they were just bodies, tools in the fight for control. He shook off the thought, refocusing on the task at hand.

While entering the van, another boy asked Adisa, “Why do you get to hog the driving privileges.”

Adisa lifted his eyebrows at his soldier and said, “Remember what happened the last time a boy drove this van that was not me”

At the house, most of the boys still did not believe that Rakeem was even dead. The immortal legend was rammed into their ears their whole life and now he lay powerless with no life left in his eyes. Paulo picked a stick off of the ground and used it to lift Rakeem’s eyelid. When no reaction came from the big man, Paulo finally believed that he was dead.

Adisa’s van creaked to a halt in front of the house, where a group of bored boys lingered around Rakeem’s mangled body. From the back of the battered van, a few boys threw open the doors and waved for help. The five boys around Rakeem struggled to lift him, his immense weight making the task nearly impossible. Three more boys jumped out, and together they hauled his lifeless form toward the van, while two others assisted from inside. When they finally managed to shove Rakeem into the back, the entire van sagged under his weight, bouncing with little effort.

Adisa looked into the back to see what was going on and said, “Even without a leg he weighs that much!”

This time the boys did not end up laughing.

-Chapter XVI-

When the van left Rakeem's compound, every boy was ready to ride into Nileville to celebrate with the people of the city who would rejoice at Adisa's leadership and Rakeem's death. Adisa drove the same way through the city seeing all the same sights that he did before. While approaching his apartment, Adisa had the thought to see his mother and invite her to celebrate. Maybe if he finally showed her what he was doing she would finally be proud of his ways.

Adisa pulled up next to his apartment abruptly confusing the rest of the boys in the van. From behind Adisa, Paulo asked, "Aren't we going into the city?"

Adisa opened his door then looked back at his comrade.

"I need to see my mother. I will be quick then we will ride into town."

His gaze caught Afia, who had remained in the van throughout the entire raid. His eyes, glossy and distant, were fixed on a single spot inside the vehicle.

No one in the van questioned what Adisa was doing and let him walk off into the apartment. Each step he took up the stairs his stomach started to hurt more and more. For some reason he started to feel like something was wrong with what he was about to see. He brushed it off as anxiety from how his mother may act. His eyes locked onto the door as he let out a heavy exhale before pushing it open. The moment he stepped inside, his stomach twisted as blood had trailed across the floor, leading toward the living room. His eyes widened, and without hesitation, he yanked his revolver from his shallow pocket, gripping it tight. With his arm

outstretched, pistol steady, he moved slowly through the house, every step careful, every breath controlled, until he saw them.

Ameen sat calmly in the dim light, filthy, drenched in blood, his wild eyes bulging out of his skull. His breath crackled through clenched teeth; his lips curled into a sickening grin. Adisa was now frozen.

The couch, once a place of comfort, was now stained with blood. Dara lay bound in duct tape, her expression eerily calm yet hollow, as if terror had drained from her body, leaving only exhaustion.

Ameen pressed the barrel of his pistol against her head, his fingers steady, his presence suffocating.

Adisa's grip on his own gun loosened as fear sank its claws into him. His mouth opened, but no words came. The weight of the moment crushed him, and for the first time in a long time, Adisa felt powerless even after he had just felt victorious in a battle.

"Let-"

Adisa choked on his words and stopped his sentence to gulp.

Ameen could feel Adisa's fear and fed on it as he was starving.

"Let her *go*!"

With his other hand, Ameen held down Dara's head to taunt him.

Adisa broke out of his frozen state and lunged at Ameen who he wanted to kill with his bare hands. His body stopped him in his place when he noticed the gun that Ameen held had its hammer slightly move as if it was going to shoot. Ameen teased the trigger of the pistol to intimidate Adisa and get a taste of revenge.

Even though his face was mangled, Ameen still had an eerie smile going from ear to ear. Ameen knew that he could not talk but still tried saying a malicious insult in gibberish. Words came out of Ameen's mouth and Adisa did not understand what he said but knew it was something that he did not taste before he spit it out.

It seemed like the chief was about to spew more nonsense, words Adisa would have to endure just for a chance to save his mother. Instead, Ameen broke into sudden, maniacal laughter, his head dropping as if he were lost in some twisted high. The moment his eyes shut; Adisa lunged.

He aimed for Ameen's head with his revolver steady, but the old chief snapped out of his fit just in time, knocking Adisa's hand aside. The shot went wide, tearing into Ameen's shoulder, yet he didn't so much as flinch.

Instead, he shoved Adisa with unnatural force, sending him sprawling across the room.

Before Adisa could recover and get up, Ameen pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through his mother's chin, her head bursting in a gruesome spray against the couch.

A pain of one thousand punches crushed Adisa's stomach, forcing out a raw, war-torn scream. Ameen chuckled, amused by the boy's despair, watching him charge without a thought for his own survival.

Adisa's eyes burned wide with fury, his grip tightening around his pistol.

He could have pulled the trigger and ended it right there but instead, he chose another way to kill the chief.

Ameen pointed his pistol at Adisa while still sitting next to his dead hostage on the couch. His finger pulled the trigger of his pistol which sent a bullet right over Adisa's right shoulder. Adisa ran towards Ameen like a rabid dog, uncaring about the bullet that almost hit him.

As Ameen tried to fire off his third and final round to kill Adisa, his hand was gripped and wretched aside by the young savage. The vengeful boy moved Ameen's arm knocking his pistol out of his hand where it fell on the floor. Ameen overpowered Adisa with a swift punch to the stomach, sending the boy sprawling to the floor, his pistol still clutched in trembling hands with tears streaking his face. Gritting his teeth, Adisa pulled himself up as Ameen bent over from the couch trying to reach his fallen pistol. Without hesitation, Adisa kicked him hard in the face, snapping his head back, then raised his own gun with two hands and slammed the wooden grip down on the crown of Ameen's skull.

The chief grunted, collapsing onto his stomach, his hand still clawing for the pistol, his last desperate hope. Adisa didn't give him the chance as he fired a bullet tearing through the center of Ameen's palm, pinning his fate in place. Ameen clenched his teeth, biting down on his tongue so hard that blood pooled in his mouth, refusing to cry out.

With a sob of rage, Adisa brought the grip of his revolver down again and again. The wood cracked against bone; each impact duller than the last as skull fragments splintered away. Blood mixed with tears, dripping from Adisa's face onto Ameen's broken body.

Ameen's last vision was the grimy floor of Adisa's apartment, his own blood spreading beneath him. Hearing the pounding against his head grow fainter, swallowed by the darkness that finally took him.

Adisa cracked through Ameen's skull, finally killing Ameen who had killed one of his comrades and killed his own mother. The young boy turned his victim over to see a disgusting blank face that still looked accomplished at its actions.

Ameen could have easily shot Adisa when he entered the room and then killed his mother but instead did it the other way around which led to his death.

Adisa tore his gaze away from the lifeless body of Ameen and turned to the couch. His breath hitched as he looked at His mother who lay still, her head ruined where the bullet had torn through, the entry wound below her chin, the exit a grotesque cavity. Her lifeless eyes had rolled back, leaving only the whites exposed.

With trembling hands, he ripped the tape from her mouth, as if freeing her lips would let her speak. One word, one breath, anything would give Adisa relief, but the silence was absolute. She was gone.

Adisa stared at her face, still frozen in fear. Even in death she hadn't understood why this had happened. She had died confused, unaware of why the chief had done this to her, oblivious to the war her son was waging.

And now, there was no bringing her back.

Adisa turned away, hoping and praying that when he looked back, she would say something.

The silence remained. Then, his eyes fell to the floor. Scattered among the blood and ruin were the torn remnants of his letter, the last words he had written for her, meant to bring some form of closure, some sort of comfort. Now, they were nothing but wet, crumpled scraps.

His chest tightened, kneeling, he gathered the shredded pieces in his trembling hands, his breath stopped before breaking into sobs. He looked up at his mother, his voice cracking as he spoke, though he knew she couldn't hear him.

“I am sorry Mother. Utopia will be made for you...”

He took a deep breath and began crying some more as he wished so badly that she knew what he was saying.

“This is my fault. I ruined your life! Our life! Why didn’t I at least come inside and say goodbye?”

Adisa punched the bloodied couch as he sobbed and let out a blood curdling wail, wishing it would be his last.

He crawled up the couch, his arms wrapped around his mother’s body that was soon to turn cold. His tears mixed with her blood while he sobbed on her stomach like the young lost boy that he was.

The door behind Adisa slowly opened and two males were talking gleefully as they walked in. Adisa got off his mother’s stomach shakenly and grabbed his pistol and then kneeled on the corner before the hallway. His heart raced, and his breaths deepened as two shadows stretched across the kitchen wall. One was the figure of an adult, the other, a child. It wasn’t one of his soldiers as they weren’t holding guns. Adisa’s eyes fluttered shut for a moment, his mind racing with possibilities. He turned the corner quickly, and there, standing before him, were his brother and uncle. He rested his gun down and then brokenly said, “Don’t.”

By the time this had happened the duo were in view of the travesty and Abraham covered the innocent Abel’s eyes, but he had already seen enough. Abel saw his dead mother wrapped up in a cocoon on the couch and the fallen body of Ameen. When Abraham covered his nephew’s eyes, Abel tore his fingers off his face and shouted, “Ma!”

With an open mouth Abraham let Abel run to his mother and grabbed Adisa hard on the arm. Abraham then said through his teeth, “How in god's name? Did you do this?”

Adisa did not answer Abraham’s question. Instead, he wept, his grip loose on the pistol in his trembling hands. Abraham took this as a sign of guilt, so He tightened his fingers around Adisa’s arm, and he raised his free hand, ready to strike. The boy’s sobs quieted. Slowly, he lifted the gun, barely aiming it at his uncle. Abraham looked at the pistol that was pointed

at him and hesitated.

A wail pierced the tense silence; Abel's fresh cries filled the room. Abraham's gaze shifted to the body on the floor, the lifeless form of a man he did not recognize. He turned back to his nephew, who still held the pistol with an unsteady hand.

His voice was low but seething, "Was this you? First, you run off, leaving violence in your wake, and now you bring it home!"

His breath came heavy, rage brewing in his chest.

"I don't care who you think you are. If you killed her, I will strangle you with my own hands."

He stepped toward Adisa, undeterred by the pistol. His body shook with anger, fists clenching at his sides, ready to crush the boy.

Adisa's eyes, red with grief, lifted to meet his uncle's. His voice cracked,

"I didn't do this," His fingers readjusted around the pistol, "Chief Ameen, the man on the floor, he did. He was hunting me and my men... and then he found her... He killed Mama. Right in front of me."

Abraham shook his head, pressing his fingers against his eyelids as if trying to block out reality. To his side, Adisa broke into sobs once more. Abel lay beside his mother's lifeless body, his breath shallow, his mind too tangled in grief.

Noticing his nephew's silent torment, Abraham stepped past Adisa without a glance, moving toward the boy he now truly had to protect. He placed a firm, reassuring hand on Abel's arm, offering comfort only to him—never to Adisa. Abel melted into his uncle's embrace, his tears halting, replaced by a hollow ache. His mind wavered between grief and rage, uncertain whether to break down or lash out.

Murder seemed to shadow his brother's every step, and in his heart, he blamed only one person. Without Adisa, none of this would have happened.

Abraham had never cared for Adisa beyond the labor he provided. He saw him as nothing more than a shadow of Abel—someone who would never be half the man his younger brother could become.

Adisa set the gun down and turned toward the door. His steps were slow, heavy. As he reached the opening, his voice trembled towards his family.

"I'm sorry."

He then walked out, leaving behind a family that would never forgive him.

When Adisa made it to the car his men were lollygagging in the back of the car talking about nonsense and what they would do when they get rich. Adisa silently entered the car and boys got into order quickly. In the motion of a robot, he sat down and stayed still for a moment staring off as his ears rang. He wished so badly to cry but knew he had to swallow his emotions if this revolution was to work.

The boys behind him quickly realized that he was covered in fresh blood and that something was wrong. Before any questions were thrown to Adisa, he muttered, "My Mother has passed. The chief is dead now. He escaped from that cell. We should have killed him."

Boys looked at each other in reaction to Adisa's haunting and monotone voice that showed no emotion. It was like he was speaking the same way as Afia who was giving the same spacey look in the back of the van.

"I can't let this stop me. I must do it for her."

The whole van was silent until Paulo from behind Adisa spoke, "I am sorry about this Adisa. I bet you it was the mayor who let him free. We must kill him next. But we can put off tonight, maybe you need some rest friend."

Adisa then shoved the keys into the ignition and broke into a high but still blank voice, "No! No rest! We must show these people tonight!"

His words sent shivers down the boys as this aggressive tone that broke from his calm demeanor was scary. The boys knew Adisa would do anything to take his revenge and kill anyone involved with this.

Adisa threw the car into reverse, startling his comrades as the tires screeched. Without a word, he sped off into the night, vanishing into the

darkness. The boys exchanged uneasy glances; their nerves rattled. No one knew what Adisa might do next. They understood that this loss would weigh on him, no matter how hard he tried to maintain his composure as their leader.

Still, some felt relief. Some boys were glad that they would continue with the new year's plan because sleeping next to a rotting dead body all night did not sound fun.

-Chapter XVII-

In the heart of the city, people laughed and danced, with small torches flickering like fireflies in the night. The lucky ones held sparklers, their tiny bursts of light a rare luxury. Performed traditional music filled the air, and hundreds gathered to drink and celebrate, clinging to the joy of the coming new year. Few had wealth, but they knew how to make the most of what they had, even if, by morning, they'd be back to toiling for scraps.

Through the crowded streets, Adisa's vehicle rolled like a shadow creeping over the festivities. He turned to his men, his voice sharp with command.

"Open the back and fire rounds into the sky, it's time they put their attention on us!"

Instantly, gunfire cracked through the air, tearing the night apart. Townsfolk screamed, their joyous celebration twisting into chaos.

As the van rolled into view, the crowd tensed. They recognized it instantly as a police van. Panic shook through the streets. Cigarettes were stamped out, drinks abandoned, and people scattered, wanting nothing to do with the city's most hated enforcers.

When the van jerked to a stop and the driver's door swung open, the fleeing citizens hesitated. Instead of officers, a young boy stepped out with an AK-47 in his grip.

Silence gripped the once lively crowd. This wasn't the police. This was something far worse.

Most of the people had heard of Adisa and his escapades with his violent terrorists. Fear gripped the crowd, yet they couldn't look away. Their instincts screamed at them to run, but something about the young revolutionaries held them in place, like moths drawn to an open flame.

Adisa climbed onto the dented hood of the van, then hoisted himself onto its flat rooftop, standing tall above the people. His men lined up beside the vehicle, rifles in hand, their faces unreadable. They wanted to smile, wanted to revel in their moment, but they knew better.

Then, with a heavy creak, the van's back doors swung open.

Gasps shook through the crowd. There right in front of them, on his knees was Rakeem, held upright by three boys.

Murmurs spread like wildfire of disbelief, horror and awe. No one had thought this was possible. Yet here he was, a legend brought low before their very eyes.

Some people felt as if what they were seeing was out of a dream. Every noise turned into a staticky whisper.

Standing above the crowd, Adisa's face was a mask of confidence, but his mind was trapped elsewhere. He couldn't shake the image of his mother, her lifeless eyes, the stillness of her body. The raw pain ate at him.

On the surface, he looked ready to speak, but inside, doubt twisted through him like a blade. Was this truly justice, or had he only buried himself deeper in blood? In just two days, he had sent more people to their graves than he could count. The weight of it pressed on his chest, heavy and suffocating. He even wondered if his mother's death was a sign that he had gone too far.

Then he looked out at the sea of faces before him. More than he had imagined. A tide of bodies, all with their eyes locked on him.

Adisa swallowed hard then spoke, “Over the past few days the people of this city have heard a lot of things about me and my boys. I would like to clear things up! Me and my friends started this movement with an end goal of changing this city.”

Adisa coughed and looked around once more then continued, “We were all raised with little to nothing, most of our lives as we knew it was school or labor. I realized that my family did most of the same things that I was doing when they were children and noticed that nothing changes around these parts. It is an endless cycle of working for poverty then dying until the next generation is born to repeat it. Our lifespan on this planet is limited so why do we do it doing things we hate? I told my men this truth and my words struck into their hearts. We armed ourselves and pledged to clean this city out to start new. The revolution started in our schooling institution then we moved to the main street to get supplies. The reactions were harsh, we did not want to hurt anyone that day, but the worst happened, and lives were lost. Me and my men had a shootout with our corrupt police department who then followed us to the church outside of town where another battle ensued. We tried to make do with the department but were interrupted by the violent Chief Ameen. The man who has done more damage than any one of us soldiers combined yet parades around thinking he is a peacemaker. After the battle at the church only four officers survived including Ameen. He ran off and took my dear mother’s life. I ended the savages suffering in an act of revenge but also as an act of revenge for this entire city! Everybody knows someone who has been affected by Ameen! He was a psychopath willing to harm anyone that got in his way!”

People were now looking up at Adisa with a sense of admiration as the people began to realize they were watching history unfold right in front of them.

“As most of you see, below me the body of Rakeem lies. This is a token of my forgiveness to my people that we have unintentionally harmed. The immortal Rakeem who affected many people as well, is dead! Now let

us continue this celebration of the new year knowing that a big step has been taken to get rid of corruption in this city! This is now Utopia!"

The crowd erupted in celebration, cheering and jumping with unrestrained joy. A new era had begun as Rakeem and Ameen were gone, and with them, the old order. People rushed toward Adisa and his men, hoisting them into the air, their voices rising in triumph.

At first, some of the boys resisted, still wired from the bloodshed, their hands instinctively clutching at their weapons, but as the people's embrace tightened, their wariness faded. Laughter broke through the tension. For the first time in what felt like ages, they let themselves enjoy the moment and put down their guns, if only for a while.

Adisa watched it all unfold; his plan having worked better than he could have imagined. The people were mesmerized by him, drawn to his presence like metal to a magnet. Their faith in him was absolute. Memories of past mistakes erased in an instant, as if his victory had rewritten history.

Adisa had always known this day would come. Yet as he forced a loose smile across his face, he couldn't escape the weight pressing on his chest. His mind refused to let go of what had happened just minutes ago inside his own home.

Still, the people cheered. Hands pressed drinks into the boys' grasp as they were tossed up and down in celebration. The boys took them without hesitation, the law forgotten in the flood of euphoria. For a small moment, Adisa let himself drift into happiness, letting the night wash over him, letting himself forget the trials that had brought them here.

But deep down, he knew that their work was far from finished.

Just as the clock struck three, a restless man stood within the walls of his home watching upon his own people. For hours, Cyril was not able to sleep since seeing what his people were doing. With his binoculars, he looked down upon the people he once ruled over with an iron fist dancing around with his worst enemy in a celebration he usually would partake in with his people.

Not long after the New Year struck, the last two remaining police officers of the department rushed to the mayor's residence.

After getting a depressing look at his people who had abandoned him, he had sat in restless silence, waiting and hoping to hear that his brother had put an end to Adisa and Dara. But no word had come yet.

When the officers hesitantly pushed open the door to his darkened room, a chill ran through them. Their leader sat slumped in a chair in the far corner, his shirt unbuttoned, his gaze lost in the shadows. He didn't move but was still very much awake. The waving candlelight barely reached his corner.

His wife lay alone in their massive bed, fast asleep, the soft glow of a candle dancing on her nightstand.

The officers lingered at the door, unsure whether to step inside.

Then, without a word, Cyril rose. His movements were swift but eerily silent. He crossed the room and ushered them out into the dimly lit hallway, closing the door behind him.

Only then did he whisper, "The child is dead, yes?"

Both officers in front of Cyril exchanged glances and then one of them stepped up to tell the mayor the news. With a scared look on his face, the officer said, "We got a call from Abraham Moses, Adisa's uncle. He walked into the apartment with Adisa's brother only to see Adisa crying with his mother's body and-"

Cyril's eyes started to grow larger, so the officer took a break to swallow his own spit.

"We reported there and… Ameen was on the floor dead; the boy had killed him."

Before the officer could finish his cursed sentence, Cyril's fist shot over the man's shoulder, slamming into the white wall beside him. The impact echoed through the hallway, though the stone held firm, stopping his knuckles in their tracks. The officers froze; their words caught in their throats as the mayor paced back and forth.

Cyril then screamed in seemingly one word, "Sonuvabitch!"

His two officers backed up from where they were standing not knowing what he would do next. The mayor turned away from them and walked five steps down his hallway breathing heavily. His feet shifted him around back to the men to which he then said in a quieter voice, "I know

my brother, I knew that waste of air couldn't do it! We are Adisa's next targets. We must protect my family. I do not care at what cost!"

From behind Cyril, came the sound of a door opening. A small girl stood in her doorway with a pink dinosaur stuffie looking at the three men in the hallway. The mayor turned around and gained his composure.

"Honey, go back to sleep. I'm having my meetings with my men, okay?"

She wiped her eyes from being tired and then asked, "Dada why were you yelling?"

It hit Cyril right then that he would have to explain to his daughter and wife that his only brother was now dead. Even if Ameen was not his wife's favorite, this news still was not pleasant. The mayor broke out of his thoughts then responded, "Just business stuff, I'm sorry for yelling. Now go back to sleep. I love you."

She shook her head, and the mayor waited for her to go back into her room, but she didn't.

"Can you tuck me in?"

Cyril knew he couldn't say no or else she would never forgive him and more than likely not fall asleep. As he stepped into her room, he cast a glance back at his men before shutting the door behind him. His daughter led him to her small purple bed, her tiny feet padding softly against the floor. Painted dragonflies and ladybugs danced across the walls, their bright colors frozen mid-flight. His eyes followed them absentmindedly, tracing their path until they ended beside her bed, where a low frame hung against the wall.

He lingered there.

The frame held four pictures. In the top left, a family portrait, him, his wife, and their little girl, smiling. His gaze drifted to the next, a snapshot of his daughter with her grandparents. Then, his breath caught. The last photo showed his daughter perched on his brother's back, both grinning with their tongues sticking out and their eyes crossed.

Grief anchored his eyes to the image, then a sweet voice pulled him back.

"Dada?"

He turned, forcing a smile as he met her expectant eyes.

"Sorry, little koala. Let me tuck you in."

She gave a smile at her nickname, and he gently pulled her blankets up, tucking them snug around her before pressing a kiss to her forehead.

As his lips left her warm skin, he knew he would stop at nothing to protect his baby.

Cyril gulped as he softly shut his daughter's door and began to look at his men again. The officer who had remained silent finally spoke, his voice low and hesitant.

"Let's go to your office. There's one more thing you need to see."

Cyril shook his head and looked dumbfounded.

He then whispered sharply, "One more thing? Just tell me now, what it is, do not play these games. You answer to me, not the other way around!"

The officer then responded to the mayor who was pointing his finger at himself.

"There is only one way to show you. Just follow us."

Cyril shook his head and put his hands up and told his men sarcastically, "Lead the way."

His two underlings led him through his giant house until they reached his office which was to the left in the house.

Cyril entered his office and asked, "What now?"

"Grab the binoculars, then look at the city center. Focus on our van," the officer said.

As the mayor opened his desk drawer to retrieve the binoculars, he half-joked, "Adisa celebrating? I already saw that silly shit."

He pressed the binoculars to his eyes, scanning the crowd of people dancing and laughing around Adisa. The scene seemed surreal, an almost hypnotic atmosphere surrounding the young revolutionary. His eyes shifted to the van, and he saw Adisa sitting casually in the back with a bottle of beer in hand. Women circled around him, and in Cyril's mind, it was as if Adisa held a brain washing power over them. They no longer seemed like people, but puppets or zombies with no will of their own, seeing him as a savior.

Anger twisted in Cyril's chest. He tore the binoculars from his face and turned to his men, his voice sharp. "What? What am I supposed to be looking at?"

The officer closest to him remained calm, yet a hint of urgency crept into his voice. "You don't see him? Give me the binoculars."

Cyril, barely holding his frustration in check, shook the binoculars toward the officer, his tone cold.

"Don't see who?"

Without responding, the officer snatched the binoculars from Cyril's hands. Cyril didn't care to reprimand him; he had already endured too much today. The officer scanned the crowd, his eyes darting across the festivities. He paused, and Cyril noticed his posture shift. The officer took a step back.

He handed the binoculars back to Cyril. "The gazebo. He's at the gazebo."

Cyril frowned, shaking his head, then raised the binoculars again.

He scanned the crowd and finally focused on what appeared to be a partygoer standing motionless, but as he adjusted the dial, his breath caught. It wasn't a person. It was Rakeem's lifeless body, suspended by blades and scraps of metal, nailed to the wood of the center's gazebo.

Citizens threw fruit at the mangled body, their drinks spilling as they laughed in the grotesque spectacle.

Cyril felt his stomach churn as he stared through the binoculars, unable to look away. The people were no longer his. They had turned so quickly, so completely. He couldn't understand why they had abandoned him so easily. The blood spilled after Rakeem and his brother's death had fueled their loyalty to Adisa.

Adisa wasn't just a revolutionary, he was a symbol, a guardian angel in their eyes, saving them from a world they no longer wanted to be part of. Cyril realized, despite everything, why the people were so captivated by him, but that didn't lessen the sting of betrayal.

The room fell silent, Cyril's officers stood still, watching as their mayor gazed at the chaos unfurling in their city, their once-loyal citizens dancing around the bodies of his friend.

Finally, Cyril lowered the binoculars. Without glancing at the officers, he spoke, his voice cold but firm.

"This city has been overrun by these terrorists who have hypnotized our people. The people have clearly spoken. If they want anarchy, let them have it. But they will not get any help from our resources… We are their next targets, so we must protect this family and our remaining officers, but I have a plan. A plan to destroy Adisa and put a nail in the coffin once and for all. I need to make some calls. Leave me alone…"

One of the officers, his hand lingering at his side, slowly reached into his back pocket and pulled out a familiar-looking pistol before leaving. He held it out toward Cyril.

"It was your brother's. Do you want it?"

Cyril looked at the worn, scratched-up gun, his expression disgusted. After a long pause, he shook his head, then said, "Yea, I know what to do with it."

-Chapter XVIII-

As the night went on in the center of the city, more and more people fell asleep from drinking too much or literally partying till they were too tired to drive or walk home. People laid in the dirt asleep including all of Adisa's soldiers. The only person who stood wide awake was Afia who sat on the back of a truck bed looking at his sleeping comrades. He was the only one in the group of boys who decided to not drink that night even if his friends had tried to peer pressure him into doing so.

From the direction of the mayor's road leading to his house, a dark silhouette appeared, moving steadily along the dried mud of the streets towards the city center.

Afia spotted him from a distance, his eyes squinting as he tried to make out the figure. He dragged his rifle across the bottom of the truck bed, the sound of metal scraping against metal sharp in the quiet morning.

With practiced ease, he lifted the rifle and racked the charging handle, keeping it concealed for now.

To the child's left, the sun began to rise over the city's modest buildings and scattered trees. The golden light broke through the horizon, casting long shadows and illuminating the figure's dark blue outfit. It was unmistakable now; he was a cop.

Afia's fingers tightened around the rifle.

By the looks of it, the officer didn't hold any gun in his hand, so Afia thought he was on suicide mission. The cop who seemed like an imbecile in Afia's mind threw his hands up as he approached the lonely boy who held an AK-47 pointed straight to him.

Afia then spoke, "What the hell is your business here?"

No one around Afia or the officer woke up from their drunken sleep. The officer who stood ten feet in front of Paulo then spoke anxiously, "Put down the gun. I am just a messenger not here to hurt you. The mayor wants to set up a meeting with Adisa at his house."

The officer then stupidly pointed at the giant house behind him when Afia clearly knew whose house it was. He then continued, "He wants to hold it after sunset tonight. Two men are allowed with Adisa as we have two men with the mayor. No arms will be allowed into the meeting. If you bring more than two men or guns, we will have no choice but to end the meeting. You all have permission to check the house to make sure there is nothing fishy going on. We do not want this to be a violent meeting but instead a meeting that could resolve the issues in this area. We will solve it like men."

Afia nudged his gun up at the man and said, "It is up to Adisa if he wants to partake in this meeting. Now get out of my sight!"

The scared officer then approached Afia slightly to which Afia gripped his gun hard and gave him an undiscerning look. The officer gulped and closed his eyes for a long second. He lowered his voice and then spoke again.

"The mayor wants to make you one more offer Paulo. He knows how hurt you are with where you are. You could end all this madness…"

The lone officer pulled a pistol from his waistband, but he did so in a surprisingly non-threatening manner. His fingers didn't grip the handle, he simply held the gun loosely with two fingers, with his arm extended toward Afia as if offering it.

Afia, despite the danger, made no move to shoot. He stood frozen for a moment, eyes narrowing in quiet curiosity as he glanced down at the pistol in the officer's outstretched hand.

“The mayor has another proposition, just for you Afia. On the left side of the house, the mayor’s bathroom window will be cracked open where at exactly seven, the mayor will be in the bathroom where you can hand this to him. I see you have a watch, so you won’t get that wrong.”

An awkward laugh came out from the officer’s mouth as they both looked at the boy’s watch.

The officer continued, “When you enter the compound, we will all search each other but our officers know about this plan. They will ignore our friend in your pocket. We will reward you for this Afia, handsomely. Help us end this madness. Choose the right side of this fight. No one else has to die, just Adisa.”

Afia looked into the man’s scared eyes and then looked back down to the pistol. He swiped the pistol from the man’s hand sharply then silently said, “Get out of my sight.”

The man quickly turned around and walked off back to Cyril’s compound.

An hour or two after the interaction, the sun began to shine hard down on the people who were sleeping in the dirt, making them wake up one by one.

People started to wake up and wake others up, so the hot sun did not melt their skin off. As the early morning light spilled across the city, the people began to rise, still clutching bottles in their hands, eager to drink again and stretch the remnants of the New Year’s celebration until the next one arrived.

Adisa stumbled out of the van he slept in, his body aching from the weight of the hangover that clung to him like a second skin. The noise of the party faded into a dull throb in his head. He had heard the only cure for a hangover was to drink more, so he did, taking a long swig from the bottle that greeted his lips.

Just as the burn of alcohol hit his throat, Afia came into view, walking slowly toward him, his gaze locked on Adisa with intensity.

“Adisa, we need to talk. Put the bottle down.”

From Afia’s recent depressive and empty state, Adisa expected his friend to tell him he was leaving the group. The drinking minor put the

bottle of beer down then said, “God damn I feel awful. My brother, what is wrong?”

“Follow me friend.”

Adisa and Afia walked off from the main city center away from the many people and began to talk.

They both stopped at a good distance and Afia said, “I stayed up for most of the night and as the sun rose, I was approached by one of the mayor's officers. He told me the mayor wants to set up a meeting with you tonight. The man said the mayor will Allow two men to accompany you since that is how many officers they have left. We must be unarmed but he said we have full permission to check his house for anything suspicious.”

Adisa then stopped Afia and started to chuckle.

“I expected this. Clearly this is an attack attempt my friend. Why don’t we go tonight and kill them all with all of our men, not just two.”

Afia reached into his back waistband and pulled out the silver and black pistol that the officer had passed to him. The silver and black hammered sidearm entered Adisa’s vision and the etching of Ameen’s name across it flooded memories of the night before into his head. It was the same pistol that was pressed against his mother’s chin, making him freeze in place. He snatched it out of Afia’s hand and spoke in an angered tone, “Where did you get this? Did the officer give it to you?”

Even though Adisa looked at his comrade, all he could see was his mother’s last moments.

“They want me to take part in killing you. The officer said that the officers will ignore this pistol I was given, then I will pass it to the mayor as he takes a bathroom break. He will then kill you with it while you two are inside of the house alone.”

Without saying a word, Adisa dropped the magazine into his palm and examined it, seeing it only had five rounds, two missing from the full seven. His jaw tightened as he realized Cyril had likely wiped Dara’s blood off the gun and done nothing else to clean the gun up before sending it to Afia. It was like some twisted ceremonial gesture.

The sheer disrespect stunned Adisa. It wasn’t just a threat—it was a message. Crude, calculated, and shameless. A clear sign of how far the mayor was willing to sink to get under his skin.

And it worked.

“Thank you, Afia, for telling me of this.”

Adisa then unloaded all eight rounds from the magazine of the gun with his thumb and then put the empty magazine back in the gun. They both walked with each other back to the center, with Afia going back into the truck bed and Adisa approaching the van.

Adisa stepped into the empty van he had slept in the night before, shutting the creaky door behind him. The solitude inside wrapped around him like a heavy blanket. He slumped into the back, letting his body sink into the van's cold interior. After all the drinking, all the noise, and all the celebration, it had been the only place he could break down in peace, away from the crowd, the praise, and the eyes that watched him like a god.

He leaned against the right side of the van, his eyes landing on the pistol, the very one that took the life of the woman who raised him.

Then, from the driver's seat, a voice came, **"How do you like being a leader?"**

Adisa jolted upright, the van shifting under his weight, its old frame squeaking in protest.

Outside, Afia paused mid-step. He had been on his way to speak with Adisa again, but the sudden jolt inside the van made him slow, concern creeping onto his face.

Inside, Adisa stared at the driver's seat, where the shadowy figure sat, shrouded in gloom. The boy's voice cracked with emotion, "Why didn't you warn me? You- You had to have known."

The spirit appeared in front of Adisa then spoke.

"**I know all**. **Some things have to happen Adisa**. **Everything happens for a reason**. **You have been chosen now child**, **so there will be obstacles**. **Sacrifices must be made**. **Look at the people who surrounded you last night**. **They loved you; you are exactly what they needed**."

Adisa then put his head down into his legs and spoke down to his feet.

“Why was I chosen? If I knew it would have taken my mother to get here, I would have never taken your deal!”

The spirit sat in silence and then told Adisa, “**If you did not do it then someone else would have**. **This city was on its breaking point someone else would have stepped up**. **Everyone has their expiration, Adisa; it can come at any time**.”

Adisa looked up into the shadowy abyss of the man’s face silhouette and then spoke, “But it wasn’t her time yet… You do not know about loss! You aren’t even here! You are from hell!”

In frustration Adisa put his head down into his legs again then said, “Now this is the part where you disappear right?”

Adisa lifted his head for what felt like the last time and saw a woman.

She was unlike anyone he had ever encountered. Her skin was pale, almost ghostly white, a rarity in South Sudan. Long blonde hair cascaded down her shoulders, shimmering under the dim light. She moved toward him with an effortless grace, her presence almost hypnotic.

Then, she extended a hand.

Her fingers were adorned with red nail polish, the kind that looked like it belonged in an old movie, elegant and striking.

She was beautiful, more beautiful than any woman Adisa had ever seen.

Without thinking, driven by a strange mix of confusion and hunger, he reached for her hand.

The moment their hands met, her grip tightened like iron and then Adisa knew something was wrong.

Adisa’s breath held as he felt the change. The soft, polished fingers in his grasp withered, veins bulging beneath thin, aging skin. He tried to pull away, but she held firm.

His eyes darted up to her face where he saw that her radiant beauty had vanished. In its place was a withered husk, skin sagging over bones with hollow eyes and cracked lips drained of color. In the span of a blink, she had aged decades.

With a final, desperate pull, Adisa ripped his hand free, stumbling backward and collapsing onto the van’s floor.

He gasped, blinking rapidly, his heart pounding and when his eyes focused again, she was gone. In her place stood the spirit, watching him with an unseen gaze as there were no eyes on his face to discern.

“I am not material, yet you fell into my trap then and there,” the spirit said. “**I gave you the illusion of being someone I was not, and you took my hand.”**

Then, as always, the spirit faded into nothingness, dissolving like mist before Adisa's eyes.

Afia stumbled backward, his breath catching in his throat. Through the tinted window of the van, he had seen something he knew he was never meant to witness—Adisa speaking with a spirit as if it were an old friend. Then, before his very eyes, the figure had twisted and reshaped itself, shifting into a pale-skinned woman. His back hit the cold metal of the side of the truck behind him, his pulse hammering in his ears. He had seen death before and caused it, but this was something else. Something far more disturbing feeling. With shaking hands, he pushed himself up, eyes darting around to make sure no one had caught him spying on his leader. The morning air felt thicker now, suffocating, as if the world itself had darkened around him. Chills ran up his spine with every beat of his heart. He wanted to dismiss it, to tell himself that his mind was playing tricks on him, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t shake the truth. This wasn’t an illusion, what he saw was more real than life itself. In the depths of his soul, Afia knew he had just seen the devil with his own two eyes.

Adisa’s right pocket felt heavier than usual as soon as the spirit left which led him to reach down into his pocket. In his deep pocket, his fingers felt cold little cylinders that he picked up to look at in his hand. Looking down at his hand he automatically knew that they were bullets that his friend had gifted him. The strange thing about the rounds was that, instead of a smooth brass tip, their casings looked crimped shut. Adisa slid the odd bullets into the magazine of the very gun meant to kill him, then stepped out of the van.

Curious, he wandered far from the others, into the edge of a quiet forest. He raised the pistol, aimed at a tree, and fired. His ears rang, but the bark remained untouched. Frowning, he moved closer, aimed again, and fired a second shot which still left no mark. As the ringing faded, he looked down at the weapon and understood that they were blanks or prop rounds.

The spirit had given him the rounds to replace in the pistol and give to Cyril who would think they were real. A slow smile crept across Adisa's face as he realized.

Before returning to the city center, center Adisa was surprised to see his men already grouped together in a circle without himself. They were talking while people stood nearby looking curious at the boys who were their new leaders. Adisa rushed to his group and interrupted the conversation the boys were having with each other by asking, "What is going on? Anything serious?"

Paulo looked at Adisa and began talking.

"People are distressed. A small group of citizens said that they saw a military looking helicopter land in Cyril's compound and then leave right after. Who knows if they are bluffing but it is better to be cautious..."

Adisa shook his head and then spoke, "If that is true, the mayor is going to play dirty tonight. I do not think my people would lie about seeing a helicopter, so we will be cautious. The mayor wants to set up a meeting tonight with me. I can bring two men along with me where we will be able to search the house and the property to see what if they are planning an attack. The mayor has chosen Afia to snake me in a stupid plan that he has where his men will not question the pistol that one of his officers gave him and then he will pass it through a window in the mayor's mansion. This plan of course is useless as I have loaded the weapon with prop rounds. With this helicopter rumor we now have suspicion to believe that there may be more than two officers along with the mayor or some other sort of weaponry or trap that we do not know about. So, we will play dirty too."

Adisa's men who had already been through so much would endure one last battle for freedom and Utopia being officially put into place. They shook their heads and patted each other's backs, never feeling as ready to fight as they were now. Adisa handed the full but empty pistol to Paulo and smirked. His men disbanded after he ordered them around a bit more to go run errands around the city to prepare for battle.

-Chapter XIX-

Afia was put on the duty of picking up supplies for the explosives that they would have to make. His leader requested him to get metal piping with threads, metal thread caps, gunpowder and some sort of fuse. He was sure he would have to hit up multiple stores to get what he needed but was surprised when he walked down the streets to see most of the businesses around him closed. This was not unusual on the first day of the year where most people were trying to recover from whatever they did the night before but that was not the case this time around as businesses truly were scared to open because of Adisa.

He walked down the dry main street where he and his comrades had their first altercation with Cyril and the police. When that battle happened, he was so out of it and almost in a trance from the guilt he felt from the murder he committed. He strolled by business after business finding nothing had any sign of life inside of them, showing that they were closed. Everywhere looked like a ghost town and the only store that seemed to have a little bit of light coming from it was the same store that he took his first victim in. He debated going inside after what had happened but had no other option as to not disappoint Adisa. Paulo opened the glass door that was usually open and a bell over his head rang. The hospital looking blue lights that were shining on his skin flooded in memories of what had happened in that store. No one stood behind the counter where a body was laid only two days ago. Before grabbing the supplies, he noticed the checkered dirty floors were cleaned behind the registry but had a permanent dark stain from that blood that pooled out from the man's head. Paulo shook his head to try and shake off having flashbacks and started to grab supplies one by one. After grabbing the supplies which had not been touched in a long while, he began walking up to the counter to pay with still not a soul standing there. He put the many gray tubes out on the counter along with other supplies then waited for a worker to show up. Out of the corner of his eye he realized there was a nice silver bell that he could ring to tell whoever was in the store he needed assistance. Afia slammed his finger onto the bell, then stepped back, waiting. Through the small window in the back door, his gaze locked down a narrow hall, straight to the body he'd left behind, now resting in a cheap polyester tuxedo, perfectly laid in an open coffin. The blood was gone, his shattered face, somehow restored.

His breath caught. But as his eyes adjusted, the door opened, and the coffin vanished. Whether what he saw was real or not didn't matter as now standing in front of the door and behind the counter was a younger man. "You…" he said. "Haven't you taken enough from us?"

Afia saw it instantly, in his eyes. The same eyes as the man he killed. Guilt surged through him like a wave as he realized he stood in front of his victim's son. Wordless, trembling, he grabbed the supplies with both hands and bolted from the store.

Behind him, the son of the dead man said nothing.

Being the last to finish his errands, Afia approached the newly formed circle of boys with an awkward movement in his body. They sat sprawled on the ground around the van and out the sides and the back and some were even smoking cigarettes, which was new.

Citizens gave cigarettes to the boys, saying that they, "Needed a head break after all the hard work."

Adisa seemed to be the biggest smoker of all the boys, for every one that a soldier smoked he went through two. Afia did not partake in the newfound nicotine consumption of the boys.

Other soldiers rushed up to Afia and took the explosive parts out of his hands and ran off back to the van with them. Adisa had already told the boys how to make the pipe bombs so when they threw the materials down on the floor of the van, they had them built within mere minutes.

Afia grabbed his trusted AK-47, then made his way to the driver's seat of the van, where Adisa lounged with his feet dangling out of the open door. They began discussing the attack plan for the night and Adisa made it clear to Afia just how crucial he was to pull it off. Mid-conversation, the bomb-building boys lobbed five pipe bombs into Adisa's lap.

Adisa smirked at his loyal soldiers and held them up, then pulled a lighter from his pocket and pretended to ignite the single fuse that now connected them all.

"Bon voyage!"

Some of the boys in the van yelped, covered their ears, and threw themselves flat on the ground. Adisa closed his eyes and laughed, snuffing out the lighter's flame with a flick.

Afia didn't flinch as he'd known from the start Adisa was only joking. Still, the five pipe bombs, now duct-taped into one cluster, could've easily turned the van and everyone in it into ash.

Paulo, who had dropped to the floor looked up at his leader as he dusted himself off and said, “That was a good one.”

Then Adisa gave him a glance and so did everyone else. He was ignored.

When the sun was in its final stages of sunset, Adisa, Afia and another soldier that Adisa couldn’t name or even remember the face of began walking towards the mayor’s compound up a long straight road from the city center. As they neared closer to the gates of the compound, they noticed two shadowy officers at the gates. The officers did not raise their rifles at the boys and instead opened the gate without question.

Adisa and his men walked through the gates while being met with bitter looks from the officers and no welcoming words. The two officers began walking slowly behind the three boys and Adisa tried his best to act as if he didn’t care his enemies were trailing him.

Both boys at Adisa’s side would turn their heads and meet the gaze of their enemies who they were scared were going to shoot them in the back.

Keeping his head held high, Adisa admired the beautiful house, quietly thinking it would be his one day. To the right of the house stood a football field length of rolling grass that was occupied by nothing. Even if nothing filled its space, Adisa found it to be beautiful and serene. From the center of the home, the front doors opened, and out stepped Cyril, standing alone, hands on his hips, like a disapproving parent.

The two men behind Adisa were armed but Cyril himself appeared without a piece. He wore a crisp white button-up shirt, dress pants, and polished shoes, casual but thought of. In contrast, Adisa stood in bloody, mud-caked school pants, shirtless and uncaring.

The mayor shouted from the steps of his home, “Come in, make yourselves at home. It is time to speak.”

When everybody reached right before the front door, Cyril stepped down and Adisa then asked, “Now may we search each other?”

The mayor stopped and gave a serious look, he then smiled and said, “Yes of course. Then your men may search my home. I have nothing to hide.”

After letting out a lone chuckle, Cyril shifted his stance. In response, Adisa and his men fell into formation, shoulder to shoulder, backs turned to

the door, each boy locking eyes with the man across from him. Guns were placed on the ground, and Adisa's side stepped forward slowly.

Everyone stared down their counterpart with barely masked disdain, except the mayor, who forced a smile, trying to appear pleased by the meeting.

Adisa patted down the mayor's warm body, finding, as expected, nothing. His soldiers did the same with the others. Then the mayor's men returned the favor and began patting down the boys.

Afia, who had a pistol tucked into his waistband, passed the check without incident, the officer of course choosing to ignore it. Still, Afia had braced himself, unsure if someone might forget the plan and react with panic.

Once finished, both sides stepped back, retrieved their weapons, and held them low, barrels pointed toward the ground.

Adisa's men immediately walked behind the mayor and his officers as they stepped inside of the home to search around the house from corner to corner. Accompanying each boy was their mirroring officer who watched as they searched the home.

While the soldiers and officers scurried around the house, Adisa and Cyril stood in the front of the house. At first the duo looked at each other awkwardly with a bit of anger in their eyes until Cyril threw up his hands and spoke, "It's just me and you now boy. Would you like a drink?"

Adisa shook his head while Cyril walked off into the kitchen poured some sort of fancy brown and gold bottle into engraved glass cups and spoke, "No thank you. I appreciate the offer. What type of whiskey is that?"

The mayor had already poured two shots of the fine brown alcohol in glasses to which he looked back at Adisa in annoyance.

"Last night you seemed to be partying with my people pretty hard, now you don't want a drink? Funny child. It is Martell Cordon Bleu, A brandy. Not that I expect you to know what that is."

In the Blink of an eye the mayor scarfed down both shots and shook his head in pain.

"Your people? Why were you not with them last night then?"

"Well clearly they have made a choice on who they think should be in charge over this town and it is a choice I do not agree with."

Adisa was about to respond to Cyril but all four of their men came stomping down the hallway.

Afia then said, “Everything is clear sir. Nothing suspicious.”

The mayor looked at the men and spoke, “Just as I said. Now let me and Adisa have a word alone. Everybody else, wait outside.”

As Adisa and the Mayor continued staring at each other, all four of the men rushed out of the door then closed it. Right as the door slammed shut Adisa responded to what Cyril said.

“They are tired of this corrupt city; they need someone like me to step up and do the work that your department cannot do. Rakeem needed to be killed a long time ago, same with your god damned brother who killed my mother! He went rogue as he could not handle being a true officer, his temper was too bad!”

Cyril was irked at the fact of Adisa calling out his deceased brother, even if he was useless, it was still his little brother. The man then angrily spoke, “You please this town with easy anarchist violence instead of lawful long-term solutions! You think I don’t spend sleepless nights trying to fix the problems that have taken over this city?”

Adisa then smirked and responded, “I don’t and if you cared about this city as much as you say you do, Ameen’s violence wouldn’t have struck. My mother was murdered by your brother in a senseless act of violence and the police could barely help! You do not rule for the people, you rule for power and relations!”

Both men were breathing heavily and looked as if steam was about to start shooting out of their ears. Even though he was angry, Cyril knew that he needed to check the time, so he looked at his watch mid argument, seeing it was six fifty- nine and then said to Adisa, “Let me use the restroom, then I will come back and we will have this conversation civilly.”

Cyril turned his back to the angry Adisa and headed to the restroom where a present would be delivered to him.

When all four men stepped out of the house, they stood across from each other, locked in a silent standoff. It felt like the opening moment of a Western duel with each man waiting, hoping the other would flinch first and give them reason to start a firefight. Afia remembered where the bathroom was—off to the left of the house, near the entrance. He glanced down at his battered watch and saw he had two minutes left until the exchange.

No one spoke. No one moved, but in their eyes, the truth was clear, if given the chance, each man would kill the one facing him. That long minute stretched, heavy with agitation and pounding heartbeats. Time didn't pass—it pressed down and stuck.

At six fifty-nine, Afia hesitated. The silence had become its own kind of show of anger. Breaking it felt dangerous, but the plan depended on his bathroom break.

"I am going to use the restroom."

He turned to his side, walking to the side of the home and the rest of the men nodded their heads in agreement. Every man knew the plan. Afia was to pass the pistol to Cyril through the bathroom window, but each had to act as if they were in the dark.

Afia walked through the tall grass on the shadowed side of the house, glancing around as he went. He reached behind his back and slipped the pistol from his waistband, his heart thudding as he waited for the small window to open. His biggest fear was someone rounding the corner, catching him in the act, and blowing the whole operation, but then it hit him that everyone inside the compound already knew the plan. If they saw him, they'd look the other way.

As he stood lost in thought, the bathroom window slid open with a quiet scrape. A large hand that was dark and steady reached through, the fingers thick and old. Cyril didn't speak and barely made eye contact. Afia rose onto his tiptoes, extended the pistol, and the mayor's fingers closed around the iron. No words were exchanged, just silence.

Cyril shut the Bathroom window and held the pistol tight in his hands. With no time to waste, the mayor clicked the magazine release and let half of the magazine slide out of the gun. He saw the brass casings in the holes through the magazine to see if it was loaded, not seeing the crimped ends of the bullets showing that they were nothing but blank rounds. The magazine got slammed back into the gun and Cyril racked the pistol as quietly as he could.

He flushed the toilet, acting as if he used the restroom and took a deep breath while putting the pistol into his back waistband. Adisa stood still in the middle of the entrance room of the mansion waiting for Cyril who he knew would try and get the satisfaction of killing him at any moment. Of course, after he gave a big speech. The two men locked eyes again and they began to speak to each other.

Cyril sighed and then said to Adisa in a calm voice, “What must I do to appease you child. I don’t know if I can meet these requirements as you will do anything to get to power. The power that you bring against me and act as if I crave yet you are the one killing anyone in your way to get to the ruling top.”

Adisa was confused at the mayor’s mean demeanor after he said they were going to talk to each other nicely. He did not care though as this conversation could only end one way.

Adisa responded, “The only way you will meet my requirements is if the people of this land have happy lives. That is all I ask for, and with you in power that will never happen… You were clearly colluding with Rakeem, getting money by letting him run drugs through our city. If you were a sensible, not corrupt Mayor he would have been long gone years ago!”

Cyril put his fingers into his chest and boomed, “I am corrupt? Says a boy who abandoned the normal way of life to murder and do unsensible things! You are Satan's child! You will promise the people false things then stab them in the back.”

“Let’s say I end this revolution and stop everything that I have been doing. What will change? The people have chosen who is their leader now, a new hopeful era has descended upon us. If I was you, I would leave this city and go far away now. You know where this will end.”

The mayor knew the conversation couldn’t last much longer and was tired of speaking with the boy.

From his waistband, Cyril pulled his pistol out and swiftly pointed it towards Adisa. The boy who had to act as if he was scared put his hands up and stepped backwards. His feet guided him back towards the door to which the mayor then spoke, “You touch that door I will shoot you. I have you in my grasp. All the travesties you have committed will be avenged by my actions tonight. Soon you and your rebels will be gone like dust in the wind!”

Adisa stopped, smirked, then said, “Do you think the people who have welcomed me with open arms will just forget about this?”

The mayor stepped closer towards Adisa with his dress shoes hitting against his wooden floor and pointed the pistol at Adisa’s head from only inches away.

“They will not forget you; they will just have to deal with your absence. Things will go just the way they have before you strolled in and

sparked your childish revolution! Your men will be killed, and things will be just the way they should. Goodbye scum."

With the loaded pistol ready to shoot Adisa in the head, Cyril pulled the trigger as nothing would satisfy him more than doing what he was going to do.

A loud bang filled the room and put a ring in Adisa and Cyril's ear.

At first, the mayor was confused. Adisa stood there still as a brick and unharmed. Then it hit him, the rounds weren't real as there was no way he'd missed his shot.

Adisa burst into laughter; a mocking belly laugh that echoed through the room. Cyril, furious, pulled the trigger again to spark another dummy round. Enraged, the Mayor quickly pistol-whipped Adisa across the mouth. The blow dropped the child to the floor, blood spilling, his mind flashing to his trusted AK that was just outside the door, out of reach.

With the pistol now pointed at his roof, Cyril drove his shoe into Adisa's abdomen, knocking the wind from him. Stunned and curled on the ground, Adisa barely registered the distant gunshots cracking right outside the house's walls. The sounds of scuffling, men shouting and legs scrambling came right after. As his vision flickered in and out, Adisa barely saw Cyril shove a massive chair across the floor, positioning it in front of the main doors to block anyone from entering.

From inside the house, a sharp bang rang out, followed by the sound of wood creaking and shifting. It echoed through the mansion as military boots began to thud across the wood floors, rapid and heavy, heading straight for Cyril and Adisa.

In a fit of bloodlust, the mayor yanked Adisa from the ground and hurled him against the stone wall of the mansion. Adisa hit with a harsh thud, pain searing through him then he folded back to the floor.

Behind the Mayor, a group of men in black combat gear appeared in the hallway, moving with stealth and purpose, figures Adisa could barely make out through the blur.

"Took you boys long enough. Now go out and blast them!"

-Chapter XX-

From outside of the compound walls, a dozen of Adisa's soldiers sat in the dark forest waiting anxiously for any noise that resembled a gunshot.

Paulo was the clear leader of this small group of boys and was the one who held the cluster of pipe bombs in his hand. While waiting for twenty minutes, he looked at the bomb in his hand and realized the power he held within it. With the lighter he would use to light the bomb; he lit the cigarette that was held on his lip while he waited. It was windy outside,

which required him to try the lighter a hundred times until it finally lit his cigarette. The flame was so iffy that only half of the top of the cigarette lit which was quickly solved as he dragged through it. The boys looked scared and anxious not only because of the battle but because of the bomb. All of the boys stood at least fifteen feet away from the wall where Paulo stood and kept his ear open.

One of the boy's silently said, "How big is that damn explosion going to be? Will it blast all the way until it reaches the actual house? How far will we have to run?"

Paulo then aggressively said, "It does not matter how much it will explode or how far it will blast till. If we want any chance of winning this, we will have to run like the wind after I light it then as soon as the explosion is over run over the rubble of these stone walls to snatch the mayor."

As soon as he spoke his last words his ears perched up as the sound of a gunshot was clear but faint coming from inside of the house. Boys held onto their rifles hard and their stomachs dropped. It was as if the roller coaster was about to drop down.

Paulo crouched low against the wall, carefully setting the pipe bombs down to keep them from rolling downhill. His right hand gripped them firmly, while his left dug into his pocket, searching until his fingers wrapped around the lighter. He quickly raised it to the fuse, but no matter how many times he tried, the flame wouldn't catch. The wind snuffed it out before it could even form. Frustrated, he took a long drag from his cigarette, letting the smoke billow out in front of his face. A thought came into his mind. With quick precision, he stuffed the lighter back into his pocket, then pulled the cigarette from his mouth. He pressed the glowing cherry against the fuse, praying it would ignite.

Sparks flew from the fuse, and Paulo turned on his heels, sprinting downhill into the forest. He didn't drop the cigarette, instead, he shoved it back into his mouth as he ran, trying to distance himself from the blast.

He dove behind a tree, far enough from the others, but still close enough to feel the impending danger.

"You're gonna get blasted! Don't take cover there!" a voice shouted from behind him.

Afia's voice rang out calmly, cutting through the chaos. "I'll be fine!"

Then, the bomb detonated with a deafening roar. The stone wall crumbled, the flaming shockwave pushing against the air. Afia's arm, exposed behind the tree, felt the searing heat of the explosion, too close for comfort.

Just as the fireball settled, Afia tore out from behind the tree, rifle in hand, charging back up the hill, shouting for the others to follow. One by one, the boys fell in behind him, their feet pounding the earth as they rushed to regroup.

The mayor knew that even if he killed Adisa, it wouldn't be the end of his problems and there would be more rebels to kill. With that in mind, he had already called for backup, reaching out to Nileville's allies for reinforcements the night before.

Instead of retreating through the now-blocked main door, the secret officers in black suits opened fire through the front window. Glass shattered, and men rushed to lean through the broken frame, guns aimed at the dark.

Meanwhile, Cyril continued his assault on Adisa, fists pounding mercilessly. Outside, the officers fired blindly through the windows, rounds flying wild into the night.

One officer peered out into the darkness. His eyes the front of the property but instead of finding any of Adisa's men, he saw the lifeless bodies of two of Cyril's men. No sign of the enemy.

As they faced towards the open field on the property, the air was torn apart by a massive explosion. A ball of fire surged outward from the compound walls, expanding rapidly. The stone structure fell apart under the blast, and in the same moment, boys poured in from the left side of the property, charging toward the mansion with AK-47s raised, their screams echoing in the night. One soldier turned, eyes wide in horror as the sound of the explosion registered.

“Bomb!” he shouted, his voice cracking.

Adisa reacted with a smug smile even though he was hurting while the rest of the men inside let the air of fear take over their bodies. The man who observed the bomb turned back around to outside hoping to shoot the running boys but instead was met with a bullet to the face. His body fell down to the outside after getting shot.

In his place, the two boys that originally were outside started to jump into the window while blaring off rounds inside. Despite the glass slicing their fingers, the boys ignored the pain, leaping through the broken windows into the home. The first boy to land inside opened fire, and Cyril who was unarmed, realized the battle had shifted and bolted out of the front room. The military-looking officers, now pinned down, shot sporadically from behind cover. Only two officers remained in the front room. One of them was taken out by Afia, who leapt through the window, AK-47 blazing. The rounds tore through the wall corner where the officer was hiding, shredding him apart.

Afia’s eyes were glazed; the weight of his actions lost to the rush of adrenaline. He had hoped to never to kill again, but as his rifle did the work for him, the reality of it faded from his mind.

The second officer, still standing beside his fallen comrade, cautiously extended his AR-15 around the corner, taking a shot that dropped the first boy that made it into the home.

Afia saw his friend fall, and silently but aggressively, he dashed toward the officer who had fired, blind with fury. In one swift motion, Afia knocked the man’s rifle from his hands, sending it clattering to the floor. Without hesitation, Afia’s AK roared to life, and he emptied a hail of rounds into the officer’s stomach upwards. After killing the soldier, he quickly ducked back from where he just killed the man as a bullet was shot down the hallway where he stood, and more footsteps approached.

Adisa watched as his soldier did his best to hold his weight in a gunfight he was outnumbered in. The boys who had flooded through the broken wall finally made it into the house. They found Afia crouched behind cover, narrowly dodging bullets as fire poured down the hallway.

His breath came in gasps as he pressed his back against the wall, trying to steady himself.

Some of the boys rushed to return fire, their weapons lighting up the hallway in a barrage. Others, however, turned their attention to Adisa, who lay battered, his body bruised and bloodied. Paulo emerged from the front door, walking into the room with two AKs in hand. He put it down toward the injured Adisa, the weapon steady in his grip.

The boy then said, “Take this.”

Adisa smirked and snatched the rifle out of his hands as he groaned. He shook his head side to side to shake the pain off his body and then raised his AK up and threw it back down. He then began to yell.

“It has seemed the mayor lied to us and brought more men! Good thing we lied as well! Let us find the mayor and kill everyone else in this damn house!”

Despite the dizziness from the beating, Adisa gripped his rifle at his side, his steps steady but heavy as he moved toward the hallway. His vision blurred, but his will was unshakable. As he opened fire, spraying the hallway with hip-fire shots, his men followed closely, providing supporting fire wherever they could.

The group surged forward like a singular force, shoulder to shoulder, step by step. Each boy, locked in rhythm with the others, moving as one cohesive unit. They cleared the halls with brutal efficiency, rifles blazing, cutting down officers in their path.

The sound of gunfire filled the home, and the momentum of the boys could not be stopped. Some of them took hits, falling, blood staining the floor, but they were ignored, left behind in the frenzy of battle. Even those who were shot kept running, pushing forward, their bodies burning with pain but refusing to break. Side by side, their blood and sweat fused, strengthening them, propelling them forward as an unstoppable force.

As the boys stormed through the hallways, they quickly noticed hidden passages in the walls, secret openings that the officers had used to

hide, were now exposed. Sections of the walls had been pried open, and cabinets were flung wide, their contents spilling out in disarray.

After gunning down more than ten officers who emerged from corners and side rooms, the group took a sharp corner. On the new straight, to their left, an officer fired from the doorway of the mayor's room. The moment he exposed even an inch of skin; he was ripped down by a storm of bullets.

The boys stormed into the room with a roar, ready for another fight, but were met by silence. Not the peaceful kind, but a heavy, waiting silence, like the breath held just before a gunshot.

They swept their rifles across the room, aimed at windows, eyes scanning every shadow.

"They must've jumped out the window!" Paulo shouted. "Let's search outside!"

Adisa then looked around to the windows and looked down on them then ordered his men, "No! He must be somewhere in this room! The windows are locked. Search for anything that leads us to him!"

The boys scrambled through the room, searching for anything out of place. Afia, peering under the bed, frowned. Something felt off. The bed wasn't centered with the room. For someone as prestigious as the mayor, it seemed unlikely he'd tolerate such an obvious misalignment, especially in the bed he and his wife shared.

Afia then yelled, "Someone help me push this bed!"

Two boys scurried to the bed and helped him push it to the side while other boys opened drawers hoping a secret entrance would open up. When the bed was shoved aside, Afia stood over a rectangular cutout in the floor, clear evidence of some kind of hidden exit beneath it.

Adisa clapped him on the back. "Good work," he said, then raised his voice. "Men, keep your rifles ready!"

Soldiers crowded around the trapdoor; guns drawn. The two boys who'd helped move the bed crouched down beside Afia, slipping their thin fingers beneath the false floorboard. Carefully, they lifted it toward themselves, revealing a narrow concrete stairwell that descended into darkness. At the bottom stood a heavy metal vault door.

Adisa let out a sharp laugh at the sight of it.

He then bellowed, "Aim, and give that door hell!"

A line of boys shot the door repeatedly, even some reloading in-between. Bullet sized indents laid in the smoking door now, but it was not breached through.

Paulo did not shoot and put his rifle with its butt down on the floor directing the attention to him then he spoke nonchalantly, "Stand aside."

From his cargo pocket, he pulled out a metal pipe bomb. The moment it came into view, the boys scrambled back toward the entrance of the room.

He pinched the fuse straight between his fingers, then lit it with a flick of his lighter, finally unbothered by the wind. Without hesitation, he hurled the bomb down the concrete steps, where it clanked and bounced, stair by stair, into the dark.

With calmness, Paulo turned and walked away from the trapdoor, clearly trying to imitate the action scenes he'd seen through windows growing up.

It didn't go quite as planned. The blast behind him was stronger than expected, sending a shockwave that shoved him forward. He nearly lost his footing.

The boys stifled laughs, their rifles shaking from the effort. Before they could crack a joke, a high-pitched, feminine shriek echoed down the corridor, wiping the smiles clean from their faces.

Adisa walked near the hidden entrance right out of view from whoever was inside and shouted, "Let's make this easy you son of a bitch!

Come outside with whatever wildebeest you have down there, and we will spare at least her life."

From downstairs the mayor did not respond to Adisa but instead whispered aggressively to someone else down there, "Do not let them come in!"

Adisa then yelled again, "I can hear you; you dumb ass. I made an offer..."

He then turned to his men and spoke out loud, "There are officers down in this bunker. We haven't had an issue with killing them before so put them down then take anyone else alive."

The young soldiers nodded and moved to either side of the trapdoor, lying flat at the top of the secret entrance. They knew better than to charge blindly as doing so would get them torn apart. Instead, they edged their rifles just beyond the doorway, ready to fire.

A pair of officers stood guard below, shielding a group of three huddled figures. In a flash, the boys opened fire, dropping the guards in a burst of gunfire from just out of their view.

The rest of the group poured down the concrete stairs into the vault-like room. Inside, Cyril stood tall with a shotgun aimed at them all his body tense, his eyes wild. Behind him, his wife and daughter lay curled together on the floor, trembling, their faces covered with tears.

One by one, the boys surrounded him, guns raised. Last to enter was Adisa.

He stepped forward calmly, locking eyes with the mayor, a man who truly believed he could stop a small army with a single weapon.

Cyril couldn't look away from the child.

"Don't hurt my family. If you are going to do anything, do it to me! I deserve it! I am a bad man!"

It was clear that the mayor was not taking acceptance for his wrong doings but instead trying to put the title of a “bad man” onto his name so the boys would punish him instead of his family.

Adisa then said, “Put the gun down you damn fool! No one here has to die… at least right now.”

The mayor’s daughter then cried out, “Dada, you're not a bad man!”

Cyril shut out the cries of his wife and daughter. Eyes closed, lips trembling, he slowly lowered his gun. As it neared the floor, he sank with it, dropping to a seated position.

Without a word, he turned the shotgun toward himself and shoved the barrel to his chin. His finger hovered over the trigger, ready to end it all in one a cowardly act of silence.

Before he could pull, Adisa’s foot slammed into the weapon, sending it skidding across the floor. The gun discharged with a deafening boom, blasting a hole into the ceiling and raining concrete dust across the room.

His wife and daughter screamed; their voices sharp with horror. The girl broke down, sobbing uncontrollably.

Cyril collapsed inward, curling into a ball on the cold concrete, his body wracked with sobs.

Adisa didn’t hesitate and marched forward, grabbing the mayor by the front of his shirt, and yanked him upright like a rag doll.

His soldiers moved swiftly, prying the mayor’s wife and daughter apart and dragging them back despite their wild shrieks. The woman fought, the girl kicked, but the boys held firm.

Still, Cyril didn’t lift his head and didn’t look at them. His terror was turned entirely inward, locked in on himself and whatever torment he believed was coming for his own soul.

Adisa loomed over him, heart pounding, rage coiled in his fists. For a moment, he wanted nothing more than to smash the man’s skull in, just as he’d done to his brother. Instead, he stood there, silent, soaking in the sight

of a powerful man broken. A man who once ruled with arrogance now trembling in his own filth and fear.

It was better than revenge. It was humiliation and it tasted just as sweet.

Paulo, who was kneeled near one of the soldiers' bodies, looked up at his comrades and said, "None of these guys have any ID or patches. It's like their ghosts."

Before stepping up out of the basement Adisa looked over at Paulo and said, "Who knows where they came from. We will find who did this."

After dragging the family down Cyril's dirt hill, Adisa and his men at around Seven-twenty made it to Nileville's center where no one stood anymore.

The van was still there next to the small Gazebo where Rakeem's body was decomposing. Adisa's men threw the three family members down under the overhang of the gazebo and then their leader spoke, "Gather up people again. We are going to send a message."

Door to door, Adisa's soldiers knocked with the force of battering rams, waking civilians and ordering them to gather at the city center. Word spread fast; Adisa had something to say. Or something to show.

Families clutched each other, dragging loved ones along as they made their way toward the heart of the city. Curiosity mixed with fear, but everyone wanted to see what was going to happen.

By the time it was halfway past seven, the entire city stood gathered before the flat-topped gazebo. At its center, Adisa loomed tall, the kneeling figure of Mayor Cyril at his feet.

The mayor's head hung low, dead looking, but still breathing.

Beneath the platform, his wife and daughter knelt in silence, surrounded by armed children who stared at them with hard, unblinking

eyes. The two women could see nothing of what was happening above, only the angry mob that shouted from beyond the gazebo.

"Kill him!"
"What's the hold-up?"
"End it already!"

Shouted the civilians as they were thirsty for blood, desperate to see the man they once feared reduced to nothing. Adisa was the only one who could quench the people's thirst for blood.

The leading boy scanned the sea of faces before him. Some were twisted with rage. Others, with awe. All of them were waiting, gnawing at the teeth like starved dogs.

At that moment, Adisa knew it was time to speak.

"People of this great land, I have before you the final obstacle of corruption."

Adisa stopped talking for a second, basking in the glory of his people in complete silence ready to hear what he had to say next.

"Next to me I hold the shameful body of a corrupt official who ruled over this land for far too long. This man was allied with Rakeem who paid him to let him continue his business of destroying this city with drugs. This is also the man who had my mother killed by his corrupt brother so he would not have blood on his hands! What I do next is for my mother who should have been alongside the great people in our new city!"

Cyril sniffled and whimpered like prey and his eyes clenched shut.

Too afraid to face what was coming, he finally blurted what he had been wanting to say.

"Adisa! L-Let me live and I'll tell you who really wants you dead. I'll tell you who brought the soldiers in!"

The boy knew this was a trick and said, "Oh, shut up!"

Behind Cyril, Adisa drew a large buck knife. His left hand, small but steady, gripped the front of Cyril's throat. With his right, he pressed the blade to the top of the mayor's hairline.

Then, with slow pressure, he began to saw left to right.

Cyril's screams tore through the plaza, rising above the gasps and shouts of the crowd. Some people turned away. Others covered their children's eyes. But many watched, wide-eyed and unblinking as blood streamed down the mayor's face.

Adisa kept cutting, though his hand wasn't perfect. The blade slipped too deep down more than once, scraping skull, carving past flesh. Cyril thrashed, trying to wrench free, but his hands were bound tight behind his back. All he could do was writhe and scream, jerking like an animal caught in a snare.

By the time the blade reached the back of his crown, Cyril had gone silent, his mind stopped thinking, his body limp. Shock had taken over him.

With a final tug, Adisa ripped the scalp free and raised it into the air. Blood dripped from the torn edge, gleaming in the moon's light.

The crowd exploded and cheers erupted. Fists flew into the air. All were united in their hunger being fed. Adisa let go of the mayor then Cyril's body slumped forward, lifeless, and fell down from the gazebo into the dirt like a puppet with its strings cut.

When he hit the ground, he irked a little on the ground and Adisa noticed this and said, "My people, he is still living. Do as you will with him!"

Adisa leaned over the edge of the gazebo while people were rushing to Cyril's body to kick and grab at his skin. As he leaned with the scalp hanging over the edge, he took the opportunity and thrusted his knife into the scalp against the fascia of the gazebo, marking a trophy for everyone to see.

Even Adisa's savage soldiers took a step back as the crowd surged forward, eyes wild and mouths agape. The citizens pressed in beneath the

gazebo like a pack of starved beasts. Their pupils were wide, unblinking like animals hunting in a frenzy.

As their eyes moved back and forth, a few soldiers watched as some in the crowd were sinking their teeth into the mayor's skin, gnawing like animals on meat.

This resulted in the soldiers stepping aside, letting the horde flood the gazebo. Screams erupted as hands reached for the two girls still kneeling beneath the platform.

The mayor's wife and daughter bolted away as the crowd closed in.

They ran past the stunned soldiers, through the chaos and out into the open streets. Behind them, the crowd followed, not as people, but as predators. Mud and stones flew through the air, hurled with no aim but hate. The girls didn't look back as they couldn't.

They ran with the desperation of the hunted, while the city behind them fell deeper into madness.

For minutes people could not get enough of beating down on Cyril who was past dead and just a pile of mushy blood and skin. Adisa hopped down from the gazebo and observed what his people had done to the

mayor and felt proud but scared at the same time. All of Adisa's soldiers gathered around Adisa tired after the battle that had just happened not long ago. The crowd had cooled down a bit and Adisa noticed that the only boy not around him was Paulo who he saw out of the corner of his eye. He was talking with a young man who had a camera, then he shook the boy's hand and took the camera from his hands. Paulo himself started to record people beating down on the mayor's body or what was left of it. Breaking Paulo out of his recording, Adisa shouted towards him, "My friend! Get here!"

Paulo pointed the camera down and stopped recording then ran to Adisa and the rest of the soldiers. Once he got into his group he shouted, "Look at this."

He held up the old tape camera, its bulky frame and faded buttons made it look like alien technology among the ruins.

“I got this off that nice man over there,” he said, grinning. “He recorded the whole execution. We should show the world what we’re doing! It doesn’t even have to be just the deaths, we can show how we’re going to rebuild the city, the good we’re doing.”

Adisa took the camera in his hands, turning it over slowly.

“I agree,” he said, eyes locked on the dusty lens. “We will show the world. This will be a message,”

He raised his voice for the other soldiers to hear.

“The mayor had allies, ones who sent officers into his home to ambush us. They thought they could surprise us, but even with the element of surprise, they were nothing. Let this camera show them.”

He looked out at his men, young and battered, standing taller than ever.

“Within the week, we will raise the walls of Utopia, around this city and its farms. We’ll welcome anyone who wishes to live in peace and dignity. Let them come.”

Then, with a thunderous voice, he roared, “*Long Love Utopia!*”

The boys echoed the phrase back, their cheers echoing through the broken streets. Even if the phrase was wrong, Adisa liked the sound of “love,” better than “live.”

Adisa handed the camera back to Paulo and clapped his friends on the back. Battles that would have broken most grown men had been won in a matter of days by boys born into poverty, shaped by pain, and held together by belief in Adisa.

Adisa's charisma was a force stronger than steel. It had drawn boys into his arms and led them to accomplish the impossible. Now, that same force pulled the entire city under his rule.

Nileville was no more, and Utopia had begun. Adisa, the concrete leader, stood ready to build it up high enough for God to touch it.

Not every soul welcomed this new dawn, not in the city, not in the shadows beyond its walls and certainly not among those still clinging to power in the rest of Africa.

Part II: Lueth në Dhiëëth
(Falsehood in Comfort)

-Chapter XXI-

The morning after Adisa's public execution of Cyril, and the final cleansing of Nileville, Abel awoke early, on his uncle's couch to a knock at the door. It was not the first knock that woke him up, but instead the third one which is why when Abel was awakened, Abraham was already in his vision walking to the door in his signature unwashed robe.

Abraham lived in a decent home that was nicer than most. It was on the outskirts of the city undisturbed by the troubles of the main city so a knock at the door was quite unusual. In Abraham's left hand held a black pistol while he leaned down to look through the peephole of his door to see a normal looking couple and a nice-looking red car behind them. He put his sidearm down on a key holding desk next to the entrance then he opened the door. When he opened the door, the couple outside looked surprised and happy to see him even if he had never seen them in his life. Abraham planned on speaking first and asking them what they wanted or why they were at his ranch but was beaten to it by the couple.

"You are Adisa's uncle, correct?" Spoke the girl in the couple.

Abraham's face became bleak, and he automatically became annoyed at their presence. He really wanted to slam the door in their faces but

noticed that it seemed that they had something behind their back that looked like a present.

"I am. Now what is your business here?"

The couple looked at each other and gulped, then the husband spoke, "It is very hard to get any message to the new leader, but we are big supporters. Me and my wife wanted to give a gift to you so that you could give it to Adisa."

The wife stuck her hands out to reveal a beautiful bouquet of flowers then she smiled. She ended her quick smile then spoke while Abraham looked at the flowers and said, "We heard the news about his mother and wanted to send our regards. Please accept and give it to him."

The words the woman spoke were static to Abraham's ears, but one thing stuck out to him the first time her husband spoke. He then asked her a question.

"Leader? New leader? The boy is only fifteen years old! Are you playing a joke with me? I am not one to be joked with!"

The couple looked at each other again, not scared but confused at how this man did not know that his own nephew was the new leader of the city.

Nicely, the husband spoke, "Adisa has put down the mayor and taken his spot. Before that he killed Rakeem. Someone is finally bringing great change to our land. He has started a Utopia!"

Abraham laughed and couldn't believe what he was hearing. It was either this couple were loonies or he was dreaming.

"You are not messing with me? Let me ask you this, how does he plan to rule?"

The wife then said, "He is giving the city what it needs. Free food, no more starving children. No more drugs, there will be harsh penalties for anyone who sells or uses within the walls of Utopia."

Abraham was shaken once he heard no more drugs but was more shook at the part where the women said, "Walls."

He then spoke softly, "Walls? Walls around Nileville?"

The couple shook their heads in unison then asked, "You have not seen it? They are just beginning construction right behind your ranch?"

Abraham snatched the clay pot from the woman's hands and hurled it through the window of her red car. The vase shattered just inches from the couple's heads as they ducked, screamed, and scrambled back to their vehicle.

Abraham snatched the pistol from the desk, brandishing it into the air to drive them off. The couple sped away in panic.

Abel, who had been sitting silently, finally stood up to see what the commotion was about. Through the window, he spotted something in the backyard.

Abraham was still cursing at the retreating car when Abel crept up behind him. He tapped his uncle on the lower back.

Abraham spun around, anger flashing in his eyes, but when he saw his nephew, something in the boy's timid gaze softened the edge of his fury.

Abel wanted to run, to hide from the glare in his uncle's eyes, but instead, he stood still.

Abraham holstered his pistol in his pants, his voice shifting to something more understanding.

"What is it, Abel?"

Without a word, Abel silently gestured toward the backyard. Abraham followed his nephew's pointed hand, but before he did, he checked one last time to make sure the couple was gone.

Abel wasn't a talkative boy so his silence didn't bother his uncle as much as it should have. The two moved toward the back window, and Abraham paused when something caught his eye.

His heart skipped as he saw the police van, parked just beyond the ranch fence. The same van that had been parked outside Dara's home on that cursed night.

Abraham squinted, narrowing his eyes as he tried to make sense of the scene. Boys in the open back of the van were unloading large stone bricks. As the van slowly moved forward, a line of people behind it poured concrete and arranged the bricks into a makeshift wall. This show of power was happening right outside of his property.

Enraged, Abraham's fists clenched. He turned to his nephew, his voice thick with fury.

"Stay inside, Abel!"

Abraham stormed through his cattle; the weight of the pistol heavy in his hand. With a shove, he hopped over the fence, his feet hitting the dirt with a heavy thud.

At first, the workers didn't notice him but as he approached the line of boys stacking the bricks, he raised his pistol and fired a round into the air. The sharp crack echoed, and immediately, the van screeched to a halt.

Three boys leaped from the van, rifles raised, pointing directly at Abraham. He didn't flinch. Instead, he pointed his own gun right back at them, his hand steady. The rumors were true. Little boys were running around with AK-47s. Adisa had started this patrol with the builders as he was expecting a raid against Utopia from outside South Sudanese forces but that fear never came true.

"Are you with Adisa," Abraham yelled, his voice hoarse with fury.

At that moment, the door to the van swung open, and out stepped Adisa himself. The young leader didn't flinch at the sight of Abraham's gun. Instead, he raised a hand, palm open.

"Hold your fire!" Adisa called out to his boys, his voice calm but firm.

Abraham blinked in disbelief. He wanted to laugh at his nephew; the boy who had once worked for him, now leading this ragtag army and building walls around the city.

Adisa's eyes locked with Abraham then said, "Put down your pistol, Abraham. There's no need for bloodshed."

Abraham stood there, pistol still raised, the weight of the situation sinking in. But one thing was clear, the boy standing before him wasn't the same Adisa he once knew.

"I will not put down my pistol! What is this business? Building walls almost through my property and not telling me?"

Adisa then said, "It is for the safety of Utopia. We cannot have any outside issues come within these walls such as drugs or threats. There are people who want to hurt our people, Abraham. This should not be as big of a deal as it is!"

Abraham scoffed then spoke, "So you get slave labored citizens to do it while you and your cronies sit in the van ready to pop out with rifles to anyone who questions your sick ways?"

"You do not get it. With a community as strong as Utopia there is no slave labor. These people volunteered! We have many more ready to take shifts once we get back to the main city. This is the power of the people and the future for our people! Now let us finish our work, please."

“I thought about buying more property one day, now you have to go and ruin it all! Shame on you, your mother would be ashamed! Damn this operation and whoever-”

Abraham was cut off by the booming Adisa who approached his uncle, “Who do you think you are! Do not mention my mother in vain again. Mind your business slaving children in your camp. They have better things to do now; the people of Utopia will not fall for the tricks of the higher up! I will make sure of it until I am put into the ground!”

Abraham turned around and spoke nothing, then hopped over his fence and towards his home. Adisa could have easily killed Abraham then and there but decided not to.

When the gunshot went off Abel watched the whole ordeal from the home, telling that there was an argument going between the two. The whole time he wished for Abraham to raise his pistol at Adisa and knock him down but that is not what happened. Abraham opened the door to the home and Abel hopped down from the window acting as if he was not watching. The giant man did not speak a word to Abel but instead rushed into his room with anger. Abel got up from the old couch and crept towards his uncle's room. He did not shut the door all the way, so Abel got to snoop into whatever was going on inside the room. Abraham reached up into his closet to the right of the door and pulled out a tiny cream-colored watch box. He sat down on the bed while facing the door and put the box to his side. His fingers shook violently while he opened the bottom small drawer of the box and began to take stuff out of it. A glass pipe, A bag of cloudy rocks and a purple clear lighter were taken out and put into his lap. Without closing the drawer, he opened the small dime bag of amphetamines and dropped the crystals into the glass stem of the pipe. He stuck the pipe into his mouth and lit the giant flame under it while waiting for the ice to bubble.

Abel knew that this was some sort of drug and he was suprised as he could have never pictured Abraham doing such a thing.

After a couple seconds Abraham started to twist the pipe in his mouth and try to burn all the pieces of the meth while blowing smoke in and out. The smoke still lingered in the room as Abel wrapped his hand around the doorknob. Abel planned on entering and acting as if he didn’t know what was going on, so he opened the door quietly, and the motion caused

Abraham to stir. The old man blinked, startled, and hastily shoved the pipe into his lap in a fit of embarrassment.

"Uncle, what happened with Adisa outside?" Abel's voice was calm, almost too calm. "And what are you doing? It smells like burning plastic."

Abraham's reaction was immediate. His eyes widened, then he blurted, "It's tobacco. Now get out!"

The pipe slipped from his trembling hands as he raised one unsteady hand, a command for Abel to leave. The door shut behind the boy with no protest, but as it clicked closed, Abel stood there, heart heavy.

Abel knew exactly what was happening, and what it would cost his uncle's life.

In only a week from the mayor's death, the walls around Utopia had finally been built. The walls were made with sturdy stone bricks that reached eighteen feet high and resembled something medieval. They surrounded the entire city and farm areas that surrounded it. The only place that the wall didn't touch was the White Nile on the left side of the territory that Adisa didn't want to block as it was a partial source of income with fishing and transportation. Adisa made sure that the area was watched by soldiers and that is why he had four watchtowers built on the river that stretched its entirety inside of the walls. The only way to get out or in of the city besides the guarded and choppy river was the front entrance that was to be guarded with three men at the least. Utopia's electric powered front gate was large but not as high as its neighboring stone walls and was opened by a soldier in a booth.

Now Utopia looked like Rakeem or Cyril's compound, just on a bigger scale. Cyril's home had now become Adisa's home, and the rest of the boys stayed in the house until their own houses were built. Another thing that was built was a stage for Adisa to speak on that was built right where the old, rotted gazebo once stood. It held a staircase that led down into an underground concrete room that had an escape route that exited at the city's hospital. Adisa had ordered the people to build the structure just as he had seen it in a dream many nights before.

A stone wall surrounding a populated city of a country was a rare occurrence, but Adisa convinced his people with hope to work nonstop to complete it. He would reward them with alcohol, food and other goods if

they were lucky. When people were not working, the party that started on New Years continued.

The first week of Adisa's reign was known to the people as the week of good feelings.

When the wall was finally finished, Adisa planned to talk to his people about the completion of the project and give news. Before speaking he sat alone in the dark stone box that was underground. He had it built to appease his imagination from his dream, but it really was a good place to reflect before he went to speak to thousands of people. It also led to an escape route to the hospital in Utopia. His feet led him back and forth in the room while listening to people up top scream and shout for him to come out. With his back turned away from the entrance to the outside where a bit of sunlight came down to him, He felt a chill down his spine and a tiny ring in his ears. A voice came from the dark behind him and he knew exactly who it was.

"**Look at how much has changed since we last talked. You have truly grasped your destiny boy. I like what you're doing with the walls. The people love you more than I even thought. This week of good feelings is nice, but there is one more thing that you are forgetting.**"

Adisa gulped and knew exactly what his friend was going to mention. The elephant in the room that had followed Adisa around since he started his revolution and made him feel guilty for things that he had not even done.

The spirit continued, "**Farming and other ventures make good money sure, but you will need other ways to make money. You remember our agreement. Make Rakeem's old home the basis for your operation. It will be easy to sell whatever you can make to people outside the wall. You do not have to do it inside of these walls. It will not affect your people, and they will not even have to know you are in on it. If outside communities get corrupted by drugs, if they are smart, they will run to Utopia where you can accept them with open arms. Keep it a secret, and don't let it spread into Utopia. That is all you must do.**"

Adisa blinked his eyes and his friend who was sitting in the dark corner of the stone room disappeared into the shadows.

He knew the dream of Utopia came with a price, and to keep it alive, he'd have to sell drugs, no matter what. Telling his men was risky as he feared their panic or disapproval, but deep down, he knew they wouldn't

say no. They were in too deep. Power had tasted too sweet, and the best was still ahead for the boys.

Adisa pushed the guilt from his chest like smoke from a fire and climbed the creaking wooden stairs to his stage. His first real speech to his people.

As his small frame rose above the floor, the crowd erupted, screaming as if he was a Hollywood celebrity.

The yells of excitement had power behind it as the people were excited to see their young ruler who would lead them into a newfound greatness. Now in front of the high stage there was an open space between two small wooden fences that stopped the people from running up to grab Adisa like a crazed fan. In the open area stood his line of men with their rifles who had gotten them through so much.

On the steps on the right of the speaking stand, sat Paulo with his rifle leaned against himself and his camera pointed at the booming crowd. He turned the camera to Adisa who had his hands up in a confident manner with the microphone right in front of his lips.

Adisa looked down at the silver, circular microphone, perfectly level with his face. It sat inside a black ring, like a spotlight waiting for his voice. The microphone was quite old, but it was one a citizen had donated after they found it in a pile of junk. The microphone connected to four giant wooden stand mount speakers that let Adisa not have to scream and instead be able to talk normally and his people still hear him. Of course, this didn't stop him from screaming into the microphone and causing immense amounts of feedback.

People in front of Adisa could not stop screaming and shouting at the boy while he was trying to speak, so Adisa looked down at his men and put his right hand up sharply to which his men noticed and fired their Rifles into the air letting the sound boom throughout the city. The people automatically stopped their mouths and listened to what their leader had to say. Adisa tapped the microphone three times letting feedback ring into the air then comically spoke, "Testing, one, two, three. Testing one, two, three."

Adisa smiled and the people forcibly laughed.

"If my beautiful people have not noticed, the grand walls of Utopia have been built!"

People cheered and raised their arms in excitement then stopped after a couple of seconds.

"Look what we have done! This wall was nothing but an idea, but with the people it became a reality! Not one person was paid a dollar during this construction, only food and other rewards were given. This shows that as the people we do not need money to help each other out as blood is worth more than dollars! We have been tricked with the dollar to think we need it to make transactions when in the old-world people traded and bartered with people they loved for the strength of the commonwealth! By no means am I banning the dollar, but I encourage the people of Utopia to strive to use it as little as possible! The love of our heart should power what we need and who we help. We must be an example for the world to show them that this is possible!"

While people started to cheer again, Adisa noticed a woman and her daughter standing at the front of the crowd trying to reach over to where his security was with happy tears in their eyes. Repeatedly they screamed, "Adisa! Adisa!"

He noticed them and pointed, offering a small wave. The older woman, tears streaming down her face, collapsed in awe. Around her, people scrambled to claim the moment, each one desperate to believe Adisa had seen them too.

"I wanted to announce to our people on short notice that after this morning at around twelve we will have some visitors. An American news crew will be coming into Utopia and recording life around here. This will be broadcasted to the world along with my soldier Paulo's footage to show people that this community will strive. No matter what age the leader is, or how we support each other it will survive and strive! This news special will also invite people into Utopia where they can live in prosperity like us. After the special this will show a lot of people that we are setting an example for the world! Thank you, my people. *Long Love Utopia!*"

Adisa turned away as people shouted and walked down the stairs where Paulo followed him across the stage. The child leader noticed this and turned around and pointed into the camera then he repeated, "*Long Love Utopia!*"

He smiled and wrapped his arm around his friend while walking away with his men. They all hopped into the old police van behind the stage which now had been refurbished from the crash and all the beatings it had taken. As people scrambled to escape the city center, racing to get to Adisa, Afia sat quietly in the back of the van, his mind heavy with thoughts of the

days gone by. He had always been Adisa's best friend but now, he thought about how quickly Adisa and Paulo had become inseparable in just a matter of days.
He knew how Paulo operated. Paulo knew how to suck up to someone just enough to where it wasn't annoying, and Adisa was the kind of person who thrived on the attention. He relished in it. Jealousy clumped in Afia's throat.

While driving up the hill towards his new house Adisa looked at where he stood as his men grabbed him and shook him around in celebration of the grand speech. As they drove off, he focused on the white piece of wood that was nailed into the stage from the old gazebo where the scalps of Rakeem and Cyril stood on nails. People would run up to the scalps and touch the trophies with their fingers but not take them down as if they were holy relics. Even Mothers would raise their children to run their fingers against the skin of old enemies.

Adisa rode towards his house ready to prepare for his interview.

-Chapter XXII-

When the clock struck twelve, A dirty white chevy van rode towards the front gate of Utopia. In the van riding through the dirt, A news crew of three rode by themselves scared of what could be approaching them. Even if Utopia had an airstrip Adisa had invited them to use, due to unfavorable circumstances, the crew couldn't get a plane into Utopia, so they resorted to using the van. The interviewer, Rebecca Rowl, was a well-known reporter who had interviewed many respected people around the world. She rode with her not so well-known audio specialist and camera operator.

Usually, a camera recorder in a news crew is seen as a person of bigger stature but this guy was a skinny greasy man who could barely handle the giant camera sitting on his shoulder. Two boys smoking cigarettes with AKs stood in front of the giant gate and began to walk out as the van came nearer.

Even if the boys were noticeable to the crew, what really was interesting was the giant spray painted: "UTOPIA" in red across the left side of the city's wall. The camera man shouted from the back of the van to Rebecca, "The letter we got, it wasn't a lie, these are really kids! I think we are in for a treat."

The boom operator shook his head, and the camera man began to record through the front window and zoom in on the boys. Rebecca then said, "Yes, it is very true, the world is going to eat up this story. Now just be cool and we will make it out breathing."

The two boys approached the van with their guns down and neutral faces. Rebecca rolled down her window and spoke, "Hello Friends! Are you going to check this van?"

The boy next to her door said, "Yup," which threw her off guard as she expected the boy to have a childish voice but instead, he sounded like a thirty-year-old who had been smoking his whole life. By the time the boy said, "Yup", his rifle wielding accomplice opened the rusty back door of the van, surprising the crew inside. The boy hopped into the white van, tossing

the scattered equipment around without a word. He avoided eye contact, ignoring the people inside as he searched under seats and through glove compartments. One by one, each crew member was ordered to stand and be searched.

When Rebecca's turn came, she complied, then dropped back into her seat with a huff. She glanced at the boy near the door. He was smug looking and shameless. Rebecca scoffed and looked away.

The boy jumped out, slammed the door, and gave a silent nod to his partner at the entrance. They were cleared and Utopia awaited.

Rebecca raised a hand in a mockingly sweet wave, plastering on a smile as they drove off.

Behind them, one of the boys hit the ground, lying flat in the dirt to check beneath the van as he'd forgotten to look underneath.

As the crew drove past farms, they saw happy people working out on their fields which they recorded. After about a minute they were fully in the city surrounded by semi big stone buildings filled with homes and businesses. Out of nowhere a crowd of children and parents stopped the van by jumping out in front of them on their so far smooth path and waved their arms up and down.

At first the news crew were a bit startled as the people came out of nowhere, but the citizens didn't seem to mean any harm and asked for them to come out. While still recording, the camera man opened the back of the van and recorded the small horde of people that were surrounding the van. Rebecca stopped the van and climbed near the back of the van where children poked her. A random little child yelled out, "White woman!" and others awed at her different color. For a big percent of Utopia this was the first time they had seen a Caucasian person. Rebecca swatted the people away that were touching her making sure that she was real and then put on her reporter face and asked, "Tell me as the first person I am speaking to In Utopia, what is it like here."

A mother holding a small child who was gazing into the soul of Rebecca, said, "It is now heaven. We have a strong leader, strong defense and food. Many people starved to death here before Adisa and now I see people walking around with full stomachs instead of rib cages showing."

Rebecca then nodded her head and uttered, "Mhm," and then asked, "That is great, what are the people's thoughts on Adisa's Age?"

Quickly the mother responded, “So far Adisa’s age has shown great prosperity for our people, it is better than our old leader's age I will tell you that.”

Rebecca then laughed and said, “No I mean people’s thoughts on how old the boy is.”

“I forget that he would be considered a child to some people. I have not heard a person complain about his length of life because it does not matter. He has come in and changed thousands of lives, so people do not even care. He is no boy.”

Rebecca took a moment of silence to process what the woman had said and then responded, “Thank you for your answer. Is there anything else anyone would like to say?”

People started to rush to the woman saying random things such as, “Adisa is the best!” Or “*Long Love Utopia!*”

They recorded the crowd going crazy showing support for Utopia and Rebecca decided it was enough, so she swept her hand next to her neck signaling to cut the camera.

She started to shut the doors of the van and yelled, “Thank you!”

As the door was closing in a small crack of air a black piece of cloth got thrown into the van by a small boy. The camera man opened up the dark shirt and stretched it out to read whatever was written on the shirt. He held it out with two hands and examined it. Along the front of the shirt in white it was painted, “Long Love Utopia.”

His hands turned it around to the rest of the crew then he smirked and asked, “Do you think they know how to spell the phrase? Is this what happens to education when a child runs your city?”

The Audio engineer then said, “Maybe they meant to spell it that way. Long live the love of Utopia.”

Rebecca snarked at the engineer's realization and started the car to continue their journey to Adisa’s home.

As the van neared the city center, more people lined the road, waving at the news crew and chasing after the vehicle like kids chasing an ice cream truck.

Just before they reached the entrance, a wooden platform came into view that was unmistakably a stage. Rebecca leaned forward; eyes wide.

“Record this! Are those… scalps?”

Through the van's window, the cameraman zoomed in. The lens swept over the stage and the vast, empty dirt field stretching before it, big enough to be a football field. Then it focused on the white panel below the stage and the flaps bloodied and hairy, Nailed to the wood.

"God," he muttered. "They are scalps…"

Rebecca gripped the wheel tighter with her eyes forward.

"Let's keep driving."

The van finally made it up to the compound after going out of its way to interview people in the street where two boys stood outside of the compound and happily opened the gate to let them in. Right when the white van pulled up in front of the house, Adisa came out with his arms up with armed men coming out with rifles by his side. The crew shut the back of the van, and the cameraman began recording the spectacle.

"Welcome To Utopia!" Adisa shouted.

Everyone in the crew could not help but want to smile at whatever was happening before their eyes even if they were a bit terrified. Adisa seemed to have a white orb of light around his body leading them to him. As they approached him, Adisa rushed up to them and began to shake their hands, introducing himself to them. When he got to the Cameraman's hand, he locked eyes with him and said, "I Love your shirt? Where did you get this?"

The Cameraman looked at his raggedy Long Love Utopia shirt and then said, "A kind citizen threw it into our van. I could not see who gave it to us."

Adisa let go of his hand and then said, "I should start selling those, put them all over the world!" Adisa laughed, then he said, "Come inside, Come inside."

With a group of men around Adisa and the crew they walked into the house, With Adisa showing off Cyril's decorations and possessions as if they were his. They then made it to the cleared out living room next to the kitchen that had only two nice leather seats next to the window. The crew got their set up ready, and Adisa and Rebbeca sat across from each other on the titled chairs. She adjusted her hair and made sure she looked good while Adisa looked at her with a smile on his face. The Camera man then spoke, "Three… Two… One… Action!"

Rebecca cleared her throat and then said, “Hello Adisa, very nice to meet you.”

She reached her hand out for Adisa to shake to which Adisa then stuck his hand out and shook it.

“Okay If you insist, I'll shake your hand again.”

Rebecca laughed and responded, “Very funny, now let us start at the beginning Adisa, what sparked the revolution of yours.”

Adisa smirked and adjusted his posture then said, “Well, I have lived in this city for my whole life, and I used to work on a cattle ranch. Since I was little, I was taken advantage of and saw the true filth that humanity could bring. Every time I would come home from work, I was attacked by older men who would then take my money. It happened every day for over a year until I realized the secret to life. You are in control, and you control your destiny. The next time they tried to attack me I put them down. I didn’t stop there; I armed myself and a group of friends and began to clean the filth starting from the bottom up. If I just killed those boys, they would have been replaced in a heartbeat by another group of thugs, but I worked my way up with my soldiers and took down the biggest drug dealer in this city. But I also knew that even he would be replaced in a heartbeat and not stopped by those in power. I then killed the mayor of this city as he was in collusion with Rakeem, the drug dealer who had tarnished this city for years. Now I am in charge and there will not be another kingpin or any more thugs.”

Rebecca cleared her throat, then spoke, “I mean, this is a crazy story for someone of your age. What do you have to say to anyone who wants to tarnish what you are doing because of how long you’ve been alive.”

Adisa looked around with a confused face and then said, “I do not understand. Could you repeat that?”

Rebecca went wide-eyed and then adjusted herself and said, “Sorry- I was saying what do you have to say to anyone who looks down on you because of your age or wants to stop you because of it?”

The boy quickly responded, “I have to say, it doesn’t matter how old you are, anything is possible. I wish for my story to be inspirational to anyone on this earth who thinks they can’t do what they want to do. Not just inspirational to young people.”

“That is a powerful statement, Adisa. What are some of the rules and laws of Utopia? People are very curious as this is a unique community that has big implications for Africa and even the rest of the world.”

“I know that Utopia is one of a kind, but it does not have to be. Utopia strives to commit acts of kindness and work together as a people for everyone as we are all humans. I do not allow drugs in these walls… and I give free meals and water for anyone who lives within these walls as that should be something leaders provide to their people! These are easy rules to follow and not absurd rules. If other governments put in these rules societies would be much better off and I can say that with certainty.”

Adisa put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it after talking, blowing his smoke away from Rebecca.

She then asked, “How was it converting this city from Nileville to Utopia.”

Adisa took the cigarette out of his mouth and said, “Just so you know it is looked down upon if you say the name of the old city. Utopia is so far from Nileville that it is alien. The word of the old city disgusts people and brings up feelings of hatred and sadness… To answer your question, it was not very hard to convert the city. The people were starving and dying out in the streets. My leadership is miles above the old cities, so the people accepted me with open arms. They did not need forcing like some governments.”

Adisa took another long drag of the cigarette and then Rebecca Asked, “Now as we were driving in, we noticed a wooden structure with a microphone on it. There were also what seemed to be scalps hanging from the wood, what is the purpose of that?”

Adisa blew smoke out and then put his head back and then said, “That is my speaking stand. Everyone in the city gathers there to listen to my messages. Now the purpose of the scalps is not to put fear into the people. I am not showing them that, that could be them. The tops are from the old mayor and Rakeem the old drug kingpin of this city. Those two people caused immense pain in this city and ruined people's lives.” He stopped for a moment and looked his faint eyes around and continued, “The Mayor even convinced his brother to slay my mother, and he let Rakeem do what he was doing and didn’t stop him. A man in power that lets evil happen is worse than the man below him who is allowed to do it.”

“I am sorry to hear about your mother… What was her name?”

Adisa was struck by this question and exhaled deeply and said, “Dara… Dara Moses. I miss her every day and my speaking stand is dedicated to her and so is all of Utopia.”

The boy thought of his deceased mother for a moment without making eye contact towards Rebecca and was broken out of his trance by his interviewer asking, “Now with these scalps brings an implication of violence even if they are just trophies to show the success of your people. From an outside perspective, Utopia might seem like a violent city-state in an already violent country. What do you say to that?”

Adisa opened his eyes and then responded, “Utopia is for peace and for the people. But violence must happen for things to change. Look at you Americans who had George Washington and the revolutionary war. It has happened throughout history, but I will agree that this new country has been plagued by violence and has seen too much of it. Utopia is different from South Sudan. Even if we are in South Sudan, we are our own thing even if we are not recognized as such. This infant of a country was made only two years ago which I remember clearly, and the peace did not last even when they got what they wanted. Death broke out as it has followed our people for far too long, arguing over which god is right or which ethnicity is right. In Utopia, there is no main religion, and we are all the same blood.”

Rebecca shook her head again and tapped her pen and said, “Even though the president, Samir Moses has not spoken of your independence just yet, how do you plan on having relations with him?”

“There will be no wars between us and if he ever wants to talk, he is welcome. I don’t plan on having any relations with that man though, as my people have made it clear enough, we don’t think of ourselves as South Sudan but instead as Utopia.”

“Now what are your plans for the future of Utopia?”

“Utopia’s population will grow, and it will only be filled with more good people. Anyone is welcome within these walls as long as they are willing to follow our rules. I see great prosperity in the future, but I do know that my system does not promote people's greedy ways and people will try to bring me and my people down. Anything is possible with love. Any threat that arises will be put down with force.”

“Great words. Any message for anyone out there looking at Utopia from an outside view?”

“Any soul is allowed into this haven. People can say what they want but this society will stand the test of time. The only people that die in Utopia are people who had it coming. I hope our society is an example to the outside world that anything is possible.”

Rebecca then finally said, “That will be it for the interview, Thank you Adisa.”

Before the camera stopped Adisa stood up, adjusted his pants and said, “Long Love Utopia!”

Adisa let out an evil sounding laugh as the camera zoomed in on his face.

The young boy stuck his hand out and said, “My pleasure,” as Rebecca put her hand out with shakiness. She felt as if she was in the presence of a madman. They both got up out of their chairs and Adisa started small talk with the film crew. Adisa told the camera man, “I don’t know If I have told you, but I really like that shirt. Why don’t we all get a picture together.”

The camera man laughed and then said, “Sure! Let me grab my camera.”

Adisa then put his hand up and said, “No, no, let my friend Paulo take it.”

The crew of three stood by the side of Adisa and put a thumbs up with a smile on their face as Paulo took the photo with the old camera.

As he was taking the photos, it hit Rebecca why people liked Adisa so much. He was a charismatic boy who could charm anyone. Paulo passed the camera to Adisa to which Adisa took the SD card out of the back of the camera and handed it to the Camera man.

“Take this please, there is footage of me speaking and other good things around Utopia. And also send me the photo once it is ready. I will put it up in my office... My first interview! Now if you would like before you leave, we can ride along the walls, and I could show you other things for more footage.”

The crew obliged and they exited the home to get into Adisa’s new refurbished van. Awkwardly they piled into the new van with child soldiers and Adisa driving which the crew questioned. Rebecca asked, “Where you gifted this van? How did you acquire it?”

With the cameras rolling Adisa responded, “It used to be the police department's van, we took it by force. Funnily enough my men accidentally drove it into the department letting my friend Afia here free

after the mayor took him hostage. Even if I am thankful for that action, there is a reason why only I drive."

While recording the camera man could not help but laugh at the crazy story.

Three days after the interview was filmed, the special on Adisa was edited and put on worldwide television. People from all corners of the world watched the child leader Adisa and how he ruled over his self-governed section of South Sudan. A lot of people watching were disgusted but others were amazed at the feat and fell into Adisa's charismatic ways. Adisa had become a sensation across the world, seen as a threat or a savior to others. Even people that did not have TVs or see the special heard the word of Adisa and his Utopia. The section of South Sudan was most looked at as good by people in Africa who had never had the opportunities of free food.

From all over the globe Utopia was seen as a threat to the natural order of the world but Adisa knew that this would come. He did not care and urged people to come together to come to Utopia.

Adisa had the flame in his heart to take revenge against the men that hurt him but did not ever think he would end up in the ruling spot of his city. To think that it would be known all over the world in an instant was also insane to his mind. The people that were not fearful or hating of the boy, took inspiration from his life story and how he took his fate into his own hands.

In Ibis, the Capital of South Sudan, people rejoiced at the idea of Utopia. Ibis was very similar to Utopia and not far from it. Even if it was the Capital, Ibis was a poor city with drug problems and corrupt officials.

That is why Cyril was friends with the Mayor of Ibis, Kuol Pech.

Adisa had begun to believe that the president of South Sudan himself, Samir Moses, was the man who sent reinforcements to Cyril's home, so Adisa didn't like the thought of going to Ibis or being acquainted with Kuol even if they were his neighbors.

Samir was a mysterious man, despised by his people and largely unknown to Adisa. There had been several attempts on his life, along with a failed revolution aimed at toppling his rule.

When news reached him of his old friend Cyril's death and of Adisa renaming Nileville as Utopia and claiming it as his own, Samir was livid. Since then, he had been quietly scheming ways to strike back, to weaken or

even destroy the boy, but his time was consumed by the endless demands of governing his newly fractured nation, leaving little room for personal vendettas.

Eventually, Samir convinced himself that Utopia posed no real threat. He let the matter rest, not out of forgiveness or disinterest, but out of irritation so deep that the very thought of acknowledging Adisa soured his mood. He refused to send a letter, to call a meeting, or even speak the boy's name.

Silence, he decided, would be his response.

The President's rage finally boiled over when he saw the boy on his own television. With his morning coffee in hand, he walked out to his large living room with his wife on the couch watching the news from an American channel. The special started with a picture of Adisa and his men all holding AK-47s in a line with all of them trying to look tough next to a spray-painted black van. Samir gripped his coffee hard with hard tense fingers and he bit his lip in silence, trying to cover up his rage. Across the picture of the Boys came lettering reading, "Utopia: The Children's City."

Samir quivered his lip but could not help but watch what was going to happen. After the show of children with rifles, the special went straight into the interview with Adisa, cut with recordings of the city and its walls. Watching Adisa's confidence, so assured and so effortless as he claimed a city that didn't belong to him, lit a fire in Samir.

Samir felt, no boy his age should carry that kind of confidence. The President could already see how the people would fall in love with him, and that realization made his blood boil.

He stood still for a moment, fingers curling around the handle of a brown clay coffee cup, his jaw tightening. Then, without a word, he hurled the mug straight at the television.

It missed his wife's head by inches.

The cup shattered against the screen, splashing scalding coffee across the living room as the TV fizzled into static. Half of the mug clattered to the floor, spinning once before settling in a growing puddle.

His wife flinched, clutching the top of her head, then let out a quiet, "Hmph."

The First Lady of South Sudan, Hiba Moses got up from the couch and stormed off towards their master bedroom.

Samir watched this with his hand on his head and then from behind him heard, “I told you getting involved with the mess with Cyril was a mistake. We have lost too many of our officers.”

The large man’s eyes shut for a moment. Then, with a sharp pivot, he turned with his breath heavy as he glanced down at the suited man seated at the small dining table near the door.

The man wore a wrinkled grey suit and thin, clear-framed glasses, his expression frozen in terror as he looked up at Samir.

Samir said nothing. He simply stared at the mayor, Kuol then grunted and reached into the inner pocket of his robe and drew a small black Beretta Bobcat.

Without a word, he closed one eye, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

The shot rang out, striking Kuol square in the stomach. Blood splattered against the back of the once pristine chair, which now bore a hole where the round had passed through.

Kuol's glasses flew off as he slumped to the floor in silence.

In Samir’s immaculate mansion, so clean it could’ve been a museum, there was now a body on the tile, and he knew his wife was going to be furious. He couldn’t be mad though as he already planned on killing this man as he was getting in the way of his plan.

“I’m glad you did it… because if you didn’t it woulda been me.”

The man in the all-white outfit sat at the circular table across from Kuol. He spoke calmly, almost unfazed by the sudden violence, then rose to his feet. With a flick of the wrist, he tried wiping away the three specks of blood that had splattered beneath his collar, tiny stains that seemed to irritate him more than the killing itself.

He wore black Ray-Bans, his eyes hidden behind the tinted lenses.

Though Samir couldn’t see the man’s eyes, they looked at each other, Then they laughed.

In that moment, the blood, the body, the broken calm, it all seemed like just another piece of the game they’d been playing.

The President spoke with a booming voice, “Now you are Mayor David Akech.”

Samir burst into laughter, a deep sound that bounced off the marble walls.

David hesitated for half a second, then followed suit, laughing along, his sound lighter and more practiced. He matched his leader’s energy,

nodding through the laughter, even as a corpse still bled onto the floor beside them.

The title had been given that David knew he would receive and now there was no turning it down.

The man in white put on his colorless general's beret and walked out of his leader's house towards a crowd that had formed itself around his home.

He looked down to his silver watch seeing it was twelve o' clock then he casually took his pistol out of his pants and shot a whole magazine of bullets into the sky to shut the people up. The line of officers in front of the crowd looked back at their leader and laughed.

People appeared to be enraged again and returned to shouting insults at the General and tried picking fights with the officers. With a dirty white megaphone in his hand, the new Mayor raised it to his mouth and yelled, "Before speaking, I need order!"

No one seemed to calm down in the crowd and in reaction he said, "I come bearing good news for the people of Ibis!"

He threw up his hands and a smile went on his face even though people were still cursing him. They went quiet for a minute and Samir took his chance to speak.

"To start I come bearing good news that I am the new Mayor of Ibis!"

Boos and curses came from the crowd then David continued.

"I know that most of you have seen or heard of Adisa and Utopia. Before Utopia was finalized in place, we sent officers over to help Cyril of Nileville, the old mayor. Adisa and his savages killed him and then every officer we sent. These were community leaders that were put down! People that could be your neighbors or family! This child leader clearly has no compass of right or wrong. We all could be next to be attacked! And to see that some of you want to leave Ibis is horrifying! Ibis is better than the childish Utopia in every way. It is a fake dream that is put forward by a power-hungry child!"

People in the crowd then began to scream again, saying together, "We want free food!"

David shook his head and then screamed into the microphone.

"There is no more negotiating! If anyone leaves Ibis, they will be put down! We must stand together strong and if we do not, we will crumble!"

At this point people from the crowd started to pull out blunt objects and other weapons to try and attack officers which led to gun fire by police. The officers fired into the air as a warning which scared the people of Ibis and drew them back. People started to run off scared to their homes hoping they would not get shot in the back.

At the first fire, David walked past the shrubbery outside of the palace and entered it again.

Sitting where he was just sitting earlier was Samir who now wore a suit and was surrounded by two armored police officers. He turned to his side at his angered second in command and said, "It went as I expected."

After his hoarse voice settled, David then sat down across from him. He gave a look at the broken TV and let a large exhale out.

David muttered, "He has them in his grasp… There is no way to stop them from leaving besides with force. That child has Satan on his side."

Samir looked at David with no facial reaction and then said, "We must play his game against him, but with the same moves as he makes."

David squinted then asked his friend, "What do you mean by that?"

The man then spoke, "Build walls, make sure no one leaves. Take away TVs and make them love us. Then we will put the plan into effect."

David realized how smart this action would be. Even if the walls were terrible, it did not matter as long as no one left Ibis for Utopia. He got off the couch and walked back outside towards the line of Officers who had seized fire as every citizen had run back into the city.

Samir shouted, "Any Casualties?" Not caring what the answer to this question was.

The officers shook their heads no and then Samir spoke, "We have a long couple of days ahead of us. Make sure no one leaves the city. Prepare resources to build walls."

He patted one of the officers on the back and then strutted towards his sitting police car. The officers were tired, and this news made them feel exhausted just hearing about it.

By the end of the day, after the new mayor's shaky, unconvincing speech, the mood in Ibis had soured. Families began packing what they could carry, gathering their children, and searching for a way out. The restless city had

now been stirred up and people planned to leave quietly in the night towards Utopia.

To keep anyone from leaving, ten officers on motorbikes began patrolling the outskirts, riding in wide, looping circles near the edge of the city where the wall was soon to rise. You couldn't leave the hum of their engines anywhere you went in the city.

Meanwhile, five other officers moved with efficiency, laying the first pieces of the barrier's foundation.

It was clear that Ibis was no longer a place you could simply walk away from.

A group of around twenty of the Capital's citizens all from the same string of homes in the slums packed all their belongings in sacks and gathered whatever scraps they could together. At Seven, outside of their homes, the group gathered together, ready to run away from their terrible city and towards Utopia. People who decided to stay in Ibis were envious of their neighbors but didn't want to risk getting executed.

They began their short trek towards the forest that was between Utopia and Ibis. Before they could reach there was a dreaded area known as "Dead Folks Marsh." This area was not walked through or even thought about as it was filled with crocodiles. There were legends of people taking only a few steps into the marsh then disappearing in an instant, being killed by crocs or other horrors.

The promise of Utopia was more than enough for them to at least try to make the hike, no matter the legend.

With the marsh stretching below their line of sight, the group pressed forward, moving in silence as they crossed the road. Night cloaked them on all sides, and every step was laced with the hope that no headlights would cut through the dark and expose them. One beam, one passing car or bike, and their position would be compromised.

Everyone had finally made it across the road besides a father and his toddler son who did not want to cross the road. The boy walked behind the father, and he looked back at his son who stood in the road and was startled.

“No!” The child yelled as it kicked its feet and threw a fit.

The father clamped his sweaty palm over the child’s mouth, stifling the cries as the boy writhed and kicked in his arms. Just as he lifted him, a sudden beam of light cut through the night, coming fast around the bend.

The dirt bikes rider appeared like a phantom from the dark, engine roaring and eyes locked on the man as if he’d been waiting for him. The father froze for a moment, caught in the blinding light.

Then instinct took over.

“Run,” he shouted to the others, his voice tearing through the night.

Without hesitation, he hurled the child down the hill toward the marsh, where the rest of the group crouched low in the shadows and around trees. The baby hit the ground softly, headfirst into a thick patch of moss by the water’s edge.

A woman broke from the group, scooped the child into her arms, brushed the moss from its crying face, and vanished into the darkness. The others followed, fleeing deeper into the wetlands, feet splashing as they ran.

At the roadside, the father raised his hands in surrender. The officer, already reaching for his sidearm, dropped his bike to the dirt.

“What is your business here? Trying to leave! Is there anyone else with you?”

He smiled in reaction then said, “Rot in hell!”

With no hesitation the officer shot him in the heart. The poor soul let out a gust of air and slowly fell to the ground.

To the officer’s right, down below the hill in the marsh, the sound of someone gasping alerted him, making him raise his pistol up again. With Haste the officer then radioed to his men, “I need backup now, we have runners! I am at position Eight!”

His feet carried him up the small berm that overlooked the marshland, where figures, dark and desperate rushed through the swampy

terrain. The officer's mind was already made up and without hesitation, he braced his elbow with his left hand, aimed, and fired. The rounds tore through the night, striking the fleeing silhouettes. Some fell into the muck, their bodies splashing as the water sprayed into the air. The officer didn't flinch, and he kept firing, one after another, picking them off as they went down.

By the time the first four people had collapsed, their bodies sinking into the wet ground, his comrades had joined him at the top of the berm. They opened fire as well, sending bullets into the darkness, gunning down anything that resembled a person.

One by one, the nineteen runners fell, their bodies left to float lifelessly in the water, each with a gaping wound in their backs. The Crocodiles would take care of them by morning, stripping the remains clean, leaving nothing behind but empty water and the faintest trace of blood. A Massacre would be covered up and the Ibis Police wouldn't have to worry about the bodies at all.

-Chapter XXIII-

The night the slaughter in Ibis happened, Adisa did not hear a word of it, as no one did besides the soldiers who committed it.

That same night Adisa asked his men to gather with him at Rakeem's house for an important meeting. Most of the boys were already together but Adisa wanted to make it feel official, so he set up the meeting at the giant house. The news he would have to break to them could potentially hurt what he had been building up with his boys. The alternative was no better though, if he did not follow the spirits orders of spreading drugs, he did not know what pain he would be met with.

The sun was down, and Adisa sat upon the steps of Rakeem's door. His men made it to the compound soon after he did. Seeing Adisa sitting on the steps of his old enemy's door looking somber to most of the men. It looked as if he had the worst news to tell the boys. Adisa's soldiers ran up to him and tried to tell jokes and say greetings to heighten the mood, but Adisa sat in silence staring down at his feet. Even though Adisa seemed to have the world in his palms it looked as if he had been defeated in a way. When all of his soldiers stood in front of him, he stood up which made some of the boys back up from the surprising action. Adisa looked into the eyes of every boy making the hairs on their back stand up straight as his eyes glued onto each of them. After staring into their eyes, he stood in silence looking off into the dark sky in front of him. Without making a second look at the boy's, Adisa said, "I was going to start this speech asking, who here would do anything to keep Utopia alive? But I realized you all have already shown me the answer to this. We have gone to hell and back to achieve this dream. But it will be nothing if we do not support our people! We have gotten people in Utopia to this point by helping them, giving them free food and supporting our people. But already after a week and a little more we are running out of food and money. The farmers we have been working with

cannot produce enough food for every soul within these walls. I have a solution, and it lies within the house behind me."

Adisa went quiet and his men started to exchange worried glances. They knew what was going to be said by their leader who they would have to listen to.

The leader of the boys cleared his throat and said, "Plain and simple we will sell drugs… Not to the people within these walls but to private buyers outside of these walls. No soul within these walls will be affected by drugs anymore! And any smart person outside of these walls that is pained by drugs can run to Utopia! It is a win-win for us!"

It was still silent, and Afia spoke up, saying, "A win-win for us. But a great pain to other communities. This is not the right idea, Adisa. This will hurt the people within these walls whether you realize it or not."

Adisa took a deep breath and said, "Do you think outside communities like us? Their leaders despise us as we are the leaders of the free world! They are in the old world. The world they profit off and would kill to stay in place. No one within these walls will be harmed and I will make sure of it with my life."

Afia blurted in response, "Selling drugs? I thought that would be something we would never touch but I guess if it must be done it must be done."

"Do you think I want to do it either? It is something that is right at our fingertips to be used for our benefit. Utopia will fall if people do not get their food! No one will even have to know about the dealings. If anyone is opposed to this you can leave now," Adisa said with vexation.

Most of the boys felt defeated at Adisas news, feeling as if it went against everything that he had preached since the beginning of the revolution, but they knew if they stopped now Utopia would not stay alive. It would crumble and be a forgotten memory just as the enemy wanted it to be. Now the feeling of defeat had partially passed from Adisa to his own men.

Adisa opened the grand doors to the house that each boy wished would be theirs one day. He entered and his men followed right behind each one walking in feeling a sense of dread go over them as this house would not become a home and change but instead stay the same as a drug operation. A place where the immortal reign of Rakeem would be continued, a place where poison would be continued to be made. A poison

that Adisa was sure wouldn't spread into his community even if it was being made within the walls of it.

One by one boys filled with sorrow went into the basement which until now was untouched by the boys. The lights were off, and Adisa flicked them on brightly lighting up glass tubes, pipes and beakers surrounding them. It was clear that this was a meth lab which is what Rakeem specialized in. Looking around, the boy's felt gross and drab in the disgusting room.

In the right corner there were giant dark green packages that were covered in plastic wrap. Next to the packages of Marijuana were packages filled with brown powder and other ones filled with cloudy, almost transparent, compacted crystals. Leaning against the pile of saran wrapped drugs was a giant piece of rebar that had the plastic wrap around it so whoever was packaging the drugs could use the plastic roller to package it quicker. Adisa ungracefully walked around touching his hands on the burnt glass tubing around them and finally resting his hand on the pile of packaged drugs. His soldiers looked down at the floor and kicked their feet around not knowing what to say. The boys who Adisa was nothing without felt a little betrayed and embarrassed but there was no other way to keep Utopia Alive.

Adisa broke the silence and said, "I know this looks terrible and in a way it is. But we have a goldmine sitting right under our feet that could be used to put food in people's stomach above. No one has to know about these operations if we keep it between us and not a single soul more! Now let us begin this side of business… *Long Love Utopia!*"

Adisa's soldiers mumbled, "Long Love Utopia," in an unencouraged way.

They scurried around following Adisa's curious fingers opening makeshift cabinets and drawers looking for any sort of instruction or anything that could help them. This snooping inside of a dead man's walls revealed powder burned glass pipes, small metal tools, plastic jugs of chemicals and light filled cabinets occupied with dirt and small bushy saplings. The last drawer that was found by the boys was in the bottom of a white painted dresser that was dug into the wall, holding a paper booklet filled with messy pen writing and crumbled paper. Paulo grabbed the already chomped up paper and held it up like a trophy. He then passed it to

Adisa and on the front of the gnawed-up paper in big black lettering said, 'Instructins'.

Adisa plopped the packet down on the shiny metal table behind him that was covered in white powder residue and burn marks. He started to flip through pages, taking the paperclip holder off the pages to free them, then laid out pages all over the table for his men to look at. The pages were filled with messy writing, diagrams and models of what certain burners should look like and how much of what you should put into each contraption. Adisa shouted out, "All of you read these papers and study them with your life. Learn as much as you can with as little mistakes as possible. We will start operations tonight!"

Every boy looked up and obediently shook their heads while locking eyes with Adisa. He turned his back to his men and started to walk back up the stairs into the house in the dead of night where no soul rested. Walking around the house aimlessly he felt the guilt of his actions that had not even occurred resting heavy on his shoulders.

Outside of the home still within the walls of Utopia, A new era had begun in the land which still was so infantile. Whether Adisa's people knew it or not, the week of good feelings had been laid to rest no matter if they kept partying.

People around Utopia started to see Adisa and his men less and less, which sparked worry about him. Instead of Adisa speaking every day or at least every other day it had been changed to once a week. The crave for blood and the need for Adisa's motivating words did not ever stop coming from his people even if he started to see the young man less and less. While people lollygagged and drank themselves to near death in never ending festivities, Adisa and his men were secretly hard at work.

For a week straight the boy's cooked up dope, using the cocaine that was left over from Rakeem to make crack, which stretched out the drugs life which meant it stretched out their money's life. They became very familiar with making Meth as well, which was harder than cooking crack but was easy in a way with the number of tools they had to make it. The amount of piping and burners pretty much cooked the meth for them. By the end of the week, they sat on one kilo of crack and three hard kilos of meth.

The saran wrapped weed that was sitting on the corner would have joined the pile but by the end of the week it had disappeared. To pass the

time quickly the boys partook in putting the awful wet brick weed in their cigarettes and hotboxing the house. No one had smoked weed before in the group, but they promised each other they wouldn't partake in it unless they were making product.

The boys did not leave the house for three full days, sharing beds when they slept which was a rare occurrence. Rakeem, being the big man he was, had much food in the home. Mostly freezers full of meats including crocodile, pork and kudu which he had the most of. The gang cooked the meats up each night and filled their stomachs with sour and gamey meat.

Near the end of the week, on a slow Thursday night the kilos of narcotics laid in the basement with the boys looking at it with their eyes wide open like it was a pile of gold.

Paulo, who was without a doubt Adisa's most loyal soldier, planned to get the gang set up with a buyer who happened to be his older cousin Loro. He lived in Ibis and was a well-known drug dealer in the area. Paulo and Loro did not know each other well but Paulo knew of his might in the city and that he was still active in the streets.

A little under a week before Adisa's uprising at school, Loro and his mother came to Nileville to visit Paulo and his family. Loro was twenty but still lived with his mother and father who he cared for with his dirty money that they paid no attention to. When Paulo saw his older cousin, he was wearing the same expensive designer tracksuit he always wore with a thousand little "GG" Logos embellished all over with red and white stripes running down his arm and leg. Loro had a dark-skinned face that sported bright red eyes with a distinctive patchy stubble beard under them that anyone could recognize. The tracksuit he always wore was old and had unwashable stains running down it, whether that being dirt or blood from the people he wronged. He also always had a gold and silver interlinked Cuban link chain that was wrapped around his neck and stuck out on top of his jacket. The gold and the silver on the chain clashed and switched off every other link and looked like the cheapest thing you could buy at a jewelry store that no one wanted to buy.

When Paulo saw him at the little reunion, he questioned how his older cousin didn't die from heat exhaustion in his tracksuit while being beamed down upon by the bright African sun. They saw each other for only an hour and Loro gave his cousin the opportunity to come work for him

anytime or be a connection in Nileville. Of course, Paulo said he was interested but never thought that he would have to use this connection in his lifetime.

After staring at the bricks of dope, Adisa ordered his men to pick them up and transfer them to the van upstairs. Five boys carried each in their hands a saran covered block of drugs, feeling dirty and disgusting as they walked through the house looking at the plastic wrapped poison in their grip. Adisa was the first to make it outside and opened the back of the doors of the van. Once all the boys were outside and the bricks were thrown into the back of the van Adisa boomed over his soldiers, "It has been a few days since we have left this compound, and in that week the world has seen Utopia. Our interview has gone global attracting many eyes on us. This means a lot of hate on our beings; this means our faces are recognizable. This means we have to be careful. I do not know the Mayor of Ibis, I do not know if he hates us and wants to see Utopia burn. But even if he does not, we do not know so we must treat it that way. I am sending Paulo, Afia and three other boys of your choosing to do this deal. I would go but at this point as I said I am too recognizable, and this must be done discreetly. Whoever goes must do this operation smartly making sure not a soul sees this deal. This is a first for us, but I believe it will go well. Do good my soldiers!"

The boys cheered, then three boys in the front of the gang hopped into the back of the van. Paulo ran to the driver's seat then Afia got into the passenger seat, them not wanting to leave or do what they were going to do. Afia did not agree with what was happening and Paulo did not even know if his cousin was still alive. This was a blind mission with a lot at stake. The boys in the back did not much agree with the actions either but it was something that they could be involved in, so they tagged along for the deal. Other boys in the gang outside of the van looked at the boys inside with envy as they drove off out of the compound that they were stuck in with their leader.

Adisa caught the envy in his allies' eyes, their silent glances, and in that moment, he understood something deeper.

No matter how dark the task, no matter how twisted he got… his boys would do it. Not because it was right and not even because they believed in it.

It was only because it was him asking.

Utopia's van started riding the short distance to Ibis, being filled with nothing but silence for the first couple of minutes. The only thing occurring in the van was biting lips and sweat dripping down boys' foreheads. A boy in the back looking at the bricks spoke up to the two boys in the front and said, "Shouldn't we be hiding the narcotics? We don't know what type of security Ibis has."

Paulo looked at Afia then shouted back to them, "As long as you can hide them up your bums, we should be fine."

Afia and Paulo shared a laugh as the boys in the back silently sat there not knowing if Paulo was bluffing or not. The driver followed up his joke and said, "I don't know what Ibis is like, but we will see. It is the Capital after all so maybe you should put the kilos up your ass!"

The scared boys in the back stayed silent while Afia and Paulo laughed, knowing their place in the hierarchy of the van, most powerful being at the front and them being powerless in the back.

As the city loomed closer, a weathered sign stood quietly in the small forest surrounding Ibis looking forgotten by time.

It was short and thick, painted white once, though now the color peeled away in brittle flakes. In faded blue letters, it read: IBIS, with a large arrow pointing toward the city like a warning disguised as direction.

The wood beneath the chipped paint was dark and damp, its surface swollen with rot. Mold clung to its edges and the sign was decayed for such a young Capital.

The gang kept driving into the city with their yellow van lights covering the desolate streets of the poor city. No check ins or soldiers greeted them, and not a civilian soul was outside of their house, making the boy's feel comfortable doing their deal.

Paulo pulled up slowly to his aunt's house, eyes narrowing the moment he spotted Loro already outside. His cousin stood in the front yard with a skinny blunt pressed between his lips and one hand buried deep in the front of his pants.

Paulo knew that look as Loro had his hand on his gun, probably thinking the van looked too much like a police vehicle.

Beside him stood another man who was shorter, older and chubby, also watching the van with suspicion, one hand resting over the handle of his own weapon.

Paulo stepped out of the van before any of his friends and he lifted a hand casually and waved, trying to put them at ease.

He walked toward them, eyes locked on Loro, who still hadn't moved his hand from his waistband. Unsurprisingly, The Same dirty tracksuit and same twitchy paranoia covered his cousin's demeanor.

As Paulo got closer, kicking up dust with every awkward step, Loro finally took the blunt from his mouth, its end soggy and dim and raised his worn Tec-9 at Paulo's chest.

"Who the hell are you?" he barked.

Paulo froze, then the other man raised his gun too.

But Paulo didn't flinch. He didn't even lift his hands.

"It's your cousin, Paulo, you jackass!" he shouted.

Then Loro burst into laughter with his accomplice chuckling along with him.

"I'm only fucking with you, Paulo!" Loro said, dragging from his blunt again and blowing smoke into the evening air.

Paulo smiled then his cousin shook his Tec towards the man to the left of him and said, "This is my good friend Humph, he helps with my business around here."

Humph was a small and chubby adult who looked older than Loro. He had a distinct hunch of his back even at such a young age and multiple missing teeth.

Disgracefully, Afia asked, "How did he get that name?"

Loro looked at Afia and then said, "What? Doesn't he look like a Humph?"

Before Afia could respond or stick out his hand, Loro pointed his gun towards the van and said, "Now who is that in there?"

Loro then stuck the Tec back into his waistband with its long magazine now sticking out as he waited for a response. The only reason Loro disarmed himself was because he knew these children weren't there to hurt him. Paulo cleared his throat and then said, "Some friends, I wanted to make a deal with you… I have some product."

Loro and his friend exchanged a quick look in half curiosity and half calculation.

Paulo turned and waved to the boys still waiting in the van. One by one, they stepped out, the back doors swung open and out came the cargo. Saran-wrapped bricks of drugs clutched tight in young hands.

Loro's eyes lit up. His gaze swept over the product, the corner of his mouth lifting into a short, crooked smile a mix of pride and hunger.

Paulo met his cousin's stare. No words were needed, and the message was clear that business had arrived.

Before Paulo could introduce his boys to Loro and Humph, Loro said, "Did you see any officers riding around on motorbikes when you came in? It isn't the smartest idea to have drugs out in the open right now."

Paulo looked behind himself at his friends and then looked back at the two men in front of him and shook his head no.

Loro continued speaking, "In the last few days Ibis has planned to set up walls around the city inspired by your city. The mayor has officers riding around on bikes making sure that no one leaves or enters the city. I am surprised you made it in without them stopping you. Now quickly, let me see that product."

The small boys brushed what he had just said off as banter and passed over the kilos to Loro and Humph who held them and inspected them up and down.

After looking for a short while, Loro decided he would take their hand in the deal and tapped Humph on the shoulder and ordered, "Grab the hunchos from under my bed."

Humph locked eyes with Loro and shook his head yes then passed him the bricks he held and ran inside. As soon as the door closed, Loro took a step closer to his cousin and the cronies around him and said, "I know what you all are up to. I know that you all work for Adisa. Your mother told me that her son was rolling around with child terrorists and now I know exactly who and what she meant. To be frank I like what Adisa is doing, and that is why I will help you."

The group of boys all had their eyes open in fear as Loro already knew their plan.

Paulo broke the silence and blurted out, "You must not tell a soul! The only reason we are doing this is to feed our people. No one else must know!"

Loro laughed and said, "Humph will not know. He wouldn't know even if I told him, with how stupid he is."

Right after Afia spoke, all eyes turned to the door and Humph burst through, breathless, with a stuffed duffel bag in hand. He tossed it to Loro, who dropped it to the floor and immediately started rifling through it.

“Five… ten… fifteen…” he whispered, fingers flicking across the edges of the bills as he counted.

After a tense minute, he hit fifty-five. He zipped the bag closed, stood, and looked around wide-eyed before locking eyes with Humph.

“Here’s fifty-five,” he said flatly.

He tossed the bag at Paulo’s feet, flashing a smirk that quickly vanished into a cold, unreadable expression.

Paulo scooped up the bag, gave it a quick once-over, then lobbed it to Afia, who caught it without a word.

Stepping forward, Paulo extended a hand to his cousin. Loro shook it, his grip dry and too firm. He stared straight into Paulo’s eyes, unsettling him. Paulo had to force his hand back, uneased by the intensity.

Without a word, the boys piled into the van. Paulo fired up the engine and peeled off, leaving behind the strange weight of Loro’s gaze. Fifty-five thousand in cash sat in the back, and not a cop in sight as they rolled out of town.

-Chapter XXIV-

In Utopia, Adisa lay in a bed that had once belonged to his greatest enemy. Now it was his, but it offered no comfort, only cold sheets and too much space for a man alone. He stared at the ceiling, sleepless as the weight of loneliness pressed down on him.

A sudden knock at the door cut through the silence. Adisa's head snapped up and instinct took over as he reached beneath the pillow for his pistol. A shadow fell under the door, two legs, still and waiting. He swung his feet to the floor, crept to the door, and yanked it open with his pistol raised.

A boy stood there, one of his men, though Adisa couldn't place his name.

"A letter came in," the boy said, steady despite the gun in his face. "No name on the envelope. Should we open it?"

Adisa didn't answer. He snatched the letter from the boy's small hands, gun still trained on him, eyes unstable.

He then confidently said, "Safe to open? Do you think a loaded gun will greet me when I open this?"

After asking the dumb question, Adisa slammed the door on his soldier and walked back to his bed where he sat down. Adisa looked down at the letter as he tore it open to reveal a folded piece of brown paper that almost looked like cardboard. He held it in front of his face, seeing a blue, blotchy stamp in the top center of the envelope reading: "IBIS."

Below the giant: "IBIS," read,

'David Akech - Mayor of Ibis

Dear Adisa - Leader of Utopia,

It is with great respect that I write this letter on this day to someone who has made history and not only changed Africa but also the world. I have just stepped up as Mayor of Ibis after our previous mayor quit yesterday. He quit over concern for the future of Africa and leadership as he had become more

and more unpopular as people began to see the great work that you are doing. A lot of my people are yearning to move to Utopia, and instead of that I would like to make Ibis more like Utopia. I have a proposition to make to you hoping for an alliance in a deal of goods. I Invite you tomorrow morning, any time before 12, to bring your men to meet me at the abandoned petrol station between our provinces. This is the start of something which will be written in the history books. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

LONG LOVE UTOPIA'

After reading the letter, Adisa smirked and gave a small nod to himself in a moment of confidence. The idea that a full-grown man would send a letter like this to a boy boosted his ego and amused him enough to draw out a low, unexpected laugh.

As his eyes lingered on the letter, thoughts began to settle in. Utopia was starving. The farms weren't producing enough to feed everyone. Maybe this mayor, whoever he truly was, could help. A partnership, even a small one might benefit the community.

Beyond that, Adisa saw something else in the offer. Getting close to the mayor of a city he was already funneling drugs into could be more than helpful. It could be A way to move without being seen.

With that thought, he stood and made his way to the doorway. He flung it open and barked down the hallway, voice echoing off the cold walls, "Get everyone out front of my house tomorrow morning, we're meeting with the Mayor of Ibis!"

The command reached the unnamed soldier who still wandered the halls, and the message began to move.

In the early morning at six o'clock, Adisa woke to a knock at his bedroom door which was very unusual at that time. He rubbed his tired eyes, and his feet led him to his wooden door which he opened to see a little under a dozen of his boys standing there with their rifles ready for the day.

He stood silent for a second then raised his voice and said, "It's too early for this shit give me a few more hours."

He slammed the door and crawled back into his bed.

Then in a flash of a quick two hour rest he woke again and got ready. The leader of the gang left his house to see all of his soldier's standing facing the house in a formal line.

Adisa smirked, then shouted, "Today we are meeting with a potential ally. A man named David Akech, the new Mayor of Ibis."

Boys looked back and forth at each other, questioning why they were going to get involved with the mayor of the capital as it seemed like a bad idea. Adisa noticed his soldiers' discomfort and continued, "Apparently the old mayor had quit, and this new mayor seems to be a fan of ours. He wants to help us and our food issue in return for a partnership. I have no clue what the president thinks of this, but I do not care. David hopefully is a fresh start for Ibis that can be of good help to this community. But… This does not mean we shall put our guards down even for one second."

Every boy stood frozen in formation, uncertain if Adisa was going to speak again after what he'd just said. He paced in silence, chin held high, eyes scanning the line, until something caught his attention.

To the right of Afia stood a boy Adisa didn't recognize. He was younger than the rest, noticeably shorter, and stood out even more by his lack of a gun and the way he slouched with his hands in his pockets.

What struck Adisa most were the boy's glasses that were thick, heavy lenses that made the sides of his face appear warped when he was viewed head-on. Adisa stopped in front of him, staring. Then, without a word, he pointed.

Afia glanced at Adisa, a flicker of concern in his eyes. Their leader finally spoke, "Who is this boy in front of me? A recruit?"

Afia stepped out of formation, breaking the line and dissolving the gathering's formality. His voice was quick and almost rushed as he spoke. "This is Mosi," he said. "He's a family friend. I believe he can be of real use to us. I thought since this was just a small meeting, it'd be good for him to see how we operate."

Adisa looked up and down at Mosi judgingly and then said, "Mosi? No, no. This four-eyed child shall be named Glasses."

Everyone in line let out a predetermined laugh then Adisa said, "Sure the boy can come."

He started to walk again then turned around to Glasses and said, "Don't get too comfortable."

Glasses smirked when Adisa turned his head knowing that what Adisa just said was playful.

Ever since Adisa had risen to power, Mosi had dreamed of joining his older friend Afia in the gang. He imagined himself riding through the city in military cars, rifle in hand, doing his part to help people, at least the way he understood it. To him, Adisa was more than a leader; he was larger than life. The boy looked up to him more than he ever had his own father.

Adisa looked at his watch then opened the dented door of the police van outside of his house and shouted, "Hop in!"

Adisa sped out of Utopia without so much as a wave to the armed boys guarding the colony. In the back of the van, Mosi's heart pounded as he was tossed side to side, landing in random laps and getting shoved off just as quickly.

The thick trees that trailed them thinned, giving way to flat, barren land. Ahead, the outline of a gas station came into view with three rusted pumps and a small office, its windows boarded shut and not a single car in sight.

Adisa slammed on the brakes, skidding the van to a halt just feet from the station. In one swift motion, he grabbed his AK from where it leaned beside the driver's door and jumped out. The boys piled out behind him, falling into a wide, tense circle, guns raised and pointed at nothing.

Everyone noticed David clearly hadn't shown up yet, so Paulo tapped Adisa with the barrel of his gun and then said, "What time did this guy say to meet up?"

Adisa answered, "He said in the morning, it is only eight now so it should be any time before twelve. We can smoke a few cigarettes and wait around until a car rolls up."

The information that Adisa just said was not spoken to the whole group but was heard by a boy behind Adisa and Paulo who then relayed it all the way to the end of the line. After everybody had gotten the word of Adisa, they threw cigarettes into their mouths and began to smoke trying their best to follow in their leaders' footsteps.

It was clear Adisa was energized by the prospect of this new partnership. So much so that he was willing to wait for hours, just to be the first one there before David showed up.

Paulo, who was in the middle of the group, pulled his cigarette out and began to smoke. He looked over at Glasses and said with his coarse but young voice, “You want one?”

Glasses looked over at Afia to see him being the only one person in the conglomerate to not be smoking.

“I think I'll pass,” Glasses said.

Paulo shrugged then turned away from the boy.

As the boys stood in silence, exhaling clouds of smoke into the crisp air, a mechanical hum began to repeat in the distance behind the gas station. They huffed and puffed their last drags and flicked their cigarettes to the ground, and raised their guns, scanning every angle around the station. This wasn’t the sound of a car, it was sharper, stranger and it made their fingers tense around the triggers. The noise grew louder and louder, a relentless thrum, but nothing appeared, until, rising above the gas station roof, came a spinning blur of black blades mounted on a sleek, stout oval body.

Afia shouted, “Helicopter!”

The dead grass and dirt began to move around the boys and shake their clothing around. Adisa noticed on the side of the black helicopter in gray paint it read, “IBIS,” so he then shouted, “Put your guns down!”

Every boy aimed them down still not feeling good about the situation. This was the first time any of them had seen a helicopter before, its dark presence sending a shiver down their spine. It truly did feel like something out of an action film.

Everyone was surprised by the giant beast, especially Mosi who had never thought he would be this close to a helicopter in his life.

The Ibisian helicopter landed and immediately, a man dressed in all white jumped out of the helicopter walking slowly towards Adisa. At both of his sides were two men dressed in all black military attire with helmets strapped to their melons while in their arms they sported what looked like brand-new Military M4s.

The man in all white was unmistakably David Akech. He wore a crisp, tucked-in collared shirt, spotless white combat boots, Ray-Bans gleaming in the sun, and a beret marked with a sword emblem at its center. As the helicopter blades slowed to a churn, more men filed out and moved swiftly toward the Utopians. The boys knew no one would dare come this close

just to kill Adisa, but even so, their palms stayed firm on their rifles, fingers never far from the trigger.

David approached Adisa, and the boy extended his hand for a shake. Instead of returning the gesture, David bowed his head, took Adisa's hand, and kissed it, an act of reverence. Adisa's eyes widened. He was stunned as no one had ever done anything like that before. The idea that a grown man, a stranger no less, would lower himself in such a gesture of respect toward a child left him speechless. Then David rose, still holding Adisa's hand, and gave it a firm, deliberate shake.

Leaning in close to be heard over the fading roar of the helicopter blades, David shouted, "Pleasure to meet you, young leader! Let's speak away from the station. Just the two of us, yes?"

Adisa shook his head in agreement then followed David over to the front of the boarded-up petrol station still in their soldiers' gaze.

The youngest of the two turned to David and suspiciously spoke, "I am going to ask you a question David. Is that helicopter over there the same one that was flown into Utopia the night that the mayor of Nileville was killed?"

David squinted his eyes at Adisa and stared for a second, realizing the trap he had been caught in.

"I respect your bluntness. That night… Your old mayor Cyril called Kuol, our old mayor and said that he would send him ten thousand dollars cash for protection against you and your soldiers. Kuol took up the offer, I had no say in this or knowledge of it. I learned the next day that a chunk of our police force where killed and Kuol was distraught. I exclaimed to him that he made the wrong move and should never have done that, and the people agreed with me. That is a big reason he quit, the unhappiness of the people because of his actions. If it was me in power that night, I would have used that helicopter to help you."

David now smiled after speaking which Adisa matched.

The boy then said, "That is the right answer my friend."

They both shared a laugh and shook each other's hand again.

"I am glad you understand, you are more mature than most people who are double the age of you," David spoke, clearly kissing Adisa's ass.

Adisa returned, "Trust me I know. So where is Kuol now?"

David then said, "No one really knows where he is now but all I know is he ran off with his wife from his house only a few days ago, no word or

anything. It is best he left without a word because if he stayed any longer, I was going to be the one to kill him… But it would be a waste of time trying to kill that man so let me instead make it up to you with alliance."

"That sounds like a better option," Adisa said. He then finished, "One last question my friend, why do you wear all white? I have never seen such a thing."

David adjusted his posture then spoke, "I wear all white as a sign of peace, as our people have gone through too much destruction. White is a show of rebirth you know. Even if Kuol is gone, my people are still distrustful of my leadership, but they always seem to flock to you young one. That is a big reason why I reached out to you, I need your guidance and alliance."

"You can have my friendship, David; I think it is useful to strengthen Ibis and Utopia together as our provinces are brothers. In return for this I just ask one thing and that is food. I have a big population as you know, and my people are fed two free meals a day. My men hand meals out every single day and it is very hard to keep up. We have decently successful farms, but they are drying up. If you can get me this one resource, my arms will be open to you and anything you need or wish will be my doing."

David smiled and exclaimed, "Clearly this alliance was meant to be made my friend, as I have a surplus of food at all times. The only issue is that they may be close to expiring but if you feed the food the day you get them, there will be no worry."

Adisa shared his newfound friend's smile and then grabbed his hand, "This alliance was meant to be made! Utopia and Ibis shall be one now in brotherhood. I invite you to Utopia tomorrow night, we shall show my people my new friend and alliance with Ibis."

David's smile then faded and he lowered his tone saying, "My friend, it would mean the world to go but it is me and my wife's anniversary. Instead, the day after tomorrow would you like to bring a lady friend to accompany me and my wife to the Mall of Arabia in Egypt? We can take the black beauty over."

David pointed to his helicopter and then Adisa spoke, "It is a shame you cannot come, and it is a shame I do not have a woman to bring. Maybe in the future once I acquire one, we may go."

The man laughed and then said, "A leader like you without a woman? Let me see if my wife has any friends that may want to go."

Adisa quickly shook his head no and said, “Why would a leader like me bother with a woman?”

David threw up his arms and shrugged and then said, “To each their own. If your mind changes, give me a call. Now I should get going friend I have more business to attend to.”

They walked side by side toward the helicopter as its blades began to whirl to life again. David pressed one hand to his beret, holding it in place against the rising wind. As they neared the aircraft, he removed his hand from his head and offered it to Adisa, giving the boy’s hand another firm shake.

With their hands touching, David shouted, “Utopia and Ibis have a bright future together, Adisa! Anytime you need food you call me and a box truck full of food shall arrive at your doorstep!”

Adisa returned, “It was a pleasure meeting you David, you now have my friendship which not a lot of people can say they have. You call me if you need anything, your word is my command as I said.”

Their hands let go and they shared a quick glare. David and his soldiers piled back into the helicopter and quickly flew off.

David watched from the side of the helicopter as Adisa walked back alone toward his friends. Without a word, he turned his head and spat in Adisa’s direction, the spit catching the wind as it vanished into the dust below. Then he faced his men, with his head shaking and his expression showing disgust.

-Chapter XXV-

Following the interesting trip to Outer-Ibis, the gang split up, and Adisa drove with only two men back to his abode to prepare for the house celebration set for the following night.

Left without their leader, even for a moment, the boys stood under the midday sun with a sudden, heavy sense of meaninglessness weighing in their chests. They kicked at the dirt beneath their feet, avoiding eye contact, each of them swallowed by a quiet gloom. Without Adisa, the day felt flat, passing as quickly as the birds that flew overhead, vanishing from one corner of their vision to the next in a blink.

Glasses studied his once-vibrant friends, now hollowed out, as if their souls had been ripped away and could only be returned by standing in Adisa's presence. It was as if the boy was a drug his city was hooked on and even those closest to him were deep in the withdrawal.

Despite the strange silence, Glasses understood. His curious mind could sense it: in the grand scheme of things, it was as if their only purpose on earth was to play a part in Adisa's grand story.

He nudged Afia on the shoulder, snapping him out of a trance. Afia blinked, turning his head from side to side, studying his friends like someone waking up in an unfamiliar world. Then he looked down at Glasses and back again at the others.

Opening his mouth, he spoke in a voice just loud enough to carry without cutting the air too sharply.

"Anyone want to drink some at my place?"

The others looked up at him, their faces mirroring the same look Afia had just given Glasses. Then, in perfect unison, they lightened up and shouted, "Hell yea!"

Glasses smirked as they walked off in the streets towards Afia's apartment on the newest complex in town.

The gang climbed the half-outdoor, half-indoor stairs to the second story of the concrete complex. Afia shoved his key into the lock, and the boys burst in like wild animals.

Though it was his own apartment, Afia was the last to step inside. By the time he did, soldiers were already tearing through his cupboards, hunting for any long-necked bottle they could sip from.

Three of them had already claimed spots on the L-shaped couch, each with a cigarette dangling from their lips, barking at the ones digging through the kitchen.

“Hurry your asses up!”

Glasses glanced at Afia, who stood dumbfounded asking himself how a group could make themselves so at home in a place they didn’t even live in was beyond him. One boy flung open the last cupboard and triumphantly held up a bottle of dark whiskey. It was instantly snatched from his hand and lobbed across the room to the couch crew.

More bottles followed, spilling out like some endless supply, passed hand to hand in a line like water buckets at a fire.

Suddenly, Afia shouted, “Fuckers! Stop throwing bottles around like they won't break!”

No one looked up and no one paused. Bottles kept flying, kept cracking open, kept getting downed in big gulps like it was all planned.

Glasses turned to Afia, who muttered through his defeat muttered under his breath with a tired sigh, “If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.”

The youngest of the hooligans trailed Afia into the chaos of his stained and infected living room. With a smirk, Afia gave one of his lounging allies a playful shove to the back of the head, snatched the bottle from his small hand, and started swigging like it was water.

The boy on the couch wiped the spilled drink from his lips and, for a second, seriously considered sucker-punching him. He ended up not as a fight just didn’t feel worth it. So, he settled for a calm, drawn-out, “Bitch.”

Afia downed at least six shots in a row, eyes closed, lips wrapped around the bottle like he was meditating through the burn. When he finally lowered it, Glasses let out a late, awkward laugh beside him as he stared at the boy on the couch. One that hit the wrong nerve in the boy on the couch.

“What the fuck are you laughing at? Why don’t you take a couple swigs, huh?”

In a flash, Glasses snatched the bottle from his friend’s hand and took a deep drink, hoping the act might earn him a sliver of respect.

Every eye landed on him and for one second, it looked like he’d hold his own.

Then he sputtered and spat out a mouthful of whiskey, spraying it all over the back of Afia’s couch.

The room exploded in laughter, the kind that bounced off the walls and erased the moment as quickly as it arrived. Even when the attention drifted and the teasing moved on, Glasses, now invisible again, lifted the

bottle and forced down a few more swigs. He didn't make it past three before the taste twisted in his gut, threatening to send him into a fountain of puke.

The fun stopped cold when Afia reached over and plucked the bottle from his cousin's hand.

"No more drinking tonight," he said, firm. "I don't want you ending up like these fucks."

Glasses looked around the room, but what he saw wasn't the mess, the wreckage, or the unraveling. He saw brothers, heroes even. Stainless, just like any other citizen in Utopia.

The night dragged on until every boy had drunk themselves into a heavy, dreamless sleep. Afia's vinyl record player echoed through the apartment, spinning *Ready to Die* by Biggie Smalls, the last track ending and the needle hit the locked groove of the record, and now a grainy static clicked over and over, digging into Glasses' brain like an itch. Groaning, he peeled his face off the floor, blinking through dry, squinting eyes. With clumsy fingers, he found the tonearm and lifted the needle, silencing the noise before letting it fall gently back into its cradle. Just before collapsing again, Glasses stumbled toward the bathroom, weaving around limp bodies like sleeping landmines, even though he knew none of them would wake, whether he stepped over or on them. He relieved himself slowly, half-asleep, and opened the door to head back to the living room.

Before he could, a soft, golden light glowing from across the hallway, warm and oddly inviting. It cut through the shadowy cocoon he had just left, standing out against the mess, the stink, and the dark. It didn't belong here, not in this wreckage and it called to him.

His feet led him to open the cracked door which revealed it was Afia's own room. Not a soul laid in the clean sheeted bed as Afia was blacked out on the living room couch. On the nightstand stood fancy colognes that were shaped like men's bodies and gold bars among other fancy things. As the curious boy walked along Afia's bed, he glided his fingers along the nice silk bed sheets which were unlike anything he had felt before. Glasses reached the nightstand and picked up the glass bodied cologne that was then stuck up to his nose and smelt. It smelt exactly how a rich person would in Glasses's mind, and it was a scent so delightful and alien that he

took a second smell. When he lifted it up to his nostrils the second time his right hand went loose, and the bottle rushed towards the floor. Glasses, not wanting to have to deal with Afia beating his ass, put his foot out to catch the bottle which halted the fall. The cologne rolled under the bed and stopped in its tracks after hitting an unknown cushion.

Glasses's right cheek reached the floor to see where the bottle went only to reveal it lying against a mountain of cloudy Ziploc bags filled with clear white rocks. Even though the boy was young, he knew exactly what was inside of these bags. He grabbed the cologne, put it back on the dresser then peeked under the bed again to grab one of the bags. Glasses threw the bag onto the bed and inspected it, knowing that the bags weren't for his family friend but instead for addicts who were now rare in Utopia but plentiful beyond the walls of the city.

The pretty white veil of Adisa's gang was moved over to reveal a broken idea which made the boy's out to be messiahs, that being the farthest thing from reality. Instead of covering the broken idea's face or revealing it to the city, Glasses kissed its swollen lips wanting to follow in the footsteps of the rest of the boys as he put the bag into his pants.

If he was to sell the product and make some pay, he would be invited into the gang with open arms, so he creeped out of the apartment and traveled into the city streets of Utopia.

After an hour of walking through the city, Glasses noticed there weren't many homeless or junkies around. The streets felt eerily quiet. As he approached an alley where he thought he saw movement, a skinny man suddenly emerged from the shadows and grabbed Glasses. The young boy flinched as the tall man pulled him in so hard that his glasses fell off his head. Even if Glasses was strolling the streets at this time of night, the man could tell that he did not have a cent of toughness within him. In pity, the fiending man let Glasses go, leaned in and said, "You selling?"

Glasses with a scared look in his eyes grabbed his glasses and said, "Yea…"

With eyes that no longer seemed tied to this world, The unsettling man locked onto glasses's soul, inching closer until his stinking breath was on the boy's face.

“So... what are you selling?” he murmured, his voice low, steady, as if he were speaking from a place beyond reason.

A smirk curled on Glasses’s lips as his hand slipped into his pocket. He pulled out the bag, holding it out to the man, its contents unknown to him except for the fact that it was something you could get high off of.

The man stared at the bag, his hands trembling as his tongue flicked across his lips. He took a shaky breath, finally speaking, “You could get killed for that, you know? I haven’t seen a dealer since Adisa took power.”

His eyes never left the bag with hunger in them, as if the temptation was too strong to resist.

The man looked and rolled his eyes after Glasses didn’t respond and then uttered, “How much?”

Glasses hesitated, unsure of what to say, the truth sinking in that he had no clue how much meth was worth. After a brief pause, he muttered, “Name your price.”

The man’s gaze continued to stare at the bag, then he said, “Five a gram. Nothing else.”

Words hung in the air, and Glasses nodded, then he asked, “Five what?”

The man completely knew this boy was an amateur and glanced down at the bag, then up into Glasses’ eyes one last time before in a flash, he snatched the bag from his hand and bolted.

“Hey!” Glasses shouted; his voice too loud.

The moment the words left his mouth, he slapped his hand over it, cursing himself. He knew the last thing he needed was to get caught out this late, especially while trying to sell drugs.

In a blur of panic, Glasses raced home, ducking into his small apartment as quietly as possible. His heart pounded in his chest; the weight of failure heavy in his gut. He knew the man wouldn’t keep those drugs to himself. The moment they were in his hands, they would spread across the city like wildfire and that, Glasses realized, meant his death was sealed.

-Chapter XXVI-

In the same night, Adisa split off from the gang to return to his abode where he would not prepare his home for the party he was to hold the next night. Him preparing his home was an excuse to leave the gang who he was tired of. His home was empty and silent as it could be, his small feet along the hard floor making more noise than they should be. Adisa arrived at the kitchen and opened his giant silver freezer to retrieve a giant piece of plastic wrapped fish. With the stainless-steel freezer door to the right of his face, he imagined his shadowed ally on the other side of it waiting to talk with him as this was one of the rare times he was physically alone. He shut his eyes and shut the door then opened them to see nothing.

The young leader rested the fish gently inside his cast iron steel pan with a hint of oil and no flavoring to it. Once the fish met the basin, a beep came from behind the boy which made him tilt his head to look at the walkie talkie on his granite island.

From the box, it said, “Adisa, your uncle Abraham is here, he wishes to speak with you. Is he allowed on the property?”

Adisa exhaled and debated saying no back into the radio. He turned away from the fish and held the radio in his hand and kneeled against the island.

“Sure, let him in.”

Only a minute later, two knocks came from behind Adisa at the front door. Adisa turned his back to the meal and tightly clutched on his pistol while walking to the front door. On the other side of the door stood Abraham, Who Adisa had not seen since their less-than-ideal meetup on his property. Adisa stared at his uncle through the peephole, examining him and noticing that his uncle did not look too bad for once. He opened the

door and let go of his pistol, still letting the grip of the gun stick out as a warning to Abraham.

Adisa did not smile at his uncle standing at the steps of his house, instead of a hello, he said, “Who the hell let you in?”

Abraham looked around then uncomfortably said, “The boy at the front,” while sticking his thumb behind his head towards the entrance of the property.

Time stood still as the two looked at each other in silence until Abraham said, “I’m family,” and stuck out his arms.

Adisa chuckled, the sound light and confident, as he gave his uncle a playful pat on the shoulder. Despite the difference in age, the way they stood facing each other made it seem as if Adisa were the elder in this exchange.

They both laughed, and with a knowing grin, Adisa said, “I’m only messing. Come inside.”

Abraham followed Adisa inside, raising his chin up and examining the beauty of this nice home.

“This is a beautiful place you got, nephew. Where did you get it?” They made it to the kitchen and Adisa tended to the flaming fish.

He didn’t answer his uncle’s question, instead saying, “You know how I got it. Now what brings you here.”

Abraham took a seat in the kitchen and spoke, “Well… As you know, times have been hard on my ranch. Less people are working and I'm starting to believe I can’t maintain a ranch any longer. I am looking for work Adisa. My cattle ranch’s lifespan draws close to an end.”

Adisa turned his head away from the pan, smirking in his mind at the fact that his uncle who once used to slave him was now asking him for work. Adisa stood in silence cooking the fish for a minute as Abraham looked around scared. He turned the burner off and plopped the burnt fish onto a white plate.

“Would you like some?”

Abraham took one glance at the nasty fish and even though he was hungry said, “No thank you.”

He could tell that a child was not fit to live alone like this, cooking awful meals that were probably commonplace every night. Adisa cleared the plate using his bare dirty hands to eat, scarfing down the steaming hot

food within seconds. The boy with his mouth still grossly full said, “Follow me to my office.”

Adisa wiped his greasy mouth with the back of his forearm, leading the way down the narrow hallway to his office. His uncle could still hear the rhythm of him chewing as they walked, the faint sound lingering until, finally, Adisa swallowed with a hurting gulp. He dropped into his cracked leather office chair with a creak, settling in as if the space had been his for a lifetime. Abraham as well took a seat and Adisa fastly spoke, “Alright we’re gonna make this quick. I’ve had a long day and I'm guessing you have too. You can work on my farms, and you’ll get paid a good bit more than everyone else. Now I’m not doing that because I like you, I’m doing it because you need money to support my brother.”

His Uncle smiled and rushed to Adisa’s side of the desk and got on his knees with his hands out towards his oldest nephew, repeating, “Thank You.”

Adisa shot him a condescending look, his gaze cold and playful at once. With a casual motion, he put his foot out, gently nudging his uncle’s head with it.

“Sit down,” he said, the command dripping with both authority and mockery.

Abraham looked up at Adisa then realized the fool he had made of himself.

Adisa put his face into his right hand in a show of disapproval towards his kin.

The boy laughed out of his impoliteness and said, “Don’t go on embarrassing yourself before I give you a job now.”

Adisa couldn’t be nice for too long, so he sent a jab at Abraham, saying, “Now, before I hire you, I need to know are you clean?”

Abraham let out an embarrassing laugh and then said, “You know? I know you are not a dumb kid. I promise now I am clean. That is why it felt appropriate to come to you now as I know you hate drugs. I have not always been the best uncle because of my issues. But I promise this is a new me.”

The man was surprised that Adisa knew his secret but was telling the truth when he said he was now clean.

Adisa shook his head and then said, “I know Abraham, I know. I do forgive you, but you do know a hardworking man like you deserves a break every once in a blue moon.”

Abraham silently shook his head yes as Adisa spoke.

“Since I am giving you this job, take this as my present. I know you of all people needs a break.”

Adisa opened his desk drawer and threw a bag of meth across the table with a clean blue-glass pipe inside.

Both sat in silence, Abraham trying to speak but failing, uttering, “A-I-”

Adisa laughed then said, “Trust me a lot of the other farmers do it as well. Just don’t smoke it all in one place.”

There was not one farmer Adisa knew he smoked meth as this was a bold-faced lie.

Abraham started to tremble as his journey to sobriety was harder than anything. The walk to recovery was difficult and Adisa was trying to take him back to square one.

He tried his best to ignore the bag instead choosing to look at Adisa who stared at him with a tempting gaze. Abraham couldn’t tell if this was a test or if he seriously wanted to give him a sandwich bag filled to the brim with glass.

Adisa’s uncle didn’t touch the bag, and after a moment, Adisa nudged it closer towards him. When his hand finally lifted off the bag, Abraham wasted no time. In a flash, he snatched it and stuffed it into his pants, his face a mix of disappointment and fear. His feet jittered up and down, his gaze darting nervously around the office, as if already tweaking.

Adisa stood, his posture casual yet commanding, and extended his hand towards his uncle. “Alright, it's late. I’ll see you tomorrow, Abraham.”

Abraham froze at the use of his first name, a surprise in his eyes, but still, he shook Adisa’s hand. He was eager to leave, his mind already on the meth waiting for him.

As their palms met, the air around them seemed to thicken. Behind Adisa’s small frame, a shadow loomed, a faceless silhouette, tall and oppressive, looming over the child and looking down on Abraham.

The moment it brushed against Abraham’s senses, his hand tensed violently, and he quickly pulled away, eyes wide with terror.

“What did you see?” Adisa demanded, spinning around, his voice trembling.

When he looked back, there was nothing there. Only darkness.

Abraham’s breath was shallow, his body trembling. He took a step back, his eyes fixed on the space where the shadow had been, refusing to make eye contact with Adisa.

“I don’t know! I need to get out of here... I need rest!” His voice cracked as he scrambled away. Abraham didn’t even glance at his nephew as he ducked around the corner and bolted down the dark hallway, heading straight for the front door. He didn’t even acknowledge the guard standing outside, rushing past him without a word.

The fright had almost made Abraham forget that he had his personal treasure in his pocket. His fingers reached into his linty pocket to pull out the bag as soon as he walked out of the gate. He held up the clear sack against the star filled sky and let the moon illuminate through the rocks. In the bag held no lighter so he checked his other pocket to only feel dust bunnies but no plastic cylinder.

“Fuck,” Abraham muttered under his breath, his hands trembling as he knelt in the dirt, scouring the ground for a lighter. By some stroke of luck, his eyes landed on a dirty, scratched-up white lighter, nestled between tire treads that had clearly been run over. It had no silver top, just a worn-out casing. He flicked the wheel with his thumb, sparks cutting through the night air, and a two-inch torch flame flickered to life.

In one swift motion, he dug into the bag, pulled out the pipe and ice, and set his rig up, his hands moving with the practiced speed of someone long lost in the habit. He took a hit, the hot, dirty smoke filling his lungs as he stared up at the stars, letting the smoke marinate in his mouth before releasing it into the night.

Abraham couldn’t stop himself, the need clawing at him. He kept hitting the pipe, each one a deeper dive into the haze. Eventually, his body told him to stop, and he coughed violently, the convulsions sending him to his feet. His breath was ragged as he staggered forward, stumbling through the city’s dusky streets, trying to escape the pressure building inside him.

As he walked, the shaking that had taken over his body from fear of what he saw and from wanting to chase the dragon, had faded away for just a quick moment until it returned even worse. He had taken a giant hit and started to feel the need to itch his skin off. Abraham was also paranoid,

tricking his brain into thinking that Adisa and his boys were following him in the trees.

Abraham reached into the Mainstreet of the city and found his haven in between two small buildings that he laid his back on. He felt his heart beating fast as if it was to pop outside of his skin never to return. Even if his body was in bad shape Abraham knew he wanted more so he returned to his pipe, putting more glass inside of his smoke tunnel.

As he was lighting up, he noticed a tall, skinny, beanpole of a man walking along his right in the open street.

Tweaking, Abraham dropped the pipe and flame on the ground and hid behind a trash can to avoid the man's sight. Abraham's eyes narrowed as he observed the man behind the trash can, fully convinced he was one of Adisa's men ready to kill him. He stayed hidden in the shadows, watching carefully. After a moment, a ragged, hunchbacked older man approached the skinny figure, and the two exchanged words in hushed tones. Abraham couldn't hear the conversation, but the interaction was enough to make his pulse quicken.

The exchange ended with the skinny man slipping a small bag of illicit substance into the older man's weathered hands.

Abraham became excited, lifting himself up from behind the trash can, wanting whatever the man was selling but then realized that he already had a full bag of whatever the man was selling. He turned around and hid back inside of the shadows and the man did not see Abraham. That did not stop Abraham from convincing himself that he did, so he grabbed his vice and took off down another alleyway deeper into the city.

He reached a not so deep alleyway that had a giant metal trash can in it which he hid next to, smelling the smell of rotting animal and fecal matter. To him it did not matter though as when he picked up his pipe it did not matter where he was.

Abraham picked up the pipe repeatedly smoking as much as he could, itching his skin in between hits till his flesh tore. He began to speak to his internal monologue uttering what would sound like an alien language to anybody that was in their right mind.

Abel laid awake all night, staring out his window, waiting for Abraham to come home. He hadn't expected a meeting with his brother to take this long, especially when his uncle had insisted, he wouldn't stay with Adisa for

too long. But as the hours passed, a sinking feeling grew inside him. When midnight struck, that uneasy feeling turned to dread. Something wasn't right and without another thought, he threw off his covers, grabbed his pocketknife and headed into the city to find his uncle.

After walking down, a dirt road passing by dark, silent homes made of tarp and subtle wood foundations, Abel's eyes locked onto the first person he saw. She was a skinny woman lying on the ground of a muddy grass corner with trash all around her. The woman got up off of the ground and adjusted herself as Abel walked by. They locked eyes and Abel's legs locked up. He realized maybe he could ask the woman if she had seen his uncle by describing him. He slowly walked up to her, sticking to the mud as he stepped while kicking through plastic bottles. As he approached, she scooted backwards towards a small pile of trash with a blanket on top and threw the blanket off to wake a small girl up. The boy stood still as two sets of frightened eyes stared back at him now, the mother clutching her child tight and saying nothing. A thick scar stretched across her neck in a clean, straight line, wrapping around to disappear behind her head. Her face, pale with fear, was marked with old scars that Abel had first mistaken for the crust of drug use.

He slapped his arms at his sides and with his eyes not leaving the girl, he asked, "Have you seen my uncle… He is a large man about six feet tall."

Abel looked down at her bare arms and thin torso that were littered with welts and old wounds, carved into her skin like a history written in pain.

Just as he was about to turn away, the woman's hand reached for a necklace hanging against her chest that was made of braided cord, with a wooden pendant at the center. His eyes locked onto the pendant and as soon as her fingers touched the wood, her lips parted, and a dry, ghastly breath rushed out with no words; just air.

Abel's head pushed back, and his knees buckled. His hands went numb as his eyes flipped into their whites, and he collapsed, pulled inward into a world not his own.

A visceral vision overtook him.

The mother and daughter were running beneath the cover of night, breathless and terrified. Behind them a crowd, fast and feral, chased them to their wits end. The chase ended quickly as the mob caught them and

dragged them down into the dirt. The crowd's noise melted into one unholy cry.

"Spill the blood of the corrupted!" a woman in the mob shrieked.

Kicks rained down on the pair as they screamed, their blood soaking the ground. The mother's voice rose above it all, raw and unbroken, until a man yanked her to her feet by the hair. Her cries didn't stop. He pulled out a pocketknife and hissed, "Shut up."

Then, without hesitation, he pressed the blade to her neck and slowly, almost methodically, dragged it across.

Abel's vision ended and he lunged up off his butt from the ground quickly, looking around to see not a soul. Even if he was scared, he ran off deeper into the city on his search for Abraham, convincing himself what he had seen was a dream, but still being disturbed.

The sun began to rise to Abraham's left, but day and night did not matter anymore to his brain. More and more the sun inched until it started to peek over the hills and people began to exit their homes to work. Along the city streets kids began to walk to their schools and adults to their jobs.

A group of three boys and two girls in school outfits were walking by the alley where Abraham sat and one of the boys picked up on the man's inebriated rant.

The schoolboy spoke up during the walk and said, "Hey! I hear a bum talking to himself right down this alleyway."

One of the girls spoke up and said, "Let's get to class, leave them alone."

On her left, the boy closest to her grabbed her arm, his grip tight and forceful.

He snapped, "Shut up, Mary!"

The other boys, their faces twisted with cruel amusement, laughed in agreement. They walked confidently down the alleyway, their steps loud and defiant, while the two girls behind them shuffled nervously, fear evident in their eyes.

Abraham's rants grew louder, his voice strained and pained, echoing down the alley as the children neared him. The large stranger, someone they didn't recognize, sat there, eyes wide open, glazed with exhaustion. Though he'd been awake all night, his body trembled as he clutched his

chest, muttering to himself about cattle, nephews, and a string of incoherent thoughts.

One of the boys, his voice full of mocking bravado, sneered, “Run off, bum! Adisa and his boys are gonna take your scalp too!”

Abraham didn’t react, his gaze falling to the ground, only to slowly raise his eyes to meet the boy’s. His voice was hoarse and cracked, “I hurt.”

His eyes rolled back into his head, and without warning, his body jerked as he began to tweak again, his movements frantic and erratic.

making the boys laugh. The two innocent girls who stood watching were not amused and their faces showed that they were disgusted by the boys' behaviors. They both walked off silently muttering to each other, “Let’s get to school.”

Another one of the boys smiled and then ordered, “Alright man... If you don’t get up, I'm just gonna have to kick your ass.”

Even if he was out of his head, Abraham mockingly said, “Who’s ass you gonna kick?”

The boys’ smirks turned into cold, empty expressions as they stared down at Abraham, their eyes void of any empathy. One of them spat, a watery stream that landed on the distressed man.

Before the situation could worsen, a voice cut through the air, sharp and demanding.

“Hey! Get away from my uncle!”

The boys paused, their gaze shifting to the entrance of the alley. A shadow stood there, small but unmoving, before it stepped forward, closing the distance between them.

The mysterious boy walked toward the group; his eyes fixed on them with quiet determination.

“You guys get to school,” he said firmly.

As the boy approached, one of the boys blinked in recognition.

“Abel? You pussy! Run off before we beat your nerd ass!”

Abel didn’t flinch, standing his ground without a hint of fear. He didn’t move an inch, even as the middle boy of the group took a step toward him, sizing him up. The boy was close enough now to throw a punch, and he did swiftly

Abel was quicker than the boy as he stepped back, flipping open a pocketknife with a practiced flick of his wrist. The sound of the blade’s click froze the schoolboy in place. His eyes widened in shock, and before he

could react, Abel swung the knife in a clean arc, slicing right across the bridge of the boy's nose.

The boy stumbled back, hands instinctively clutching at his face. In a flash, the other two boys bolted down the alley, their feet pounding against the dirt. The wounded boy followed, his face a mask of shock and pain as he ran from Abel, no longer a threat.

As soon as they were gone Abel rushed over to Abraham who he kneeled to.

"Uncle! What has happened?"

Abraham sat in sorrow still high but realizing that he had let his favorite person down. He grabbed the right chest of his shirt and began to twist it while moving his feet along the dirt in front of him in pain.

"I smoked too much Afia."

Water started to bead from the man's eyes, and he trembled. Abraham then muttered, "Adisa… he gave me too much. It's too much son." Abraham took a sharp inhale after that and began to sweat profusely.

His nephew grabbed him and shakenly said, "What? Stay with me!"

Afia wanted to get angry at Adisa, but he knew he had to direct his attention to his uncle who was slowly dying before his eyes. Afia knelt by his uncle's side, watching helplessly as Abraham's eyes darted frantically, his body jerking with the violent convulsions. Afia tried shaking him, calling out, but nothing worked. His uncle's body trembled, the fight within him draining away.

"Uncle… Uncle!" Afia cried out, his voice breaking as the panic surged within him.

For a moment, the shaking stopped. The stillness that followed was deafening as Abraham's eyes locked onto Afia's, unblinking and cold like an empty glass.

Afia's breath caught in his chest, and a wave of realization washed over him. His uncle was gone.

The tears that had flooded his eyes a moment before began to dry, replaced by a quiet rage that burned in his chest. Abraham had been a victim of his own vices, of his desperation, and of Adisa's manipulations.

Afia's mind raced back to the years of his brother's failed attempts at finding favor, his relentless struggle for recognition in a family where his brother had always been the golden child. Afia knew the truth, that Adisa

had lured Abraham with promises of a better life, only to drag him into the very thing that had destroyed him.

The favored brother now had no one, not a father, not his mother and now not his uncle, while the unfavored brother had everything. A good life was taken into Adisa's hands, where he could do whatever, he wanted and never take any blame for it.

Afia knew it now, Adisa had orchestrated this, knowingly giving Abraham the one thing that would ruin him, knowing full well that his uncle couldn't resist.

Afia clenched his fists, feeling the fury of betrayal and helplessness surge within him. Adisa had criminalized the drugs, but he was the one controlling them. His brother had begun to twist the entire city into a machine of corruption, and Afia had seen it for what it was.

Now, the only thing Afia could do in his life was end Adisa's reign. There would be no exposing his brother as no one would listen, and if Afia tried, he'd be as good as dead. If Adisa was to be stopped, it would only be through force, through waking people up slowly and turning everyone against Adisa.

Afia glanced back at his uncle's lifeless body, lying on the ground like discarded trash. The cattle rancher who once had everything, now just another casualty of Adisa's ruthless rise.

Afia stood up slowly, his anger hardening into determination. He couldn't change the past, but he could change the future.

The now lonesome boy sat there looking at his uncle's corpse not knowing how to dispose of him as he could not drag Abraham all the way to the ranch. He realized no matter how much he loved his uncle, his uncle chose to tweak in the alley way, but it didn't mean he was meant to die.

The boy turned his back on the man who had once been his family, his mentor, and the closest thing to a father.

-Chapter XXVII-

Halfway along the day's sun, two of Adisa's soldiers were marching along the streets with their rifles in hand and smiling at old ladies. Both of them had only woken up an hour before after a long night of drinking at Afia's apartment. They strutted along main street where them and the other boys had their first shootout with the police. Time had marched along quite slowly in the boy's minds making them feel as if that was months ago but really it had been only more than a week. They decided to take a pit stop and conceal inside the alleyway to their right, lighting up a quick cigarette. As one of the boys lit up, he noticed a pair of nice-looking shoes peeking out from the side of a trash can. He wondered why such a new looking pair of shoes would belong to an alley bum, so it piqued his interest and made him travel over to see what was going on. The rifle slinged to his chest swayed back and forth until it stopped, the boy now looking at a lone corpse.

"Hey," the boy shouted to see if the man would wake up. He was clearly dead, the skin on his body looking pale for a black man and his eyes halfway squinted open. His friend rushed over and realized what he was seeing and backed up.

"Whoa, you know that looks like Adisa's junkie uncle. Let's radio in."

The boy who found the body shook his head up and down and the other boy upholstered a big black walkie-talkie to his lips and spoke, "This is nine speaking in, A body has been found in an alley on main street."

Quickly as soon as the radio beeped out and the boys were examining the body a voice beeped in, “Dump it in the Nile at the docks. Do not speak of this.”

Adisa’s voice on the radio beeped out and the boys were surprised he even spoke. The boy’s exchanged glances then one of them said, “Look in the trash for a blanket.”

The other one then exclaimed, “What?”

“We are going to cover then carry him c’mon now.”

“You think we're going to carry this big motherfucker all the way to the Nile?”

“Well, we don’t have much of a choice.”

Only a second after the boy finished speaking the sound of a car skidding on dirt got into the boy’s ears and they curiously ran out of the alley way to see what was going on. In the near distance an obnoxious yellow 2006 mustang tore up the peaceful city streets, contrasting against the blue and white tents in the background where people slept. The two boys knew that whoever was in the mustang had to be Adisa or someone else in the gang, so they waved their arms at whoever was in the drop top and the driver stopped. Their head just peaked out of the driver’s door enough for the boys to recognize the kid wearing silver sunglasses as Paulo.

With the loud car still breathing, the hungover Paulo with a cigarette in his mouth shouted, “Aye! Hop in!”

The two boys shook their heads no and signaled for him to come to them. Paulo shook his head and sprinted across the dirt street with his car still running.

He then asked, “What’s the deal?”

One of the boys responded, “You didn’t hear the walkie talkie?”

“I never listen to that thing it’s in my damn closet,” Paulo returned

“We got a body in the alley behind us, can we use your car to move it?”

Paulo pushed his comrade and then said, “Are you stupid? Using my new ride to transport some dead tweaker!”

As the three boys argued across the street from another alley next to Paulo’s Mustang, a junkie appeared, eyeing the car with a mix of longing and desperation. It wasn’t until the man began to touch the car that one of the boys, facing the vehicle, asked, “What’s that bum doing?”

Paulo turned around, confused, and saw the tweaker jumping over the car door. The wheels of the Mustang spun in the dirt as the man tried to make his way inside. Paulo's heart dropped as he realized he'd left his gun in the car. He grabbed his head in frustration, then shouted at the boys, "Shoot him!"

One of the boys fired a round at the car, the bullet slamming into the back door and tearing through the side. The other boy moved in closer, letting a shot fly just in front of the man's face, shattering the front window. With every shot that rang out, Paulo squirmed, his hands clenched in frustration. More rounds followed, at least an entire magazine fired, and still, the tweaker wasn't hit once.

It was clear the man was new to driving, taking a few donuts to finally manage a straightaway. Paulo screamed at the top of his lungs, furious, and snatched an AK from the nearest boy, taking a clean kill shot that tore through the man's head. The tweaker's head hit the wheel instantly, making the car honk as he slouched still as stone.

Paulo dropped the gun, bolting toward the Mustang as it coasted down the street.

"No, no, no!" he shouted, his heart racing as the car slowed and finally went into the corner of a stone building.

The two boys walked over to Paulo as he threw the man's body out of the car and looked at the damages done to his mustard yellow beauty. Paulo spat on the homeless man's body then turned around and shouted, "This woulda never happened If I didn't stop for you punks! It is Adisa's party tonight. I wanted to roll in on something nice but… No!"

He turned around back to his car and held the top of its door and squeezed. One of the boys spoke up, "Now can we use it?"

Paulo turned slowly, his gaze scanning the boys up and down as frustration grew across his face. Without a word, he opened his palm and smacked both of their cheeks in one swift motion.

"Sure, we can use it now," he said, his tone sharp, Irritation lingering in his voice.

The boys rubbed their faces and were angry but knew nothing could be done as Paulo was the closest boy to Adisa besides Afia.

Paulo popped his trunk and walked over to the back and opened it. He looked down and realized that the trunk was not enough to fit a two-

hundred-pound man inside and another tweaker, so he shut it and ordered the boys, “Put them both in the backseat…”

The boys put the bodies sitting up in the backseat as if they were still alive and one of the two boys sat in the middle of the corpses trying not to get too much blood spilled on him from the bum's dripping head. Within minutes, an enraged and speeding Paulo arrived at the docks, his car screeching to a halt. From the driver's seat, he watched as the two boys dragged the lifeless bodies onto the wooden dock and unceremoniously tossed them into the murky Nile. The water swallowed them whole, their fates sealed.

As soon as the bodies sank out of view, Paulo slammed the car in reverse, tires screeching, and sped off, leaving the boys stranded on the dock. It was an act of pure disrespect.

In a desolate property, without a soul or savior, Abel sat in silence in his dark living room being illuminated by only a single lamp light. Abel had no family and barely any money left to his name. Just a broken ranch and thoughts of revenge, with no true purpose left in the boy’s heart. He realized the only thing that was left for him to do was to murder his own brother and end the family's curse that Adisa had started. The only blood left that was responsible for the rest of it being drained out.

Afia heard this odd sound which sounded far but was within the walls of Utopia and ran to his window. At first his mind made him think a missile was to crash down but instead in his vision was a giant burst of purple and green in the black sky off in the distance. It was odd, random fireworks being let off on a random night, but he noticed where it came from. The highest home in all of Utopia. Adisa’s home had colorful lights bursting out of it and the sound of loud music was heard by Abel once he opened his door to examine his brother’s party.

Right then in his mind he realized if he was to kill Adisa any night, a night where he was hosting a party with many people with him would be the perfect setting. He could murder Adisa in front of all of his followers and other on-goers who look up to him.

With nothing besides clothes and a body, Abel walked off his property ready to end Adisa once and for all, and crumble Utopia along with it.

Before Afia could even join the party, he and Paulo decided to leave. Paulo, tired of filming Adisa, and Afia, tired of watching his leader's door no one dared to enter.

Both took the long walk down to Inner-Utopia wanting to patrol the streets. As they walked Afia said, "You know if I was a criminal I would want to do my crimes the night that no soldiers would be out. We are bound to deal with some sort of bullshit tonight."

Paulo then responded saying, "You know I have already dealt with enough bullshit today, first my car gets wrecked then I get shit from Adisa about it, his ass laughing about it as soon as I enter his gates."

Afia belly laughed and then struggled to say, "We'll it does look like hell."

No smile was on Paulo's face, he chose to spit on Afia's shoe instead which led Afia to not smile anymore either.

Afia barked at him, "These are nice shoes bitch. They probably cost more than your piece of shit stang. You're lucky I'm not going to knock your teeth out with my pistol… Well, your teeth are already messed up from how much you suck Adisa's dick"

Both boy's put their rifles down and braced themselves for the usual friendly brawl. Behind Afia, Paulo noticed a skinny, drugged out looking man watching the two about to fight like he had popcorn in his hands. Paulo got out of his fighting stance and shouted down the street, "What are you looking at? It is past curfew you know!"

Afia kept in his fighting stance saying, "I ain't falling for this one Paulo. Put your hands up!"

The skinny man bolted down the street the moment Paulo acknowledged him, disappearing into an alley. Instinct kicked in and Paulo drew his gun and sprinted past Afia. He reached the narrow corridor where the man had vanished, with Afia close behind. The homeless man never looked back, not once checked who was chasing him.

They both realized they wouldn't catch him on foot. Just as Paulo kept running, Afia stopped, raised his rifle, and fired. The shot landed square in the back of the man's thigh, sending him face-first into a pile of trash.

The man thrashed, trying to crawl away, but Paulo was already on him, yanking him up by the collar. Afia stepped in beside him; rifle aimed squarely at the man's terrified face.

“What the hell are you doing out at this hour?”

After Afia shouted, the man squirmed with everything he had, but Paulo held him steady, even for a kid, his grip was unshakable.

“Why- You shot me!”

Afia with the gun ready to shoot in his face spoke, “You were being suspicious past curfew! I had the right to kill you then and there you're lucky I just shot the back of your leg!”

“Damn you… You gonna get me some help?”

Paulo shook his head while he kneeled and said, “Not until you say what you are out doing and why you ran!”

A swift bodily jerk came from the shot man, and he tried to move around and get up off of Paulo. In reaction Afia flipped his gun around and hit the man right on his nose with the wooden stock of his rifle. While the man grabbed his nose in pain, Paulo reached into the man’s left pocket and pulled out a familiar sized bag of meth. He lifted it up towards Afia and they both looked bewildered. They both kept the man down but looked into the clear plastic bag, it being a quarter full but having marks all the way to the top of the bag as if it was completely full at one point.

The boys all knew that somehow there could be ways for drugs to come into Utopia one way or another but the most concerning thing of all was the fact that these were the same exact bags that Adisa and his soldiers would use for their drugs.

Afia shouted out, “Where did you buy this? Tell us now and we will show mercy!”

No reaction was given to the boys, until Afia stuck his rifle barrel onto the man's skin, and he yelped out, “I didn’t buy it from nobody! Just stole it from some kid, younger than you!”

“What’d he look like? Describe!”

“Shorter than you. Wearing glasses and a collared shirt. Just a nerdy looking kid I do not know!”

Realization hung in the air like smoke. Afia and Paulo locked eyes and Afia already knew what had happened and knew it could never be spoken of.

He looked down at the man, silent and tense, then pulled the trigger. The shot drove the druggie’s face into the concrete, blood splattering the dirt beneath him.

Paulo shoved Afia back, his voice cracking. “Why did you do that?”

They both now had their rifles pointed at each other and a fearsome look in their eyes.

Afia responded, “Drug dealer deserved to die, Paulo!”

“You're covering your tracks! You don’t want Adisa knowing about Mosi. Let me guess, you gave him the drugs?”

“No! I don’t want him in this life; I didn’t even want him to come with us to the gas station! He must have stolen them from me, that stupid kid!”

Afia stood still and then gently threw his gun down and said, “Let me call Adisa. We can report the death, yes? Now put your AK down.”

Paulo agreed and gently put his gun down to the ground. Whereas if Paulo put his gun down first, Afia would have shot him, Afia knew to put his gun down first to show Paulo he didn’t want anyone to die.

The boys both stared at each other, their heart’s racing and pupil’s sharpened, not knowing what was going to come next.

Paulo swiftly radioed into the gang, “We got a dead druggie in central Utopia. Hurry to the city.”

He sat and stared at Afia as he continued to click the radios button, then he exclaimed, “Glasses sold him the dope!”

Afia seized the moment and lunged at Paulo, slamming him to the ground. Paulo’s radio clattered to the dirt as Afia pinned him down, crushing the backs of his wrists into the hard-packed road.

“I am going to run off and save my cousin. Don’t follow me!”

The boy on the ground still wore a look of fear as Afia slowly pulled his hands away. Paulo didn’t even try to move.

Afia picked up his rifle, took a step back, and kept it trained on Paulo as he retreated, moving in the same direction they had chased the tweaker just moments before.

On the tail end of his gloomful potential final walk, Abel walked up Adisa’s long mountainous driveway fantasizing about meeting his family after death. He imagined them hugging him and giving him thanks for ending Adisa’s terrible reign. Not only did his family hug him in this fantasy but also all of the past and potential victims of Adisa did as well.

Even if the boy bore no weapon walking through the front gates of the dictator’s palace, he knew his plan and he knew that he would finish this. At the front of the compound stood two boys, letting in a line of decent cars.

In the car at the front of the line was an arguing young white man who was arguing with Adisa's soldier at the front.

He cried out, "My name has to be on the list! Adisa and I were just talking about this yesterday!"

The soldier looked very displeased and tried his best to not raise his rifle to the bitching man's face. The other soldier on the other side of the gate recognized Abel and shook him in right to through the front gate. Abel walked closer to the home as another firework shot off from the backside of the home and exploded above his head.

Not once did the kid bat an eye at the blaring red explosion atop of him as he treaded towards the home.

Unfamiliar drunk people stood and laid out front, all wearing nice suits and button ups that were dirtied from the mud that they laid rest in. These people were not from Utopia and probably not from anywhere in South Sudan. Music blasted from the colorful open front door, wrapping around Abel's ears and rattling his chest with every thump of the subwoofers. The sound didn't stir the motionless bodies slumped over random pieces of furniture, lifeless in the corners of the house.

In the kitchen, a crowd of about fifty people danced under strobe lights with a crappy DJ set up on the island that everyone had to act like they liked. Most of the dancers were women and Adisa was nowhere to be found on the floor.

Abel only glanced at the makeshift dance floor before continuing down the hallway, searching for his brother's room. He moved quietly, checking room after empty room until he opened a door that stopped him cold.

A child's room.

The walls were pink, a princess-style bed sat in the corner, and a unicorn rocking chair rested beside it. Abel froze as he knew his brother didn't have a daughter.

But he knew Cyril did and Adisa was either too lazy or too cruel and hadn't bothered to clear the room out.

Abel was about to close the door when his eyes caught a photo on the dresser of a young girl perched on her uncle's shoulders. Her eyes looked straight into his and in them, he saw the same eyes that haunted him from the night before. The same eyes of the homeless girl he saw before the vision.

He wondered if Adisa looked into the room as a reminder of his power and how easy it was for him to destroy a family just as he did to his own.

After exiting, he turned a corner to face a second hallway, Abel was met with a double set of doors to his left which had to have been his brother's master bedroom. Abel turned his head, eyeing the lonely hallway, half-expecting one of Adisa's goons to be waiting in the shadows, ready to shoot the moment he touched the round, brass knob.

To his surprise, the door was unlocked and that alone made him hesitate. Someone was supposed to be guarding this room... unless they were off drinking with the others.

He slipped inside and shut the door fast and silent.

The room was hollow and drab, but Abel didn't waste time. He tore through it, searching for Adisa's favorite relic, the one that started it all. A gift from his closest friend, and maybe the only thing Adisa would never willingly part with.

He ransacked shelves, yanked open drawers, dug through every corner he could find to see no sign of the relic.

Pacing now, Abel caught his foot on the edge of the bear rug in the middle of the room. His body slid hard across the floor, and his nose smacked the bottom edge of Adisa's bed with a dull thud.

Abel slightly lifted his head up to see the open arch at the foot of the bed which revealed a small rectangle wooden box. It was made of a different wood then the rest of the floor and had old cast iron nails driven through its hinges and sides. Nothing else laid under the bed that Abel could see. The boy stayed glued to the floor and army crawled under the bed, which was easy for his small stature, and dragged the box out. At the top of the box was a glass view onto the old revolver that started it all. Abel looked at it and instantly remembered the day he encountered his brother, the day the first massacre occurred, which most people had forgotten about. One good deed by Adisa completely erased his sins according to the people. One piece of food for each citizen and every man turned a blind eye to the child's travesties.

Abel's hand now held what had started his brother's reign and what would end it, so he jumped up as fast as he could feeling anxious as he could possibly be. The door creaked open at a steady, unhurried pace with one of

Abel's hands on the knob, the other gripping Adisa's revolver, barrel pointed down.

His larynx bobbed nervously in his neck as his eyes scanned the hallway, every step making the corridor stretch longer, darker, and more uncertain.

The kitchen was now in the boy's view with women still dancing drunkenly and Adisa nowhere to be found. Abel walked behind the crowd with his piece in hand that no one would pay mind to and a dead stare looking outside. While in thought about putting down his brother, a woman turned around and grabbed his left arm which did not have a firearm in it and imprudently said, "Adisa!"

He swiped his arm off her and uttered, "Get your hands off me."

Abel looked at her for a good second, a disgusted look overtaking her visage. Still with the disgusted look he could not decode this woman as one of her eyes was completely shut from the amount of drinking she had partaken in.

He continued his walk towards the sliding glass door and as he was about to put his hand on the door he stopped halfway before reaching it, looking straight at his brother through the glass.

Adisa sat outside on a distressed wicker lounge couch with a pretty young woman comfortable in his left arm. She had long curly hair and wore a

Black silk dress matching with sparkly heels that looked like they did not fit her one bit. While looking at the kind looking girl, Adisa's face had a smug look to it, as if he had nothing to be worried about because even if the woman did not like him, he would get her somehow. The fire in front of them illuminated their faces, both of them sharing a fond mutual gaze. Adisa was talking to the girl, more than likely talking about his escapades and nothing else as she sat there as a listener. Even if it seemed like a tender moment, it wasn't a private one as Adisa's men surrounded them, shadows in the dim light, just visible enough to remind them they were never alone. All the boys looked sober as judges, surprising Abel as he thought that they would be shit-faced along with the people out-front of the house.

Abel knew that even if they wanted to get intoxicated, Adisa's paranoia would not allow it tonight. He was so consumed by suspicion; he couldn't share his first private moment with a woman without his soldiers flanking him. The soldiers who were ever obedient, saw nothing strange about it.

A loud muffled audio began screaming from the hips of one of the closest boys to Adisa, the boy noticed quickly and rushed off, pulling his walkie talkie off his hip and thrusting it to his ear. Abel didn't hear what was said on the radio as all it sounded like was staticky, distressed words.

The woman in Adisa's grasp looked worried for a moment then Adisa redirected her attention to him and Abel saw him mouth, "It's nothing," to her as he shook his head. Her face went back to normal, and they began to talk again.

Abel continued watching them with a blank stare, thinking about the poor woman who was going to have to endure watching a murder right in front of her eyes.

The kid imagined him opening that slider door with everyone's attention on him. Without even saying a word he would pick up the revolver and fire a round straight for Adisa's head and as soon as the round went off, he would be shot to hell by every soldier. Adisa would die with the woman screaming as his blood crept all over her skin. Abel then wondered what would happen next.

Adisa would die, and then so would he. Someone from his circle would rise to Adisa's spot and maybe act even worse than him. It wouldn't matter how cruel the next boy was, so long as he mimicked Adisa and gave the people what they craved. Even if Adisa took a bullet right now, he wouldn't truly die. His ideas would just slide into the skin of another loyal follower.

Abel, though, would vanish. Just another forgotten name in a long, grim line of dictators and martyrs.

He knew, logically, that pulling the trigger would change nothing. That it was a mistake, but his body didn't care. His instincts needed this—needed the moment Adisa dropped. That would be enough, even if only for a heartbeat before he died.

He glanced at the gun again, still hidden at his side, and reminded himself of everything Adisa had done and everything he was still capable of.

Abel put his hand up to the door's handle, then almost pushed it open but stopped when he saw the boy who received the radio call rush to Adisa and tap him on his shoulder. Adisa looked angry when the boy tapped him, but the soldier seemingly swayed his mind with the words he said to not be angry with him but to be angry at something else. Abel saw his brother speak, "What!"

Adisa rose from his wicker chair and pointed at the boy who had just delivered the news, then, without warning, singled out another soldier.

All three of them took off walking towards the side of the house. A chill crawled down Abel's spine. He stepped back from the door, the fear creeping in. Someone might've seen him slip into Adisa's room and maybe they'd already told him.

He moved fast, cutting through the house. The drunken woman shot him another cold glance, but he didn't stop. He burst through the front door and ran until he reached Adisa's front gate.

There, he turned once. In the distance, Adisa was clutching his head, arms flailing in fury, his voice swallowed by the space between them. Abel didn't wait to see more. Ignoring the boy at the front of the gate, the boy ran off down the hill.

-Chapter XXVIII-

Adisa held his head with his hands as he walked around his house with his own party going on. Not only did he have to leave a girl he had just started to hit it off with, but he now had news that one of his closest soldiers had been potentially betraying him according to Paulo.

Adisa slammed the backseat of the old mayor's ford sedan, and the irritated boy shouted through the open window, "Why, why, why do I always have to deal with shit like this always at the wrong fucking time! Both of you drive!"

As he waited for his soldiers to get in the front seat, his eye caught on the back compartment of the driver's seat which had a pistol's imprint on it. He shoved his hand into the warm cubby and felt the pistol's jagged grip. A 1911 was sitting in there for God knows how long. He had no idea who had put it there but guessed it was one of his soldiers. While looking at it he pulled a long piece of hair from out of the slide and threw it down onto the floor. His fingers flipped the piece around to reveal a familiar name etched along it.

"AMEEN" was scratched along the slide of the pistol, along with matching rusted spots and dried blood which was fitting for the old chief.

Adisa tried his best to not think of the man or what he had done, but truly Adisa knew that after what Ameen had done it changed him the most. He pulled his small red wooden pocketknife out from his pants and scratched a solid line along the name to not read it anymore. Even still with the etch through it, Ameen's will was now in Adisa's hands.

Adisa remembered that this pistol was filled with blanks, so he spoke up, "Do either of you have a 1911?"

Both boys looked at each other then the driver pushed his body up and pulled a pistol out of the back of his waistband. The driver then asked, "One of these?"

Adisa rolled his eyes and then responded, "Yes, I just need the magazine from it."

Without a word the soldier quickly dropped the magazine and handed it to his leader. Adisa then replaced the magazines, giving the pistol a new life.

The boys drove out of the compound, the soldier who Adisa didn't even remember the name of driving sketchily with sweat beading down his forehead. Not a soul was seen in the city they drove through, until the car turned down a street and locked on one boy who stood in the city streets with a rifle in hand. He waved down the car and the boys pulled up to him. Adisa looked at Paulo and slowly rolled down his window and urgently said, "Where is he?"

"He went down the alley behind me, but he is going to Glasses home. He said he's going to save him like the dumbass he is!"

Adisa stood blankly while rubbing his thumb upon his newfound pistol, then he spoke, "Let me take care of this. Drive!"

The soldier behind the wheel sped off, leaving Paulo in the dust, literally.

He stood there, dumbfounded as the only reason he hadn't walked to the compound to deliver the message himself was because he'd counted on a ride back.

In just under a minute, they reached the apartment complex where Afia, her mother, Glasses, and his mother all lived. Afia lived in a different room than his parents and Glasses lived in the same room with his mother. Adisa knew this because he was the one who made it free for them to all live there.

The child leader got out of the car and ordered his men to, “Stay here,” Then he walked up the stairs. A blue light shined on Adisa as he took steps up, being ready at any moment for anything. He truly did not know what Afia was doing, but he knew that Glasses needed to be punished. Once making it to the top of the stairs he was greeted by a silent Afia who stood looking defeated in the middle of the hallway to the rooms. Adisa chuckled a bit at the boy and walked towards him. He holstered his pistol and slapped Afia across the face who stood still and was silent.

“Is there something you want to tell me? Selling drugs to your friend you traitor. You know the rules of this city!”

Adisa lowered his tone and got closer to Afia and said, “You know our rules.”

Afia responded solemnly, “I didn’t sell him anything. Not a damn thing. I talked with him; he stole a bag from under my bed, and it got stolen from some junkie. He made a mistake alright, not one big enough to die for!”

Adisa knew Afia wasn’t lying as he could see it in his friend’s eyes.

He shook his head then said, “It’s not about mistakes. It's about the fact that he should have never found out! He is now a threat to us because of you!”

Adisa’s finger was now pierced into Afia’s rib cage as he sternly spoke to him.

“Now you tell me Afia. Where is he?”

Afia shook his head no and Adisa then looked into his eyes and spoke, “This needs to be dealt with!”

Afia stood still in silence, then said, “I have known you for years Adisa. You are my closest friend. Don’t kill the boy… Please. He doesn’t deserve it; he will keep his mouth shut.”

Adisa didn’t respond, he just listened, watching one of his closest allies teeter on the edge of a breakdown. Taking matters into his own hands, he tried to push past his friend, but Afia stepped in his way, blocking him.

Adisa looked again at his friend. A single tear traced down Afia’s cheek, quiet and heavy. Then, trembling, Afia said, “He doesn’t deserve to die…”

Adisa then snapped and shoved Afia to the ground, the back of his head cracking hard against the concrete.

Dazed, head buzzing, Afia still reached out, trying to hook Adisa's ankle and bring him down, but Adisa jerked his leg free and kept moving.

Afia stayed on the ground and watched as Adisa put his ear up to the closest door and heard from the inside, "Shh," from what sounded like a womanly presence.

Adisa gave a good look at Afia then moved his body backwards and slammed the door open with his foot. In the small apartment with little to no light, Adisa looked dead onto Glasses and his mother who were curled up on their couch that was right in front of the door. Adisa stood at the foot of the couch and pointed his pistol right at the child he wanted.

"You… I don't want your mother. Get up like a man and face me."

The boy's knees shook, but he lifted his chin anyway, unsure if Adisa was about to test him–or kill him. His mother screamed, lunging to pull him back, but his feet were already planted.

Adisa caught eyes with Glasses's confident face and saw a chance to break him. Without warning, he pistol-whipped the boy across the right side of his face.

As Mosi fell to the floor, his mother shrieked, hands flying to her mouth, still curled on the couch. Adisa grabbed the boy by the collar and dragged him out of the room. The door slammed behind them, cutting off her cries.

Outside, Adisa picked up Glasses and shoved the boy forward at gunpoint, the sandals on his feet skidding helplessly across the floor.

Adisa turned the boy around and with the pistol now in his stomach, he shouted, "You made a grave mistake, boy!"

As Adisa stood still, breathing heavily, his eyes locked on Glasses. For the first time, Glasses saw it, the true and unhidden evil that consumed the soul of the child who led them all.

Afia was still on the floor, and he pushed himself up slowly, slumping against the half wall that overlooked the corridor on the right. His voice cracked as he pleaded, "Adisa… Please! Don't kill the kid, kill me!"

Then he dropped his head into his arms, collapsing in on himself as he was defeated. He wanted to save his friend more than anything, but he knew fighting against his leader was useless.

Adisa didn't flinch at the plea, and he walked past Afia without a glance, dragging Glasses along with the pistol pressed hard into the boy's ribs.

The sound of footsteps faded down the stairs, swallowed by the silence, leaving only the echo of Afia's cries behind.

He should've never brought Glasses to tag along with the gang.

The thought hit him like a blade, sharp and undeniable. It was the worst mistake he had ever made, and he knew it. It hollowed him out and cracked something deep inside. The young boy he'd grown up with, the one whose mother had been his own mother's closest friend, was now dead. Now somehow, he would have to explain that to her.

Unable to bear it, Afia turned and ran, retreating to his home where the walls could hold his grief, where he could break in peace.

Two boys drove Adisa and Glasses in the car, Adisa examining the trembling boy to his right and nudging the pistol he held into the side of his gut teasing death upon him. Every time the boy looked uncomfortable or shook a tad bit, Adisa fed off of it and desired more. Adisa thought of nasty things to tell the boy to break at his mind a little more before he finally finished with him. He figured out what he was going to say in the silent car and spoke, "You really thought you could join us? Is that why you stole those drugs to go and sell them? Do you think going behind my back is going to make me like you?"

Glasses looked at Adisa in silence and had no thoughts, knowing that his death would come soon. He knew that this was all a power game to Adisa to make himself feel better about his own wrong doings.

"Like I would ever let a boy like you join the gang anyways… You know, you remind me of my little brother."

Adisa expected a reaction to his words, but Glasses did not give him one, instead he turned his head to his feet and stared blankly.

The boys kept driving through the city, almost approaching the nearby forest that Adisa and his gang once hid inside of.

With no reaction from Glasses, Adisa got bored and realized that he now had someone to bring to the mall with his newfound ally David. In childish excitement Adisa broke the quietness of the car and said, "Let me make a call before we do anything. Stop the car!"

Glasses was surprised at Adisa's quick change of demeanor and his odd attitude. It almost led him to believe that Adisa was pulling some sort of joke on him.

Adisa dialed a few numbers then put the phone up to his ear with Ameen's 1911 still pointed on Glasses. The hostage heard the phone line ring up and Adisa shouted, "David!"

He then heard a muffled, "Hello… Hello my friend."

"Am I interrupting your anniversary?"

On the other end of the phone David looked around his lonesome room where he watched a game show, then he responded, "No, not at all. Just make it quick."

"Well, I know you invited me to accompany you and your wife tomorrow and I have good news regarding that. I think I have found a woman, so tomorrow morning let us go to that mall you were speaking of. You can pick us up anytime tomorrow morning just fly right to the gates of Utopia."

David got out of his bed, swiping off ash off his shirt and then said, "Of course! Let us do that my friend. I will come early. It is a four-hour flight so I will arrive at eight then we shall get there at twelve."

"Sounds good," the boy responded.

Before Adisa could lower the phone, he heard a metallic *click* to his right, a subtle sound, followed by a sudden tug on the pistol barely resting in his hand.

Glasses had already flung the car door open and was sprinting into a narrow alley, sending wild bursts of gunfire toward Adisa's vehicle as he disappeared into the night with the pistol in hand.

The soldiers up front scrambled, ducking as they fumbled for their sidearms as they were still seated. Adisa dove for cover just as Mosi vanished around a corner.

Snapping the phone shut, Adisa threw open the car door that glass fell from and stepped out. Without missing a beat, he popped the trunk and revealed his prize, a brand-new AK-47, untouched, gleaming under the dim light. An under folder with cherry red wood furniture and a seventy-five-round drum.

He didn't bother unfolding the stock, as he couldn't with the drum. Slamming the trunk shut, he moved into the alley, not running, but

storming forward with a fast, deliberate pace, the rifle cradled in his arms and red in his eyes.

Glasses made it deep into the alley systems in between buildings ducking away from trash and sleeping bodies. Even if he felt he was deep enough he didn't stop running, letting his legs beat down against the dirt against all odds. For one second the boy turned around the short alley he had crossed into and saw Adisa who fired a round which went right past his head. Glasses in reaction tripped over some trash and on the way down sent a bullet at Adisa that also missed. He scrambled to his feet just as another shot cracked through the air, forcing him to take the next corner. It led into a four-way alley that looked like something torn from a nightmare, narrow and grimy.

Glasses planted himself in the center, pistol raised and aimed back the way he came.

As the small hairs on his ears felt cold, then came the clatter of metal, a trash can lid hitting the ground behind him. He spun, heart pounding, only to find emptiness.

He turned back around. Still nothing.

Then, out of the corner of his eye came a quick moving silhouette to his right.

He breathed in and sucked in air too fast. The boy swung his pistol and fired. The shot rang out, echoing against the alley walls. Again, nothing seemed to react.

Glasses whipped around one last time, his breaths shallow and frantic. The alley stayed deathly silent.

It hit him that if he wanted to survive, he had to keep moving.

He took a cautious step back, then another. Until—A jolt of pain ran up his back. Cold metal jammed into his spine from behind.

No words were spoken but enough was said with Glasses's widened eyes. He realized at that moment his mistake was that he stopped running and stood still in fear.

A crack went into the youngest boy's ear and a ring in it followed.

Adisa's bullet blew through the boy's back and followed out of the front, Mosi looking down at his own wound where his Polo shirt busted open and made him more lightheaded than he already was. Glasses's head began to shake, and blood started to trickle down his mouth. He fell quickly to the floor sideways, and he rested his back on the dirt ground. Adisa

looked at him with a cold unforgettable look in his eyes that would haunt the child for all of eternity. In one final act of movement, Glasses dug his hands into the dirt below him and tried to push himself away from Adisa. He stared directly at his murderer, not blinking even once as fear had completely taken over his body. His bloodied composure, the alley way, all took Adisa back to the times where he was on the floor, trying to push himself away from his would-be murderers. As Adisa stared at Glasses, something shifted. The boy's face, twisted with fear and exhaustion in a blink, reshaped.

His own face was now staring back at him.

Not metaphor, but a mirror as Adisa saw the boy as he once was. An innocent version of himself, scared and confused. A ghost from a time before he was consumed by blood and power.

A reflection he wasn't ready to face.

Adisa shut his eyes hard trying to unsee what he had seen, but that image was burned into his mind every time that he blinked.

His realization curdled into anger. He waddled over to the boy and, with a swift motion of his foot, flipped him onto his back, unable to face the familiarity in the boy's expression. He stared at the wound he'd made, then pressed his foot against it. The boy let out a dry, rattling wheeze of pain against the ground.

Adisa rested the barrel of the gun against the back of Mosi's head and closed his eyes. He saw the resemblance between them, felt the weight of what he was about to do and had second thoughts about ending his life. Then, his mind went blank. Eyes shut, he couldn't form a single thought, not even an image.

That's when he heard a voice echo in the walls of his head.

"**Do it.**"

Adisa's eyes snapped open, but there was no gunshot. Only the sight of Mosi's head, split and steaming, a red ruin. A single brass casing lay beside it, warm and still whispering smoke.

He lifted his foot from the boy's back and reached up to touch his own forehead, feeling something he hadn't felt in a long time.

Remorse.

-Chapter XXIX-

The drive back to the compound felt like days for Adisa, his brain sifting between emotions of confidence then guilt. He tried shutting his eyes and resting his head on the back of the driver's seat to maybe slow his brain down, but nothing worked. Every time he closed his eyes he saw the same thing.

No words were exchanged between the soldiers driving and Adisa the whole ride home, leading the boys to leave the car awkwardly as they parked in the compound. Adisa sat with his head still cushioned in the backseat; he was broken out of his trance when he remembered that there was potentially a female still waiting for him outside. He got out of the car and fixed himself up in the mirror, wiping the little spots of blood that were on his face and adjusting the collar of his shirt. Once Adisa turned around from the car, he walked off towards his back yard that he could see still contained a fire which gave him hope that the woman was still back there. He turned the corner of his house and instantly met eyes with the woman. It was as if she had been waiting for him to walk around that corner as long as he had gone. He broke eye contact with her and looked around not seeing any of his men which surprised him. Adisa made it to the couch and sat down right where he was before he left and said, "Sorry for the wait. Where are those creeps that were standing around you now?"

"There right inside all drunk already. As soon as you left, they took off."

Adisa shook his head up and down and thought of something to say but had a real hard time as he was not used to talking to women.

"You act like this is the first time you have talked to a girl," the girl playfully said.

Adisa smiled and then said, "Maybe… But ignore that I'm trying."

They both laughed and then Adisa said, “I hope you are not busy tomorrow; we were invited to the Mall of Arabia.”

The girl opened her mouth in surprise and then said, “Me? Invited by who.”

“Just a friend. Join me please. We will fly there on a helicopter, have you ever been on one?”

The girl was taken back as she had never even been out of South Sudan before and if she ever was to she did not expect it to be on a helicopter. Adisa sat tapping his foot on the ground in anxiety, waiting for an answer from the woman. His mouth made him blurt out, “I’m sorry to ask, could you tell me your name again?”

The girl’s face went from excitement over a bigger than life opportunity to a blank disappointed face at the stone-cold reality of her situation.

She then said, “Oh. I-I could have sworn I told you earlier?”

Her straight mouth turned to a smile, but her eyes still looked the same as she tried to keep her composure.

“Nyma,” she uttered

She let out a fake laugh after saying her name for a second time, then Adisa spoke, “What a beautiful name. Nyma- I like it.”

He smiled and Nyma did too but while looking at him while he spoke, she caught a false look in his eye. It wasn’t that he didn’t like her name, it was that she knew he truly did not care.

“I would love to go to Egypt with you, but for now why don’t we go inside.”

Adisa smiled while shaking his head, then Nyma stood up and grabbed Adisa’s hand and led the way inside.

An hour later, Adisa pushed himself off the top of Nyma who was exposed and cold with no blanket touching her skin. With his back on the bed, the boy had a big smile on his face looking up at the ceiling while the girl felt like she wanted to cry. Adisa stood up out of bed not saying a word to the girl he had deflowered and walked confidently towards his bathroom.

Nyma reached for the blanket that was kicked off towards the foot of the bed and covered herself in it. Under the protective white comforter, she grabbed her underwear which were wrapped around her right ankle and pulled them back up into place. While pulling them up she noticed two

small blotches of blood under her laying on Adisa's white sheets. She felt embarrassed and moved over from the stains, so she did not have to feel it. Her eyes closed trying to find comfort in warm solitude and she thought back to her mother in her home saying, "Whatever he wants to do, just let him do it. It won't be that bad I promise."

Her mother told her this the night before the party while putting on her small heels onto her daughter's feet hoping that her daughter would get picked up by Adisa. Nyma lived in Rumbekara which was not neighboring to Utopia but was closer to Ibis. Her father was a ranch owner, and her mother was a doctor in Ibis making her have a comfortable life. She was invited to Adisa's party by her best friend who was in a relationship with one of Adisa's soldiers. When she asked her parents about the party, they were excited and urged Nyma to try and start a relationship with Adisa as it would bring much wealth into their family. Nyma was not against the Idea. He was only a year or two younger than her and didn't seem terrible from what she heard. She was not the type of woman to go against her parent's wishes, so she did what they asked.

Now that she did what he wanted, she was scared and alone under Adisa's covers not knowing if she was going to be kicked out next or kept around after this mall trip. Nyma knew that if she stayed with Adisa that she would be financially set, but true comfort would be lacking in the forced relationship.

On his long walk home, Abel slowly walked through the empty Utopia with a deep feeling of shame for not ending his brother. He knew that if Adisa was to be killed it would have to be by the work of multiple hands, not just his. The issue was that he did not know if many people shared his hatred for his brother or if they were all under his spell.

Down a long city road, Abel noticed three men who looked to be in their late twenties, drinking beer and standing against a wooden bar rail. They seemed to be chatting, laughing and overall having a good time. Abel inched closer and one of them pointed at him, whispered to his friend to the right of him and laughed his ass off. The man who was told the joke shouted, "Hey Adisa!"

Abel was confused then quickly angered as he took that as an insult. He didn't respond a word towards the men and walked closer as they laughed. By the time he was close enough to them to where they realized it was not in fact Adisa, Abel remembered he still had Adisa's pistol, so he pulled it out of shorts and pointed it at the man who called him Adisa. The guys put their beers down and put up their hands and said, "Whoa!"

Abel stood sternly in front of the men, and they looked at the child scared.

Taking his concealed anger out, Abel asked, "Who the hell did you call Adisa?"

That's when the guy who whispered the joke in the first place said, "We finally found someone who hates Adisa as much as we do!"

The two other men wanted to laugh but restrained themselves as they were still scared of being shot.

"I am not Adisa; I am his brother."

He put down the pistol and the guys looked relieved.

"We didn't mean no harm alright. We were just cracking jokes, that's all."

Abel squinted his eyes and asked, "Do you hate my brother Adisa?"

The three guys looked at each other and then one of them stuttered and spoke, "No we love the guy! I–"

Abel could instantly tell the man was lying as soon as his mouth opened, so he cut his speech off and said, "Quit lying. I don't like the kid leader either, He is an embarrassment to Africa."

The man who just spoke, double took the boy's words and said, "You ain't kidding us?"

"Does it look like I'm kidding?"

Abel pulled his revolver out of his pants again and pointed it at the sky and shouted, "This pistol in my hands is his! I stole it from him to put him down! This is the pistol that started everything, and it is the pistol that will end everything!"

The guys had their hands back up in the air scared of the vengeful child, who's eyes were opened wide.

The middleman in the group put his hands down realizing this kid truly was angry and hated Adisa and as a peace offering said, "You want a beer kid?"

Abel, with his eyes still pointed at the ground said, "Sure."

While the man went and bought a beer for Abel, the other two panicked men stood looking at the hyperventilating kid standing in front of them. Abel got his beer and asked, “What are your names?”

The man on the left spoke first and said, “Bilal.” The man on the right then spoke, “Jal.”

Finally, the man in the middle who whispered the joke in the first place, walked back and said, “Atem.”

“My name is Abel. Nice to meet you.”

Abel sipped his beer, and the conversations continued, each of the group sharing their negative opinions on their leader that they had no choice but to follow. Only a few moments into conversation from the left of their vision, a lone soldier with an AK-47 in his arms walked towards the bar. Bilal said, “Be cool just talk about something else.”

Abel peeked at the soldier walking up and remembered him from school; it was a boy he didn’t know too well named Paulo. The soldier got close to the group, looking angry and entitled.

Paulo ordered, “Get to your homes now what the hell are you doing out at this time? Who is serving you?”

The bartender of the bar was gone when the group looked behind them, as he dipped out as soon as he saw a soldier walking up. To avoid any conflict the guys put their hands up and obediently repeated, “Alright.”

The three men and Abel walked around the bar, and Paulo followed them for a second then separated off from them. Abel was glad that Paulo did not recognize his face. Jal stopped the group with his palm and waited till Paulo was out of sight and returned to the bar. The group returned to where they stood and then Jal spoke, “You want to see something cool?”

He broke away from the group of boys and slipped behind the bar. They followed, watching as he dragged out a case of bottles from beneath the counter, then pried open a long, rectangular trap door hidden underfoot. The two other boys looked around as he did it, Abel recognizing that whatever he was doing was something not allowed.

One by one, they descended the narrow staircase beneath it. Abel was the last to go. As he stepped down, he pulled the trap door shut above his head, steadying himself on the cold concrete steps.

As soon as his feet touched the concrete ground, he noticed a printed photo of Adisa on a sack of grains that was held up with tape and had a small knife in between his brother's eyes. A smile grew over his face as he

realized that he had finally found his crowd and that what he had hoped for had come into fruition. Abel sat staring at the funny piece against the wall for a minute and the other boys behind him sat wondering what he would say about it. He turned around and looked at the rest of the basement, it being pretty bare besides a large ripped up couch and an old wooden TV.

Jal decided to speak first, saying, "The only people that know about this place are us three, the bartender and now you and it is going to stay that way."

Abel then said, "It will stay that way. But how much longer until we can bring people together? How much longer must we wait for Adisa to drive us all to hell. The sooner we bring the people together; the sooner Adisa falls."

Bilal chimed in saying, "I like your spirit kid, but we must not rush the revolution. There are others that think like us, but it is rare. We must be careful of what we speak and even what we think in this land! We must start slow and let this be the first night."

Abel asked, "So where do we start?"

Jal spoke up again, "We start by talking, brainstorming. If we start by blowing heads off, we will be found and killed in no time. And if we die, who knows if there will ever be a revolution. For all we know we are the only people in Utopia who hate Adisa."

"I agree but there has to be a silent group who doesn't like him. There must be," Abel said silently.

Atem then responded, "Trust me, there is. We just have to start with word of mouth then once we have a loyal group, no rats or snitches, we start with action."

The boys shook their heads, unanimously agreeing.

The night continued, until the sun started to run down the staircase through the cracks in the trap door. At this point Abel was surprisingly still up was Jal. They rambled back and forth, laughing till they fell on the floor and spoke disrespectfully of Adisa. It was fun until they ran out of things to speak of so Abel looked around trying to find something to talk about but instead just stared at the other two boys. Atem comfortably on the couch and Bilal dead asleep on the stone-cold ground.

Abel looked at Jal and said, "You. You know what we should name ourselves?"

Jal slowly shut his eyes and said, “Name what?” as kept his mouth open after saying it.

“I mean us. This group,” Abel responded

Jal laughed then said, “You be the namer.”

Abel smiled and thought for a moment looking around the room.

“A.U.C. Anti Utopia Coalition.”

Jal looked up at Abel and said, “Write that down! We’ll forget this by the time we fall asleep and wake.”

In all of the impoverished room, Abel knew there would not be one pen or pencil, but he did know he had a knife on him. He pulled it out of his pocket and walked to the wall right in front of the stairs. Abel’s index finger pressed firmly against the spine of the knife’s handle and chiseled out from the wall: “AUC,” Then under it, “ANTI UTOPIA COALITIN.”

When he finished it, his hand ached and a good bit of dust layered his shoes. After only a second of looking at the writing, he realized the last word was misspelled, but he ignored it in his mind. He rubbed his thumb against the dull scratched blade of his knife, turned around and looked down at Jal who was asleep while standing, leaning against the wall right next to the entry of the stairs. Abel shook his head with a smile and walked up the stair corridor and exited the basement.

-Chapter XXX-

Under a gray sky without a drop of rain, Adisa shut a garbage can lid and walked away from its presence. His feet walked on the dirt of his city streets and in the ear of the leader wind blew by him and chilled against his bare body of which every inch was showing. Each gust that came echoed random names that Adisa could hear clear as day but understand as well as

fog. No one walked the streets of Utopia on this day. Things seemed different. The walls that he had built in his far eyesight had been broken down to rubble and windows of the buildings he knew so well were shattered. He walked for a good moment not knowing what was going on until he realized that this whole time, he had been walking backwards away from the silver garbage can he walked away from. Once he realized what was wrong, he began to shift his direction and step forwards towards the way he came from. Adisa was met with a Hyaena in the middle of the road that was walking across and stopped and stared at the boy. The starving animal walked in the direction of the garbage bin following the cries and scent of a newborn child. Adisa watched closely as it flipped the lid of the can with its nose letting the screams of the child get louder until it overtook the booming winds. The fetal wails echoed through the entire city while the Hyaena gently picked it up with its keen teeth and put it into the dirt. Once the Hyaena laid down on the ground, it moved its lower half towards the red baby's face and let the child nurse from its milk.

The screams stopped.

Adisa suddenly bolted his body towards the Hyaena and then pulled it away from the child. He expected the rabid animal to bite his finger's off but instead it was calm and cordial as it looked deep into his eyes like it was a true spirited being. When Adisa looked back at the now silent child laying in the dirt he was startled at the fact that the child now had dried up and turned black and crackled as if it had been cooked. His hand went down to pat the baby as to comfort it even though it was gone. As his hand touched the dry corpse, his eyes focused on the newfound veins, hair and wrinkles on his hand which had not been before. He must have aged. Adisa stood up with the bony Hyaena still staring at him, then joining along his side as he walked away from the child.

Warm skin and a cold floor were felt by Adisa as he shocked himself awake after his nightmarish vision. He looked around his bathroom and questioned why he was on the floor of it and stood up, being met with his eyes staring into themselves while staring in the mirror as he heavily breathed out of his chest. On his left, a ray of light beamed through the shades in his window and hit his face. Adisa opened the door to his bathroom buck naked and looked at Nyma who was sitting facing towards him with his thick blanket covering everything besides her head.

“What time is it?” Adisa asked while scratching the back of his neck.

Nyma reached across the bed to Adisa’s nightstand and looked at the alarm clock.

“Seven forty-five,” she softly spoke.

Adisa whispered out, “Fuck,” Then dug inside of his closet looking for an outfit he did not have planned.

The couple rushed out of the house, Nyma wearing the same thing she wore the night before and both of them being hungover. Adisa drank the night before because he wanted to feel a fake sense of confidence to try and keep his tough composure at his own house with people that he did not really care about. On the other hand, Nyma drank the night before to fake a sense of love towards Adisa.

While walking through the house with his newfound woman, Adisa looked in disgust at his soldiers who were laid across his house asleep and looked as if they would not wake for days. Adisa used four of his fingers to tap on the head of the soldier that drove him the night before and wake him up.

He ordered, “Hey you, get up and drive us to the front of the property.”

The boy squirmed around on the leather couch that accompanied three other soldiers and looked at Adisa like he had never met him. He shook out of his tired trance then bounced on his feet silently and followed Adisa and Nyma out of the house.

The three climbed into the same car Adisa had used the night before and cruised through inner Utopia, heading toward the province’s front gate without incident, until the driver caught sight of a familiar face walking down the street.

The driver spoke, “Hey Adisa. I see Abel walking down the street. Do you want me to stop?”

Adisa then put his right arm on the side of the driver’s chair and calmly said, “Don’t stop.”

The driver didn’t respond and kept driving past the leader’s young brother who walked lonesome in the street. Adisa looked behind his shoulder while driving further away from his brother and got a good look at his face which he hadn’t gotten in so long. The two’s relationship had never been good, but Adisa knew now after his mother and Abrahams passing that Abel would blame the deaths all on his brother’s actions.

Just like at Adisa's home, two boys opened the front gate of Utopia which revealed David's black helicopter sitting in the long dirt straight away that greeted you as soon as you left Utopia, looking almost like a runway.

It was silent and Adisa heard David shout from the plane, "Hurry my friend we are wasting time!"

Adisa and Nyma opened their car doors and before they could exit the driver of the car said to Adisa, "Do I need to accompany you for protection?"

Before lifting his butt off the seat Adisa thought of the question for a quick second then said, "Well then who is going to drive the car back?"

He laughed and confidently exited the car, not opening the door for his woman and walking in front of her as he pranced to the helicopter.

In the open passenger back seats of the helicopter sat David and his Wife and a soldier right next to them. At the front of the helicopter Adisa looked at the two pilots and then hopped into the bird, shaking everyone's hand. Adisa nonchalantly introduced Nyma to David and his wife, then both of them sat across from the couple. David's wife looked quite young for the mayor and wore a skimpy dress that did not seem to be David's style. Her name was Susan which was an oddly American name for a Sudanese girl.

"Do we need to buckle in?" Asked Adisa, who noticed everyone else in the chopper was unrestrained.

The pilot readied the helicopter for flight, everyone hearing them clicking buttons around. Then David yelled, "Hell no! Just don't fall out of the open door."

The two men laughed, and the girls ignored them, Susan fixing her lipstick on a small mirror and Nyma not taking David's advice, buckling in.

Slowly but surely the plane lifted itself into the air and Adisa looked down on his city like a little kid with excitement in his eyes.

David got the boy's attention and yelled, "It's beautiful looking at Utopia from above, hopefully I can tour it some time with you."

Adisa responded, "Say the word my friend. Maybe after the mall?"

David shook his head yes and they both smiled at each other with David having a half smile that seemed anything but genuine.

To his left in the corner of his eye, Adisa caught Susan staring at him with a worried look in her eye. When he caught her, she looked down and

threw on her glasses which she had been fidgeting with in her fingers. Adisa ignored her weird presence and redirected his attention to his partner.

Nyma sat close to his left, visibly scared and clearly unaccustomed to flying. Her anxiety only deepened in the silence, as the only other woman in the cabin hadn't said a word to her. Adisa wanted to reassure her, to say something comforting, but the moment slipped away when the helicopter suddenly stopped midair.

They stood directly over Utopia idling for no apparent reason. David wore a worried expression, but it wasn't the kind that came from confusion, it was a knowing fear.

The pilot's cabin door slid open to Adisa's right, and a large man in a tailored suit slowly stepped through. A small metal South Sudan flag pin glimmered on his suit's notch, giving Adisa the impression that this was someone important.

Adisa glanced at him from the side, then looked at David, who wasn't watching the man like a subordinate, but like a servant before his master.

The man was bald, with a sharply groomed gray-and-black beard that stirred a memory in Adisa. He'd seen this man before.

Adisa squinted, something tugging at the edge of recognition. His mouth opened.

"Who are-"

The man similar in stature to Abraham turned to Adisa and interrupted him in a monotone voice, saying, "Pleasure to meet you child."

He didn't stick his hand out in a good gesture, seeming fake to Adisa. The man said the empty sentence and then turned away from Adisa.

With a confused face, Adisa was curious as to why David did not speak of accompanying this man who was clearly not a soldier and felt that something was indeed tainted.

The massive man shook his head down to David with his hands behind his back and spoke, "David." Then slowly continued to Susan who he did not bow his head down to or speak her name.

He turned around from Susan at a leisurely pace and then stuck out his hand to Nyma and said, "Your name?"

This man spoke softly but brutally and walked in such a way that he was to be respected which Adisa found deeply uncomfortable. Nyma felt the same thing as Adisa but still uneasily stuck her hand out and said, "Nyma."

The nameless man bent down and kissed her small hand which Adisa watched in close proximity. He then said in a slow but orderly voice, “Beautiful name, why don’t you stand up from your seat?”

As soon as the sentence was over the feeling of uncomfortableness had been too much for Adisa and he stood up Abrasively saying, “Who the hell is this man?”

The whole craft looked uncomfortable, but that uneasiness turned to pure fear as soon as Adisa spoke those words. He had done and said something terribly wrong.

Adisa gave one look at this man and the man returned a look, giving a faint smirk and intruding eyes. The boy at that moment knew that there was something off about this entire ordeal, so he trusted his gut and pulled out his pistol and pointed it at the suited man. In an instant, the soldier to David’s right stood up and pointed his rifle at Adisa in silence. Nyma was the only person in the Helicopter to scream and hold her ears as she expected for someone to get shot at that moment.

Surprisingly Susan did not speak a word, just resting her head against the headrest of the seat and watching what was going to unfold which she already had prior knowledge of.

The soldier yelled at Adisa, “Sit down and give the gun over!”

Every ounce of heightened fear turned from Adisa to the suited man as he said, “You are nothing like me child. You are brash and dumb, and that is why everyone around you suffers the same fate.”

After Adisa heard this disrespect, David knew the reaction that was to come and shouted, “Adisa! Put the damn gun down if you know what is best for you!”

Adisa shifted his body at David and pointed the gun in his face then exclaimed, “I order you to get this helicopter down at this moment. If not, every one of you will have a price on your heads I promise on my soul!”

No one in the craft said a word to Adisa’s promise as the only sound that filled the air was the blades of the helicopter.

The two other powerful men on the plane looked at him like the child that he was.

“Just let the girl stand, and this will be done Adisa,” The man said incautiously.

Adisa turned his attention around to the suited man and shouted, “She will not stand for one moment unless it is in my order! What the hell do you think you're doing here? What is your name?”

The sound of the suited man’s dress shoes hitting the metal floor approaching Adisa was loud even in the helicopter and struck Adisa alarmed even if he had his pistol pointed closely at the man. His aged face didn’t move, and he held his chin up high and said, “I am Samir Moses, President of South Sudan,” He took another step and then repeated, “I am Samir Moses, the man who will take your energy and end your reign.”

Adisa’s heart sank, and for a moment, he felt his grip loosen on the pistol and his legs get cold and weak. His vision narrowed and he knew he’d made a grave mistake; one he knew could very well cost him his life.

The soldier beside Adisa had hesitated too long. Without warning, David snatched the rifle from his hands while Adisa stood frozen, paralyzed by the fear Samir had drawn out of him. David didn’t waste the moment. He swung the FAL’s wooden stock and cracked it hard against the side of Adisa’s head.

A high-pitched ringing consumed Adisa’s headspace, followed by a sharp, electric jolt that tore from the side of his skull down through his spine. His knees gave out and the pistol slipped from his grasp and skidded out the open door of the helicopter, vanishing into the void below.

For a quick moment, everything went black.

He came back into reality at the sound of a piercing, womanly scream that sent a cold ripple down his back.

Someone was dragging him, pulling him toward the vacant side of the helicopter. His limbs hung uselessly, his body dead weight. Behind him, David's hairy arms were hooked under his armpits, hoisting him like a broken doll. Adisa tried to resist, to summon any scrap of fight he had left, but he was too far gone. Every breath throbbed through the back of his skull like a second heartbeat. His vision blurred, and his ears still screamed with static and screams from Nyma.

Through the haze, he caught a glimpse of Susan, silent and unmoving.

Then David twisted his body around, forcing Adisa to face forward, forcing him to see.

Through the blur of half-closed eyes, Adisa made out two figures at the edge of the open bay, Nyma and Samir.

Nyma knelt on the floor, sobbing, next to the leg of her captor. She was teetering near the edge, Utopia below her waiting for her to fall. Samir stood beside her, his face twisted into a victorious smirk, his head tilted low, eyes locked on Adisa with a glare so cold it drained the room of air.

Samir looked like a man who had already won a battle Adisa hadn't even known he was fighting.

"Since you have become leader, you have had all the fun you've never been able to have, and done everything your heart desires. Now it is time to wake up from your silly dream and come back to the real world."

Samir slid his right hand into his pocket, calm as ever. Then, with a casual motion, he nudged Nyma forward with his foot.

She toppled backward out of the helicopter and for thirty harrowing seconds, her screams echoed through the cabin, her voice calling Adisa's name, raw and desperate, growing smaller as she fell. The screams tore through him, but he didn't move.

As the sound finally vanished into the wind, Adisa shut his eyes, not in sorrow, but in disappointment. His head dropped forward, heavy with shame.

It wasn't the loss that broke him, it was the realization that he was no longer in control.

That truth was what hollowed him out.

David let him drop onto the cold metal floor. The impact knocked what little air was left in Adisa's lungs. Gasping, he clutched at the ground, struggling to pull in breath.

Samir watched with quiet amusement, arms crossed, a slight smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth as he enjoyed the sight of a once-powerful boy reduced to rubble.

Samir sat down and looked at David and said, "Not even a tear? He reminds me of myself more than I'd like to admit."

David let a small exhale of air out in amusement at Samir's dry comment.

Adisa with his eye's still shut leaned his head back and mumbled, "You're dead."

Samir leaned away from himself towards the grieving boy and responded, "No... but Utopia is."

Part III: Tɔŋ de Päny cï Maraya
(The War of Mirrored Walls)

-Chapter XXXI-

"God be with us."

Those were the only words that could be spoken about what this woman had accepted into her eyes. Resting in the ground of Utopia was a young girl facing towards the sky with her mouth open and eye wide. The right eye of this woman had popped out of her skull and was dangling towards her temple looking towards the dirt. Blood leaked from every crevice of her body and made itself familiar with the dirt she laid atop of. The arm that was closest to the mother was folded the wrong way and the one hidden from her was under the body of the dead woman.

A boy skipped across the dirt towards his mother who was protecting her gaze from the view of the body in the street. The mother quickly turned around and picked up her son, instantly covering his innocent eyes and walking the opposite direction with him held tight. Even if the mother's thick fingers were trying their best to block light from coming into

their child's view, the boy saw the silhouette of a body lying in the street with a dark pool around it.

In fear of what he saw the boy shut his eyes, not wanting to decode what his mother did not want him to see in the first place. His happy tone was put down then he asked, "Mommy. What was that?"
The mother tightened her hand against her baby's eyes and responded, "Nothing, just someone sleeping–in the street."

The son of the woman knew this to be false as he was not stupid.

Turning the corner of a building, the mother that found the body first locked eyes with a male market owner and walked quickly to him.

"You must see what has happened!"

The mother in a frenzy put her child down and covered his ears.

"A body in the street. A young woman of all people. Could this be Adisa's doing?"

A look of disbelief took over the man's face then he put down one of the dates he was cleaning with a rag into a crate and said, "Where at?"

The hands of the mother were taken off the son's head and she responded, "Right behind me!"

He walked towards her and the mother ordered her child, "Stay right at this market."

As soon as the two went around the same corner, they were in shock as a group of around eight people had already formed around the now unseen body. Everybody in this group was talking and looking down at the body like it was a piece of alien technology that had fallen from the sky. The two joined the group in their examination of this victim.

A loud sound of metal squeaking pierced the ears of the body viewers, directing their attention behind themselves. Adisa's sedan with a cloud of dirt sat closely to the crowd, giving some people flashbacks to the time before Adisa as it was Cyril's old car. Instead of a figure of authority stepping out, it was the unknown soldier, the same one who had driven Adisa and the now-deceased Nyma to the compound's front gate.

As his feet hit the dirt, he shouted towards the crowd, "Why are you people standing in the street?"

The young boy with his pistol in hand pushed people in the crowd to his side making his way closer to the sign of war that was about to be bestowed upon him. When his eyes caught on the body, He at first was not that disturbed, until it's sad face locked eyes with him which made his small

body stand in place. The boy started to stutter his words trying his best to say anything.

"Tha-Thats…"

In his view he now had a disturbing reminder that no one was untouchable. He grabbed a civilian's arm and used it to shift his body weight around back to the car where he got in and sped off, almost hitting the small crowd. Not breaking for a second, the kid drove as fast as the car could possibly go towards Rakeem's old compound, trying his hardest to not hit Utopians and Cattle that roamed the streets. He drove so quickly that the cloud of dirt that the car left behind still stayed thick along his whole trail by the time he made it to Rakeem's.

Finally, after driving along the long, flat, wooded strip before Rakeem's, he broke hard, making the car twist and turn in the dirt right in front of the gate.

The lone soldier at the gate who was barely awake shouted, "What is-"

He was cut off by the driving child who stuck his head out of the window and shouted, "Open the damn gates, we are at war!"

With worry in his eye, the boy controlling the gate opened it, letting the other child drive through the gate quickly.

The front door of Rakeem's old compound was busted open by the child who shouted, "Everyone up!"

All of Adisa's soldiers that laid on the floor of the home and sat around the card playing table woke up unwillingly and started to mumble insults at the kid.

"Cocksucker."

"HMPH."

After every soldier got their two cents, they shut their eyes again, so the boy started to walk around and smack them across their face to truly wake them up. It worked and every boy was on their feet cussing at the boy or trying to throw slaps at him.

"We are at war!"

Everybody stopped complaining and got as silent as mice in an instant after hearing the word, "War."

Every soldier looked at each other in confusion then, the boy spoke again.

"This morning, only fifteen minutes ago, I dropped off Adisa and his whore to David Akech in a helicopter. Adisa needed me to give him a ride and said

they were travelling to some mall. Only a few minutes ago I was driving back into town and came across a crowd in the street… The crowd was there because they were looking at the dead body of the girl Adisa flew off with."

The room was heavy with silence and grave fear. No one knew what to say or what to do.

Then the boy finished his sentence with his voice low but clear, "That means Adisa is next."

Only a heartbeat passed before chaos erupted. Every boy in the room scrambled, rushing through the house to grab their weapons, arming themselves for the bloodshed they knew was coming.

Watching out of the side of the helicopter he was held captive in, Adisa looked down at the Capital and the walls that now surrounded it, thinking about how this is the lowest he had ever been. He thought of Utopia and who would rule it, but in his mind, he was Utopia and without himself it would crumble. Usually, the boy was confident on what his situation would be because he had the upper hand in most conflicts, but this experience had a completely blind future.

As the helicopter got closer to the ground of Ibis, Adisa noticed two crowds of hundreds of people lined up to see what was going on. The wheels of the craft touched the ground, and Adisa was grabbed by the arm like a child by David who then walked him towards the car they had set up right next to the landing pad. While taking his first steps in Ibis, Adisa looked around himself, seeing a wall looping around the city made of scrap metal that reminded him of the same cheap metal Rakeem fell through to his demise. Past the large empty dirt aviation pad that they landed on, Adisa looked at the crowds of people in front of both sides of Ibis' main street, them looking blank and hungry as if every ounce of life and prosperity had been stripped from them.

While David stood to Adisa's left in front of the car, Samir silently circled around and, before Adisa could fully register it, gripped his right arm with firm authority. At the same moment, David let go and climbed into the car with the other soldier and Susan, leaving Adisa in Samir's grasp.

David got into the back of the car and Susan closely followed, touching him the whole way as he got into the car.

Adisa watched as she kept rubbing him and he exclaimed, "Would you stop touching me! I am not paying you that much whore!"

Susan scoffed at David's remark and then got into the car making sure to keep her distance.

Outside the car, Samir gripped Adisa's arm with unnecessary force, perhaps forgetting, or simply ignoring, the fact that Adisa was still just a child. Without a word, he began walking, dragging Adisa alongside him as they moved toward the two divided crowds. Behind them, the car crept forward, slowly. This was a symbol of the President's reach, and how swiftly he had claimed his prize.

Samir without looking at his tired and beaten people spoke, "Look at my people as we walk through and see how they look at you. You will now see what the people of South Sudan think of you."

Adisa smirked and then said, "You have copied my walls, you have gathered people up as I do. You and your people must love me then."

"I put my walls up to protect my people from you. The people of Ibis despise your presence, child!"

The two made it up over a small hill in the street and walked between the two crowds who did not look at Adisa with hate in their hearts but instead with compassion. Samir looked around at his people slowly, questioning why people had not begun to throw things at Adisa or even scream at him an ounce.

For the first time Adisa had heard, Samir yelled, "My people! Yell and show your hate to this scoundrel!"

The streets were silent, and not a trace of hatred was in the air.

As they walked, Adisa let out a faint chuckle, then Samir's grip tightened around his arm in reaction.

"You think it is funny now, keep laughing," Samir threatened

The two made it to the end of the strip without an ounce of hatred thrown at Adisa. At the end of the strip stood Samir's house atop a small hill with a small chain fence around it. Outside of the front door of the home stood two soldiers dressed in their usual black attire. Samir whistled at the closest soldier to him and said, "Put some cuffs on this boy while we wait for David."

Adisa was passed between the men, his arms already extended as the soldier stepped in and snapped the handcuffs around his wrists with a sharp metallic click.

At the bottom of the small hill Adisa watched silently as David handed Susan a fat stack of pounds and flicked his wrist towards her face, shooing

her off. The young woman walked off with a strut back to the nearby city where she would continue her life's work as a street girl.

At that moment, it clicked for Adisa. Susan was never David's wife. This had all been part of a long-orchestrated plan.

David walked up the hill alone, the soldier still in the car, and greeted Adisa and Samir with an overly cheerful, "Hello, my friends!"

As he reached the level of the house, Adisa shot him a sharp glare, his eyes unforgiving. The word, "friends," hit like a slap. After everything, David still had the nerve to throw jokes about how he pretended to be his ally.

Adisa walked into the house, thinking of how he should have never trusted a soul and how dumb he was to ever call David a friend. Now a poor girl he barely knew was dead and Adisa didn't even know her parents or how to contact them. The large and cold home that they walked into smelt of Okra and cheap candles. From the kitchen an older woman walked away from the pot she was working on, and she ran across to the other side of the house where Adisa guessed the rooms were. David instantly walked into the kitchen and started to tinker with the spoon inside of the hot pot.

Samir spoke, "Welcome to my quarters Adisa. Usually, I would not put such an enemy anywhere near my home, but I know for a fact me and you will be acquainted soon. Have a seat my child."

Adisa squinted at the possessive last sentence while the Soldier who stood behind him pulled a chair out from the small circle kitchen table that stood high in Samir's home. He pushed Adisa onto the chair and Samir sat across from him. Adisa looked to his left to see an old broken TV that looked as if a cannonball had been fired through it.

"What happened to your TV? Got an issue with Pirates in Ibis?"

Samir let out a humorless laugh, pointed at the TV and responded, "That. Now that I think of it… That was your doing."

"I don't think so, I have never been to your home before," Adisa cluelessly responded.

Samir shook his head with a smile and spoke. "I woke up one morning, already dealing with a lot, and I saw your little confident speech on my television by those Americans who interviewed you. So, I did what seemed right and threw my mug right through the TV."

Samir let out a laugh, then rubbed his eyes in a frantic, almost deranged manner.

"I know you smoke, child. Would you like a cigarette?"

Adisa wanted to refuse but shook his head up and down and bummed one off Samir after he pulled it out of his jacket pocket. While holding the white pack of Lucky Strike Flow Filters, Samir also held a golden lighter that he used to light the cigarette in his captive's mouth. With his hands restrained in front of him Adisa still managed to smoke the stick.

Samir blew a big cloud of smoke out and said, "These are my favorite Cigarettes, Lucky Strike Flow Filters. I get them imported straight from Mexico. It is the only thing I will smoke."

Adisa then said, "Good pick."

Samir let out an exhale going, "Ah," then he paused and said, "You know you remind me a lot of myself boy."

Adisa scoffed and then replied, "Me and you are nothing alike. I spit upon people like you."

"Well, there is a reason for us being so alike."

Adisa looked around the room and pondered this man's remark.

Samir let out another exhale and said, "I have lived in Ibis most of my life, but my father was born in Nileville so me and my family would go and visit every once in a while. My father's mothers house is the house we would visit, and I remember, the hut next to it held a friendly family with something special. I was around your age when I began to lock eyes with the neighbor's daughter, the most beautiful girl I had ever laid my eyes on at the time. She had short pretty hair and looked unlike anything I had ever seen. Everything about this girl was different from everyone else and I loved that. I did not ever get to speak with her, but I knew from the way she looked at me, she liked me. I grew older and soon forgot about this girl. I became involved in politics and began to travel Africa. There was a predicament where I had to drive myself to Algeria for politics and then all the way back to Ibis, but on the way home, I stopped in Nileville as I knew that I would fall asleep if I continued even the short distance to Ibis. I came to my brother's house that used to be my grandmothers where I stayed the night. When I woke, I left my room and went outside half-dressed where I then locked eyes with that beautiful girl I once yearned for. She called me over to her home, and we made love. The woman wanted me to stay but I was not able to as I had business to attend in Ibis."

The story ended and Adisa asked, "So what? Why are you bragging to me about banging some whore?"

Adisa's eyes opened as he remembered the statement Samir made before he told his out-of-pocket story, and he realized what the man was implying. Before he could say anything, else Samir spoke up saying, "That whore was your mother, Adisa. Dara."

Adisa scowled at Samir and said aggressively, "How dare you speak lies on my mother's name! I know she wouldn't have gotten with someone like you!"

"Trust me, you are the last person I wanted to be my child! But that is the way it is! Soon after banged up your mother, I was sent a letter from the woman telling me she was pregnant and that she demanded money from me, a successful man. She thought that I was more successful than I actually was, but I still supported her and visited her after she gave birth even if I was busy with war and politics."

Adisa sat in silence, his eyes closed, his mind adrift in a storm of thought. As much as he wanted to reject Samir's words, something deep in his gut gnawed at him, whispering that it was true.

All those years spent yearning for a father were wasted. In the end, it was better he hadn't known him. Samir was nothing like what Adisa had hoped for. He was cold and unforgiving but, in the end, they were more alike than Adisa would like to admit.

His desperate mother had only wanted a way out. After a lifetime of poverty, when a man appeared looking sharp, successful, and promising something better, she took the chance.

"Open your eyes," Samir ordered the boy.

Adisa did and then felt the strong urge to jump at the man, but he didn't.

Instead, he cried out, "How could you? You are a disgusting man…"

He looked down and then back up at Samir, realizing something important, then he asked, "What about my brother… Abel."

Samir smirked and then said, "Ahh, Abel. Do you know why your mother named him that?"

Adisa shook his head back and forth with unblinking eyes then Samir said, "Abel, Abe… Abraham."

The boy was taken back again as his eyes peeled back and then he said, "This has gone too far! You do not know what you speak of!"

Samir responded, “I don’t? There is a reason my piece of shit, junkie brother, took in your family so quickly. There is a reason he likes Abel more than you…”

All the days that Adisa and Abel hadn’t looked eye to eye made sense now. They were completely different boys from the same mother but not the same father. It made sense why Abraham moved Adisa’s family to a nice apartment but didn’t live with them and why he and Nyma had such a peculiar relationship.

Everything Adisa knew began to fall apart and the boy put his face into his hands as the metal holding them together clanked.

Adisa opened his eyes back up at Samir and then The President continued speaking, “I don’t want us to have a father son relationship. But I think that our connection means something for the both of us. I need your help, child, and I will get it.”

Adisa shook his head, his voice cracking with anger.

“You bastard. You abandoned us!”

Samir smirked, unfazed, then he spoke, “If everyone thought like you, half of Africa would be crying and calling me father.”

David and Samir looked at each other and shared a laugh.

Samir slowly broke his laughter as David still chuckled. He then leaned into his son and said, “Now that you know a secret of mine, I must tell you I know a secret of yours.”

For a moment Adisa did not know what to think of what Samir had just said and went through all of his mind trying to think of something that Samir could bring up, but nothing appeared.

The father’s eyes squinted, and a cheeky smile went across his face, then he spoke softly, “I know you work with the devil.”

Adisa blinked and then it came into his mind that he truly was working with the Devil. All this time the spirit felt like another part of him that would come and go from his life but be stuck with him always, the “Devil” feeling so natural.

Adisa wondered how his father knew his secret and by the time he came up with a response to what Samir had said his face had already shown his guilt.

“I have no idea what you speak of. You cannot always blame luck and favor on the Devil or God.”

Samir responded, “Well, you go beyond luck or favor. Your actions travel into the world of the supernatural. The fact that so many people have been swindled into your corruption, not just in Africa but all over the world is something of its own… Do not lie to me, boy.”
Adisa laughed and put his cigarette out on the table instead of the ashtray that rested in his reach. The boy then said, “I love this. The fact that a man of your age and capabilities, blames my goodwill and fortune on the Devil. It is plain dumb.”

Samir shook his head and said, “I know the devil’s hands when I see them. His are wrapped around your neck, waiting for you to make the wrong move,” Samir stopped for a moment and then finished saying, “But this does not mean he cannot help the both of us.”
Adisa quickly responded saying, “Again, I have no clue what you mean. There is no help to be given to the both of us unless you return me to Utopia.”

Samir’s grin evaporated, then he raised his tone and spoke, “You can play dumb all you want, Adisa, but I will get what I need out of you. I will keep you alive until your final breath just to get a piece of your power. You can give me what you want, and Utopia and Ibis can function together with me leading both. Or you watch Utopia burn and rot in a cell until your final days. So, one last chance, help your father or bask in your own selfishness!”

The breaths of Samir were now long and drawn out from his screaming, his son watching him in amusement.

Adisa laughed, a childish, bitter sound, before spitting a line of saliva that sprayed across the table, landing squarely on Samir’s nose and trailing down the side of his face.

Samir’s expression darkened instantly. He shoved his chair back and lunged across the table, his fingers gripping the fabric of Adisa’s shirt. The navy-blue cotton became a handle as Samir yanked the boy toward him, dragging him violently across the surface and slamming him onto the floor.

Surprisingly, the ashtray stayed in place. Samir glared down at Adisa, who didn’t look hurt enough, at least not to his satisfaction. Without another word, he scooped up the ashtray, and in one swift motion, dumped the week-old ash across Adisa’s face.

In one final act of cruelty, Samir threw the heavy clay tray at Adisa’s face, the edge leaving a deep, painful welt across the right side of his forehead.

Adisa puffed out the dry, gray ash from his mouth, his breath pained as he wiped his stinging eyes. The discarded cigarette butts tumbled off his face and onto the floor.

Samir looked down at Adisa and said, “Someone pick this heathen up. He needs convincing.”

David and the Soldier bounced themselves up, walked to Adisa and picked him up aggressively and made their way out of the door. Samir followed close behind and before closing the door shouting, “Woman clean up the mess next to the dining table,” Then slamming the door behind him.

-Chapter XXXII-

Piled up in the infamous van, all of Adisa’s men besides Afia were strapped up rolling into town towards the body. Paulo was driving the van, and he shouted to his men, “We can’t tell a soul that we suspect that Adisa is gone. no matter what! Even if the people like us, they love Adisa and without him the hopes for Utopia are not strong.”

All the boys behind him shook their heads in agreement then Paulo stopped, and the boys hastily jumped out of the van towards the crowd which had now tripled. Paulo led the group and with his rifle pointed at the sky he shouted, “Civilians move!”

The crowd began to slowly disperse as the boys shoved their way through, pressing cold rifle barrels into the backs and sides of those who hesitated to move. Reluctantly, the people backed away, but their eyes remained fixed on the lifeless body lying in the street.

When the boys reached Nyma, they froze. A wave of discomfort and disgust washed over them as they stared down at her.

The soldier who had first discovered the body pointed and shouted, “See!” his voice high, like a child smugly proving a point.

To see a woman displayed in the street dead in one of the worst ways possible shocked every one of the boy's even if they had been hardened to see the worst of things without reaction.

Paulo looked at the girl hard, then looked up above her knowing the only way that she fell was from David's helicopter.

A sudden static of Audio loudly interrupted the boys staring and from Paulo's Radio came a voice, "We got eyes at the front gates on what may be two–"

Static crackled through the radio, then a sharp and final beep.

Silence followed, a silence so deep, it felt like the calm held before a storm.

Then, a gunshot rang out, echoing across Utopia.
Another round followed right after.

The boys snapped to attention, eyes locking with unease.

Paulo didn't hesitate to yell, "Four boys with me to the front! The rest stay in the city. We don't know what's coming next!"

He jumped into the van, and the nearest four boys scrambled in after him. As they sped toward the front gates, sweat rolled down their faces, hands clenched tight around their rifles, hearts pounding like war drums.

Something was coming, they all felt it.

And every soldier knew one thing, Utopia was about to fall or dangle on the edge of collapse, gripping on by only a few desperate fingers.

The gates were still closed, their thick steel giving the illusion that Utopia remained secure, but the view beyond them told a different story.

Through the bars, the boys who had just exited their vehicle spotted the gate guards lying motionless in the dirt outside. Their bodies wore almost nothing as their heels faced Utopia, their noses pointed skyward. No space separated their bodies, and their arms were tucked in tightly.

Paulo rushed into the control booth and slammed the lever down. The heavy gate creaked open. His men followed close behind, rifles raised and scanning the tree line.

They stepped over a splatter of blood; a shattered radio buried in the mess and followed a thin trail until they stood at the feet of the fallen boys.

Their legs were gray and ashy, their bodies stripped to underwear, one in plain white briefs and the other in black Versace briefs with gold trim.

Paulo's breath caught in his throat.

The boys' eyes were gone, cleanly scooped from their sockets. Their eyelids hung half-open, revealing nothing but raw, hollow craters. Between their brows, a single bullet hole marked each of their foreheads. Perfectly placed, clean and surgical. Either the work of a professional… or a cattle gun.

Paulo swallowed hard as nausea crept up his throat, bile bitter behind his teeth.

Then he saw it.

Carved into their chests, deep and bloody, marked a message.

On the left boy, just above the nipples read: "*DECLARATION.*"
On the right the other boy read: "*OF WAR*."

Paulo felt a weight on his shoulders that he could not push off, leading him to fall to his knees in front of his two friends. His rifle dropped into the dirt and his hands irked to his eyes.

The soldiers around Paulo looked scared, as a show of weakness in the group had never been shown to this amount, but the boys knew also that an attack of this measure had never been taken this far. Paulo did not cry but instead wailed into the air for a good five seconds taking all of his breath away and sending a bite down his friends' skin. For all the child knew, there could be a hundred soldiers sitting in the woods in front of him ready to send everything they had at him, but he was not thinking of that.

The shield of Adisa's name had been crushed underfoot. Now, no soldier was safe, every one of them was just another target.

Still smearing the caked ash from his face with his bare arms, Adisa was yanked from Samir's car by two soldiers and dragged forward.

In the distance loomed a familiar place, the gas station where he and David had first met. The breeding ground of a friendship that had never been real.

On the roof, Adisa noticed a Ibisian soldier looking down at him, stationed with an old wooden Armalite AR-10 with a scope welded to the top of the carry handle.

One of the soldiers released his grip on Adisa just outside the gas station door. Without a word, he shoved his fingers behind a panel of weathered wood that looked like it sealed the entrance, but it was a disguise.

He slid the false panel aside, revealing a dented metal door hidden beneath. With a rusted key, he unlocked it. The door swung open with a long, aching creak.

Adisa got shoved inside, stumbling through the door into what would now be his home.

The dim gas station, once forgotten, had been twisted into a military compound. Behind the counter where a cash register was once held, locked racks of guns glinting in the low light. Across from them sat a makeshift cell, crude, welded, and waiting.

The place reeked of rot and neglect. Infant cockroaches scurried across the filth-stained floor, weaving through scattered trash and broken shards of glass, remnants of long-smashed windows.

Samir shut the door behind Adisa and the two soldiers then he put his arm up and let his sleeve roll down so he could read his watch.

"It is not time yet, put him in for the next hour."

The two soldiers hurled Adisa into the cell tucked away in the darkest corner of the station. His body skidded across the dusty floor before slamming into the back wall, finally stopping him.

The cell door clanged shut behind him, and one of the soldiers unstrapped a ring of keys from his belt. With a dull noise of metal, the lock turned.

Adisa sat up slowly, trying to brush grime from his palms. As he leaned back against the wall, his eyes scanned the cramped space. Just beyond the bars, a makeshift ladder stood propped against the wall, leading up to a locked trapdoor. An escape route, maybe, if it weren't bolted shut.

He then tilted his head back against the wall and muttered, half to himself, half to the room, "Can I get some damn food? I'm starving."

Samir was now seated at a small table to the right of Adisa with the two other soldiers in the room with a deck of cards already in his hands. He laughed at his struggling son and then said, "No– You can sit there, and you can get food when I feel it is needed for your survival."

Adisa put his head back to the wall after having it shifted towards his father and let out a scoff and closed his eyes. The sounds of cards shuffling between each other echoed through the room, then the sound of a match being struck perked Adisa's ear up. Adisa put his face into his cuffs and said, "C'mon you can't do this to me. At least give me one!"

With his eyes still on his cards, Samir pulled a cigarette out of his jacket pocket and said to Adisa, “You promise if I give you one you will shut up?”

Adisa shook his head which his father looked over to see, then Samir threw the cigarette without looking through the thick cell bars and onto the white porcelain floor next to Adisa.

Adisa picked up the cigarette and looked at his father again saying, “May I have a light?”

In an instant, Samir looked over at his Adisa with an angry look in his eye and screamed, “What did I say!”

Adisa dropped the cigarette he was graciously given and put his face back into his cuffs while listening to the sounds of his captors laughing.

An hour had flown by like minutes and Samir checked his watch then threw his cards down and told his men, “Take the boy to the chair.”

When Adisa heard this, he thought of the electric chair but knew that Samir couldn’t have had a hot seat just sitting somewhere.

The two soldiers lifted Adisa up off his butt and walked him behind the armory counter that had a door at the end of it. They opened the door, and everybody instantly felt the steaming African sun on them. After being in the dark gas station for a while it took a minute for Adisa’s eyes to adjust to the bright light outside. Once they did adjust, Adisa noticed a fence in front of the door and a giant box truck to his left.

Adisa was thrown onto the mahogany wooden chair and strapped in with hot metal fasteners that burned against his skin. He clenched his teeth, already feeling the heat of the sun being blasted onto him.

Samir slipped on a pair of thick construction gloves and bent down toward the black pavement. The screech of metal scraping against asphalt pierced Adisa’s ears as he watched Samir rise with a long, sun-heated copper tube in his grip.

Samir glanced at his soldiers, then they rushed over, yanking off Adisa’s shirt, their hands already burning from the boy’s fevered skin.

Then came the tube.

Samir gripped the blazing metal and pressed it long-ways against Adisa’s stomach.

The scream that tore from Adisa’s throat was unlike anything he’d ever let out before, animal-like and endless. The sting didn’t stop as the heat drilled into his skin, deeper than pain, deeper than nerves. His eyes

clamped shut so tight he swore he could hear it as some high-pitched screech inside his skull.

Samir looked down at the boy's writhing body, satisfied.

He pulled the copper off, and for a split second, Adisa thought the worst was over. But then he looked down, his stomach already blistered, patches of skin marked and bubbling.

Before he could catch his breath, Samir tilted Adisa's head back by pressing the hot tube against his cheek.

Another scream even higher this time.

Adisa thrashed against the bindings, heat surging through every inch of him. Sweat poured; goosebumps prickled across his skin despite the burn. He tried to fight, but his limbs seized in response.

Samir shifted the tube, flipping it to the freshly heated side and drove it into the same spot on Adisa's cheek.

The boy's muscles cramped as he shook around, and the will to struggle evaporated. Breathing hard, nearly blind, he craned his chin upward and screamed toward the sky, a final, hollow act.

Then his body sagged. His head drooped forward, the yell dying in his throat. He tried to block it all out, but it didn't come. The heat wasn't just burning him. It was buzzing, a noise crawling across his skin and rising from the baking asphalt below.

Samir let off and stepped back to admire the damage.

Adisa's stomach let out a deep, guttural groan as he felt his stomach growl. Without warning, a small amount of yellow bile surged into his mouth and spilled across his own hand. Adisa's eyes rolled and his head's movement stopped. He blinked once at Samir's looming silhouette, and then everything went dark.

From the rooftop above, the sniper shifted in his perch, a colorful umbrella shielding him from the sun. Even in the shade, the scene below made him dizzy.

When Adisa's head went limp, he called out:

"The boy's having a heatstroke. That bitch just passed out."

Samir chuckled, then called back:

"Come on, he's still got fifty-four more minutes!"

Then, turning serious, he barked at his men, "Get him inside."

One soldier grunted, catching Adisa under the arm. He didn't flinch as bile smeared across his hand. He just wiped it off on his pants after dragging the boy back into the building.

Samir followed, pulling a small plastic flask from his suit. He unscrewed the cap and poured the cold water over Adisa's face.

The boy stirred.

A few seconds later, his eyes fluttered open.

Adisa woke up in a scared frenzy, shaking his head all over the place after picking it up off the ground. His father didn't give him a minute to recover, instantly putting his shoe on Adisa's neck and pushing him down on the ground saying, "Did I tell you to get up?"

The scared boy shook his head right to left in obedience and expected his father to let up after that, but he didn't. Samir made his foot comfortable on Adisa's neck and then told one of his soldiers, "Go get it."

The sniper who was still down in the gas station ran behind the armory Counter and rummaged his hands around pieces of metal until he slid out what he was looking for. At first glance to Adisa's eye, the two black objects in each of the man's hands looked just like plastic black tubing, but as they reached closer to Adisa's defenseless body, they were seen as long tasers.

Out of the two prods, one was passed to Samir first then the other was passed to the soldier at his left.

Adisa looked up at his father who had two soldiers huddled around Adisa's body. The boy stayed as still as he could even if his fear of what would happen made his body want to shake.

Samir took his knee off of his son's neck and kneeled to his level, aiming the two electric prongs right in front of his forehead.

"I am giving you an out. It is either you join me, or you get tortured for as long as you live and watch Utopia burn. Pick wisely."

Adisa looked his father in the eye with a blank face and said, "I already made my choice."

Samir squinted his eyes and before thrusting the taser into his son's skin, he spoke, "You have been given enough chances. Your days will be filled with torture worse than hell… Dara… Your mother and Cyril, the Mayor. I am the one who told him to do what he did. I am who called him and urged him to use his brother to get to you. I am the reason Dara is dead."

Before Adisa could react, his body convulsed from the taser, making him chomp his teeth together and slam his feet on the hard floor as the sound of electric clicking repeated through the room.

As Samir turned to leave the station, he paused in the doorway, casting one final look at the barely conscious boy on the floor.

“Have fun,” he said, his voice cruelly casual. “And don’t let him sleep.”

The metal door groaned shut behind him with a hollow clang that echoed in Adisa’s skull like the tolling of a bell. Then, silence, brief, heavy, and unbearable.

The two soldiers who remained looked at each other, then down at Adisa like a project they were eager to start.

Adisa, still sprawled on the floor, skin blistered, body trembling realized the torture was far from over.

-Chapter XXXIII-

Every door in Utopia was banged upon by the stocks of guns, every civilian leaving their homes and making their way towards the center of town where Adisa would speak.

Below the speaking stand, Paulo walked back and forth in the underground room, wondering how the citizens of Utopia would react to him speaking instead of Adisa. He wondered if they would rush the stage and tear him apart as no one had ever dared to speak on the stand besides Adisa. It also had been so long since Adisa had given a speech.

And now, he had to tell them about the war that was coming fast. He didn't know what scared him more, the message, or how the people would react to it.

Paulo's feet hit the steps that led him to the podium and each step he let more light flush his face as he heard the crowd's voice grow closer. His head peaked over the wood of the podium and the crowd roared like animals, making the child's stomach drop. Once he was in complete view of the crowd, the people realized that this wasn't Adisa speaking so their screams went silent. He stepped up to the silver microphone, it being so quiet now he could hear the soft scrape of his shoes against the wood beneath him. Faces in the crowd turned toward one another, puzzled by the unfamiliar boy on stage.

Paulo leaned in close, his lips nearly brushing the mic's mesh. With a lukewarm voice, he called out, "People of Utopia! Adisa is not here today—he's... extremely busy with work, calls, and such..."

A pause hung in the air, the obvious lie stretching thin. His eyes landed on a small child resting on her mother's shoulder. He swallowed,

cleared his throat, then spoke again, this time with more weight, “The reason our leader is busy... is because we are now at war.”

Gasps crowded the mass and people’s eyes widened after what he had said.

“Just a half an hour ago, two of our soldiers were found mutilated at the front of Utopia’s gates. Their names were…”

Paulo gulped again trying to think of his comrade’s names.

“Femi… and Panyin.”

Two women in the crowd began to wail as the names called out belonged to their children. The pain of loss was muffled, softened by the cruel familiarity as deep down, they had already known. Their children hadn’t been seen by them in weeks. The mothers knew Adisa had become the pied piper to his fallen friends, leading them with hymns of hope until they vanished into dust.

Behind Paulo, the sound of something being dragged and then dropped echoed across the stage. He turned, confused and froze. Two soldiers were hauling the lifeless bodies of the boys toward the podium.

This hadn’t been part of the plan.

Paulo’s eyes widened, his foot tapping uncontrollably as the soldiers propped the corpses upright, one on each of his sides like grotesque symbols of martyrdom.

The crowd erupted into a wave of unrest. Screams pierced the air, especially from the two grieving mothers, their cries sharper now, more primal.

Paulo looked from body to body, then shouted, “This! This is what they have written. *Declaration–Of War* along two soldiers' stomachs, how disgraceful!”

The crowd began to get more rowdy and soldiers at the front of the mass pushed them back violently.

“People calm down! Direct this Anger towards Ibis! They are who we are now at war with! We must gather our people with whatever weapons we can and kill the snake that is Ibis. The Capital is Corrupt!”

Thousands roared in the crowd as Paulo’s voice thundered above them, loud and commanding, drowning their fear with promises of bloodshed. Utopia, once built to be a refuge from the chaos of war, now felt like it was spiraling into war it had sworn to avoid.

"In an hour's time, I need anyone capable of fighting to meet right back here with any weapons you can find. Rifles will be given by us, and we will patrol the outside of our walls looking for the assassins who took these soldiers' lives!"

Paulo turned around from the microphone walking with his chin high towards his van, failing to realize he had placed another stone on the pathway of destruction for his people.

From outside the walls of Utopia, Abel could hear every roar of the savage crowd as if he was only feet away from them. The boy had realized he hadn't been outside of Utopia in years so he figured he would go on a walk around the damned city. Abel's eyes looked upon the forest to his right but for some reason he couldn't stop looking at the eyesore of Utopia's walls to his left. Where a beautiful flat of vegetation would be, a city laid with grim walls of oppression looking down on its victims sat high.

From behind him, wheels spun furiously on the dirt road, prompting Abel to whirl around in alarm. A dark green van barreled toward him, kicking up a cloud of dust that stretched far behind it. Panic gripped him and he leapt off the road and plunged his bare feet into the tall grass at the roadside. The sharp green blades brushed against his ankles, but his eyes stayed locked on the vehicle speeding his way. The van's harsh, militaristic look sent his imagination spiraling, he pictured his brother's henchmen pouring out by the dozen, rifles raised, riddling his body with bullets until vultures were the only ones left to find his remains hidden in the waving grass.

The van neared closer, and Abel acted as if he was swatting away bugs from his feet in an act of feigning so he would not look like an awkward boy standing on the side of the road for no reason.

Abel listened to the van driving as he looked down at his feet, waiting for it to pass by him, but instead he heard the sound of brakes slamming hard and wheels spinning. He quickly threw his head up to see the van right in front of him in a dry cloud of dust. Abel's eyes opened and he prepared to turn his feet and run into the wilderness, but he was met with an adult soldier in a dark outfit walking towards him with a rifle.

"Abel Moses! Under orders of Ibis, you are requested to speak to the President."

Confused beyond belief, Abel looked side to side, trying to understand why a President he had never met would be asking for him and why a soldier now had a rifle aimed at his head. He knew there was no chance of running. Reluctantly, he took two steps toward the soldier. The man closed the distance with heavy boots and began aggressively patting down every crease of Abel's clothes. At first Abel was worried about him having Adisa's pistol but he remembered he kept it at home for this walk.

Once the quick search was over, the soldier grabbed him by the back of the neck and shoved him into the open van. Abel landed face-first on the rough, black carpet and scrambled to his hands and knees just as the door slammed shut behind him. The inside of the van went dark. The only light filtering in came from the front windshield, a dull gray beam, like a light in a tomb.

To his left, Abel turned and locked eyes with six soldiers seated in silence, all suited in full tactical gear, rifles resting casually in their arms. His stomach tightened.

Looking toward the front of the van, he saw two more soldiers—one already steering the van away, and the other, a man without a helmet, staring directly at him. There was something off about his excitement, his grin too wide, his eyes too eager.

"You're finally here," the well-dressed man said.

Abel now guessed this man was the President and the proper man got out of his seat quickly and squeezed between the two front seats towards Abel who scooted himself back in confusion and fear.

"Abel, my boy. The chosen one!"

The only child in the van squinted his eyes and asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Samir Moses, President of South Sudan. You know it is funny we have the same last name."

Abel faintly laughed as Samir stared at him as he knew the truth why they both had the same last name. He then continued, "I am the leader of a free South Sudan, and I am here to make you my greatest soldier in this battle child."

At this point Abel knew exactly what the man would ask and that was the defeat of his brother. Abel looked up at the man and said, "What is your proposition?"

Samir then looked back at his soldiers and said, "Proposition! You hear this kid? He might be more professional than me!"

Some of the soldiers in the back let small chuckles out, but the van was mostly silent after Samir's joke. The President put his attention back on Abel, and spoke, "Your brother Adisa has been plaguing South Sudan with his communist ideas making people think his murderous ways are something to strive towards for too long now! That is why I need you to cut the snake's head off–No! That is why you need to make sure the snake never even pokes its head out."

Abel watched Samir as he shook back and forth between the fast driving van deep in psychotic thought. Samir continued his fast articulation, saying, "Adisa is now out of Utopia and in my possession for the greater good of these lands. He will never return to his homeland, but his poisonous roots will still be planted within it. That is where you come in, the boy who will pick them out. I am not going to send you on a suicide mission to kill anyone of Adisa's psychos but instead I want you to wake people up to Adisa's short comings. I want you to arm your fellow people to slowly but surely rise against Adisa's men and work your hardest to try and overthrow them. Every week I will send arms and cash into Utopia, directly to you. There is only one hope for Africa and that is me and you."

The van began to slowly come to a halt and Samir turned his back on Abel who was still trying to gather what this man had told him.

"What if I say no?"

Samir sat down in his seat and turned around at Abel and said, "Well if you deny my offer your people have a high chance of being destroyed from the inside out. You know what choice to make Abel."

Abel looked at the ground and then was grabbed by the soldier behind him who kicked him out of the van into the dirt. With one last sentence, Samir looked out of the van and said, "Take this if you need to contact me."

The old man reached into his buttoned-up suit and pulled out a cracked silver smartphone, which he tossed to Abel without a word.

Then, the van sped off, kicking up a cloud of dust and leaving Abel alone far from the stone walls of Utopia.

He stared down at the iPhone in his hands, shook his head, and without hesitation, leapt back to his feet. Dust rising around his ankles, Abel turned and sprinted toward Utopia, determined to tell the A.U.C. what had just happened.

-Chapter XXXIV-

Sprawled on a striped couch in his own dark living room, laid Afia who depravedly looked at his ceiling just as he had for the last group of hours without the blink of an eye. After Mosi was stripped away from his responsibility, Afia barricaded himself inside the house, lying flat on his back with his aged rifle by his side. In his mind, the decision had already been made. If he ever laid eyes on Adisa again, he would kill him, without hesitation and without thought.

Hours before, In the first minutes after his friend was taken, a familiar woman knocked at Afia's door, her screams pleading for the return of her son. Beneath her desperate cries, a mother's intuition told her the truth, that her boy was gone. Rather than face what he had done, Afia remained silent, lying motionless, pretending he was invisible to the world outside. Mosi's mother sat against his door, her tear-filled eyes fixed on the stairs, hoping against the odds that her son would return, that the worst of her fears wouldn't come true. Half an hour passed, and the cries of the woman grew quieter, then faded entirely as Afia listened intently. She slowly rose from the ground, her sandals dragging on the floor, before she walked away.

As soon as her footsteps were not heard, Afia jumped up from the couch and covered in shame, ran to his liquor cabinet and ransacked it, just as his comrades had the day before. Without thinking anything but guilt, the lost child swallowed as much plain gin as he possibly could as a silent tear ran down his cheek. Afia was never much of a drinker, but this moment broke him. He dropped the bottle onto his chest as he leaned against the dirty white countertop, his tears spilling freely. His hands shook as he struggled to lift the bottle, yet something inside him urged him to keep drinking, even as he barely had the strength to bring it to his lips. Slowly, he sank to the floor and continued drinking, laughing bitterly as the buzz hit him. Faint at first, then overwhelming, washing away the sting of reality, even if just for a moment.

Afia placed the bottle on the floor, using shaky hands to push himself upright. With a grim chuckle, he picked the bottle up again, walking toward the door. Outside, he got into his car, the weight of the world pressing on his chest. From there, everything blurred.

The next thing he remembered, he was sitting back on his couch, staring blankly at the ceiling as if time had folded in on itself. The confusion swallowed him whole.

A knock greeted the door and instead of Afia immediately knowing who it was at the door, this knock was loud and anonymous. Afia shot up from the couch, his heart hammering in his chest. The buzz from the alcohol still clung to his mind but fear now drowned it out. His head spun, but he quickly reached for the AK that lay beside him, the cold metal

grounding him in reality. Every step was calculated as he moved toward the door, his breath shallow and erratic. Outside, it was eerily quiet, no sounds of movement, no sign of danger.

His finger trembled on the trigger; the rifle now heavy in his hands. He leaned closer to the door, his eye trained on the peephole. The unfamiliar light of morning filtered through the lens, casting an unsettling glow. Standing there, patiently waiting in front of his door, was Paulo who was unarmed and calm, his presence a sharp contrast to Afia's internal chaos.

Afia pulled away from the door and his finger hovered on the trigger, sweat beading on his forehead as his mind raced. The thought of pulling the trigger was intoxicating as Paulo had been the one to call in Mosi's capture, the one who had led to his friend's death. The urge for revenge surged through Afia like a storm, but something deeper inside him, perhaps a faint shred of forgiveness fought back against it.

He glanced back at his finger, a tremor running through his body as he considered the consequences of the action. Could he truly, do it? Could he kill someone he had once fought alongside? The decision felt like it would consume him whole.

With a shaky exhale, Afia slowly let the rifle fall by his side. His grip loosened, and with his heart still racing, he opened the door. His gaze met Paulo's; the unspoken tension thick between them. The silence in the air was heavy, both men caught in the weight of the past that had brought them to this moment.

Even if Paulo looked unarmed, Afia kept his rifle pointed at him from his hip as they uninterruptedly stared each other down. Paulo stood in the sunlight with his hands behind his back, looking unfazed and forgiving. Oppositely Afia stood in his dark habitat with his rifle in front of him looking scared and untrusting.

"Is that necessary Afia?" Spoke Paulo who talked like a concerned schoolteacher.

"You just got my friend killed, so you tell me if it is necessary?"

Paulo blew air out of his nose after Afia's response, then brought his hands to his front.

"I had to tell someone; it seemed clear as day you betrayed us and tried to make some money with drugs inside these walls."

Afia bit at Paulo, saying, “Don’t speak his real name like you are showing respect now because he is dead! You knew what Adisa would do you, piece of shit. *Now leave*!”
After raising his voice, Afia tried slamming the door, but Paulo stopped it with his foot and then pushed it back open.

“I know you are angry Afia, rightfully so… But Adisa is gone, and Utopia is at war.”

Paulo’s voice went soft, and his head went low, making Afia think he was pulling a bad joke, so he chuckled. Afia let the door open again and let sunlight hit his face, then he asked, “Of what do you mean?”

Paulo tensed up in uneasiness then responded, “Adisa was taken this morning by David Akech. Adisa was dropped off at the gates to his helicopter with the girl he was with at the party. Moments after going into the sky, Adisa’s mistress was found on the city streets in a mush of blood. Her body was thrown out of the chopper. Then–”

Paulo stopped speaking for a second and gulped, “Then, At the gates– My God. Femi and Panyin, their bodies desecrated, eyes ripped out of their heads and bodies torn near naked, reading of war. I saw it with my own eyes, Afia…”

Paulo who had been speaking at the ground now looked up at Afia with a pale stare and said, “And now I do not want to see again.”

Anger was all Afia could feel after hearing the news of the death of two strong comrades, so he shouted, “David Akech… That son of a bitch, why must Ibis do this?”

Paulo responded, “I don’t know, but I do know there is only one option for Utopia to survive and that is to smash Ibis down into the soil from where it shall never grow again. That is why we need you of all people. If the people of Utopia needed one soldier it would be you!”

Afia then looked questioningly into Paulo’s eyes then he said, “Now I see what this is about. Not taking revenge for our fallen soldiers. No, you have come here as an invitation for me to die for Adisa!”

Paulo spit back, “No! This is about making sure the walls of Utopia are not crumbled down, our women raped, and our men tortured! If you do not join this fight, our people will be long forgotten.”

When Paulo stopped his mini speech, he was partially out of breath, then Afia responded, “Ah, you want me to fight so we are not the ones being pillaged and violated but instead, so we are the ones doing just that.”

Paulo took a step back and began to shake his head and then annoyedly said, “You truly do not get it. You are too childlike and selfish to think about your own people. No matter what you think of Adisa, what is more valuable than your people’s lives or the way you feel towards a single person? If you do not fight, then what does that make you? An enemy of Utopia waiting to be put down whether I have a say in it or not!”

Afia stood there, his mind racing as he processed the words of his friend. The minor threat didn’t bother him, and a flicker of clarity cut through the haze of his emotions. His friend's words rang in his ears, and Afia couldn’t help but feel a strange sense of enlightenment. Perhaps there was some truth to Paulo’s words.

Afia thought of his mother, of Mosi’s mother, and of the countless comrades he had fought alongside, all of them susceptible to the travesties of war.

For all Afia knew, Adisa was already dead, lost to the violence that was his world.

Fighting under Adisa’s banner now didn’t seem so dishonorable anymore, in fact, it felt like the right thing to do if it meant that his people had a less likely chance of being killed.

Afia sighed, dropping the rifle to his side as his thoughts continued to spin.

He then said, “Don’t expect me to be your best friend Paulo, but I will help our people so there shall be less bloodshed than needed. Don’t expect me Follow Adisa either if he returns.”

A smile almost struck Afia’s face but he shut it down in a show of strength then he said, “Throw on your war clothes, I’ll be waiting outside.”

Afia shut his door without another facial reaction then in moments opened it again and then got inside of Paulo’s beaten-up car.

The two boys drove silently toward the gates of Utopia, where hundreds of men stood, shouting and hoisting makeshift weapons, wooden rifles and sharp farming tools. As Afia stepped out of the car, the sight of the crowd hit him like a wave, and he whispered, “Dear God.”

Men and Boys from the earliest ages of youth to the most elderly were grouped side by side receiving surplus rifles out of the back of vans in possession of Adisa’s soldiers. Little boys were handed knives or machetes and if they were lucky, small junk pistols were put into their hands with

little ammo to spare. Older men sported pitchforks and old bolt action rifles. Any veterans received AKs and nicer rifles.

Afia and Paulo made their way toward the crowd, noticing the lack of smiles on the men's faces. It was clear that the fire in their eyes was nothing compared to the intensity they'd show if Adisa stood before them. Paulo gave Afia a light tap on the stomach to get his attention, then nodded toward the van ahead.

"You speak, Afia," he said. "On top of that van."

Afia looked at the original police van in front of him and responded with a quick, "No."

Paulo hissed with his tongue then said, "These people need someone better than me to speak. C'mon, I know you can fire them up."

Relooking the crowd, Afia noticed all the men were now staring at him for no apparent reason, which is when he knew he had to speak.

Afia pushed through the angry crowd, thinking of what he would say and knowing that it would not be the usual lies but only the truth that would help his people. He began to climb atop the Police van and the roars of the crowd silenced as they watched Afia curiously. Once at the top of the van the child looked from left to right seeing men in all directions of his body, then he screamed, "My people!"

Afia's words echoed through all of Utopia and before he could speak again, A nearby man shouted, "Where's Adisa!"

Men around him began to agree and talk over each other asking questions. Instead of ignoring the question, Afia responded, "We do not know where Adisa is."

All the crowd roared in confusion, their angry looks becoming even more than furious. Men shouted out questions and threw their weapons down to the ground in an act of defiance.

Paulo put his hands to his face while a fight erupted near him between Adisa's soldiers and citizens. In that moment he immediately regretted Afia rejoining, but he still listened as Afia screamed, "Why must we fight! Have we lost all hope as a people! Did you people think this is the land of Adisa and not the land of Utopia?"

Men peeled off of each other and forgave their brothers in realization of what the child was saying.

"Even if Adisa created Utopia, there is something deeper than that. The fact we will be all men of the same land before and after Adisa! If we

want to flourish on these lands, then we must defend it no matter what and stop those violating it! Even if Adisa has been captured by Ibis that gives us more of a reason to fight. No one knows if we will find him today as he is likely settled in the heart of Ibis but still day by day, we shall near closer to him till he is freed!"

Men picked their rifles back up and let out deafening war cries while Afia proudly looked down at his people. He felt it was now truly appropriate to fight for them as he felt their energy, then he said, "I love to see all my people side by side but now we must separate to not be easy targets. Let us storm our surrounding land and kill those men who brutalized ours!"

Men swarmed the sides of vans, weapons raised high and voices shouting toward the sky. The gates of Utopia creaked open, and vehicles surged through, their engines roaring as they flooded the outer farms and forests in search of any foreign soldiers lurking nearby. The air was thick with chaos and the promise of violence.

As the day moved on, the sun began to set and not a single round was fired from any soldier, the lands being devoid of any Ibisian. No one travelled past the gas station's distance around the entirety of Utopia in guidance with Afia's rules as he told his men, "If you go beyond the gas station, you are pushing too much for one day."

Afia and Paulo were separated, both leading two separate groups with Paulo leading a dozen soldiers and Afia leading under two dozen men. The two leaders were far from each other, Paulo leading his men on foot straight out of Utopia's gates and towards the gas station.

As the group positioned themselves across from the gas station, Paulo instructed his men to stay low, keeping watch over the area. As they settled into their positions, his gaze lingered on the station, his thoughts drifting back to that moment. He muttered, almost to himself, "If I could go back and change one thing, it would be stopping Adisa from meeting David."

Out of nowhere a faint glimmer of yellow lights entered the right of their view as a green van rumbled down the dirt road, kicking up a cloud of dust. In response, the group of soldiers immediately dropped to the ground, taking cover behind nearby bushes. The Utopians watched intently as the van slowed briefly, allowing six soldiers to spill out from its back doors. Without a second's hesitation, the van whipped around and sped off,

leaving the soldiers standing in the dust. They remained still, almost disoriented, their eyes scanning the horizon as if unsure of what to do next.

When Paulo and his soldiers finally got a clear look at their so-called enemies through the bushes, they appeared as dark silhouettes, only faintly illuminated by the moonlight. There was an odd gentleness to their presence, not the harsh demeanor one would expect from soldiers. Instead, they looked like farmers or countrymen who had been plucked from their land and dropped into a foreign battleground.

The way these men carried themselves was completely unmilitary, their weapons were loosely gripped, their movements hesitant, almost as if they had no clear direction or purpose. It was as if they were simply wandering, not soldiers with a mission, but lost people stumbling through an unfamiliar world.

Not caring what they looked like, Paulo looked from side to side at his soldiers and whispered, “On three- two- one.”
Paulo led the charge, his soldiers hungry for blood, bursting out of the bushes and quickly advancing towards their enemies. To his surprise, the Ibisians didn’t retaliate with gunfire. Instead, they lowered their weapons in an unexpected act of peace. One by one, they dropped to their knees,

making the sign of the cross before they began to pray, their voices soft and unified in the still night.

The only one who didn’t kneel was an elderly man, tall and weathered, wearing torn overalls caked in dirt. His long white beard, streaked with age and hardship, told the story of a life well-lived, though it was clear that his time was running out. With trembling hands, he tried to lift his rifle, but his strength had waned. The shot he fired went wide, missing its target by a wide margin. The Utopian soldier closest to him, with no hesitation, drove a long wooden stake into the man’s stomach.

Ibisians around him gasped and not suffering for much longer, the stake in the old man’s abdomen was pulled out and he dropped to his knees just like his family did. He looked to his left at his family praying, repeating the Jesus prayer, which reminded him to do the only thing he could do in this situation. The old man, his hands trembling with age and pain, locked his fingers together in a desperate prayer, his lips moving silently as he sought solace from his faith. Before he could finish, a soldier stepped in front of him, his bayonet gleaming in the moonlight. With a swift, brutal motion, he drove the blade down between the man's knuckles, slicing

through flesh and bone. Blood poured from his hands, running in between each of his outer knuckles and then down his arms. The old man didn't cry out. He kept his fingers pressed tightly together, barely a grunt escaping his lips.

Paulo, watching the scene unfold with growing fury, saw the man's unwavering spirit. His eyes narrowed, and without hesitation, he shouted with venom to his soldiers, "Shoot that savage!"

Without questioning his temporary leader, the middle-aged soldier who had just cut the man, forced the tip of his bayonet right under the man's praying hand and shot a rifle round through his chest.

The old man's family yelped when they heard the round and kept their eyes shut tight while still praying, "Jesus Christ, son of God, forgive me a sinner."

With no mercy Paulo's men continued their travesties on the rest of the citizens, hitting them red and forcing them off their knees. While watching his soldiers do his dirty work Paulo yelled, "You Ibis trash disgust me, you will *never* win this war!"

The old woman two hostages away from Paulo whimpered and said, "We never wanted to Fight… Samir and David gave us guns and forced us to. Let us leave if you have a heart, please!"

She began to cry, and Paulo rushed over to her, putting his face right in front of her wrinkly visage.

"Who the hell is Samir? You are a liar making up people for your own poor actions! Now open your eyes when you speak to me, woman!"

Over again, the woman prayed with her eyes shut not wanting to stare into the corrupted soul of the boy in front of her. Paulo, while still in her face, looked around and screamed, "God Damn it, open your eyes all of you!"

Not a soul gave into Paulo's orders, instead choosing to pray which provoked Paulo, making him put his palm on the woman's chin and demand again, "Do as you're told!"

No pupils were shown.

Paulo struck the woman hard across the jaw, his breath coming in heavy bursts. She reverted to her knees, dazed, as Paulo turned his back on her and the others. His voice was cold and detached, shouted, "Kill them all. Now!"

Gunfire erupted in a savage chorus, echoing across the clearing. Every weapon fired, except Paulo's. Smoke curled in the air and when the last shot faded, Paulo turned. He stepped toward the woman's lifeless body, stared at her face one last time, then spat on it.

"Take their weapons," he ordered, "Then we will head closer to Utopia."

The soldiers, still reeling from the weight of their first kills, obeyed. They gathered the dead civilians' belongings, guns, packs, tokens of lives never meant for war and followed Paulo in silence.

Six lives were taken with not one of them having been a soldier.

Unbeknownst to anyone in Utopia, the sniper atop the gas station had recorded the entire ordeal. With steady hands and a clear aim, he prepared to send the footage to the President and to the world, intent on turning public opinion against Utopia and damning the community in the eyes of all.

-Chapter XXXV-

Within the half-broken walls Adisa was held captive in, the child sat wide awake as his foes were dead asleep, for he feared if he was asleep, they would wake him up to torture him. As long as he was awake, he could put up a fight. The only guard in the room loudly snored at the poker table with his belt laid in front of him instead of tightly around his waist so he could rest better.

In Adisa's mind, He imagined breaking out of his prison and having a magnificent return to his people who in his mind were lost without him.

The captured leader had been up for many hours undergoing extreme stress and exhaustion and his body had finally had enough, putting him to rest. With his head in between his legs, Adisa had finally fallen asleep, then a dark voice outside of his cell broke him out of his slumber, whispering, "**Get up.**"

The stern order instantly jolted Adisa up and made his tiny heart throttle like he had just awoken from a bad dream. In the end, what he saw was worse than any nightmare as the very spirit his father had named the Devil stood in front of him. Adisa looked at his master's shadowy complexion up and down and wondered if this spirit really was Satan. Even if the being was darkened in the shadows, his presence was clearly stern and indigent towards the boy judging by his unusual jittery body which was always still as a stone. Before Adisa could say anything, the silhouette exclaimed, "**You have fallen to David Akech... A simple man who's knife you should have seen from a mile away. *I am Embarrassed*!**"

The spirit's voice thundered through the room, and Adisa froze, gripped by the terror of knowing his life belonged in his Master's hands.

Shocked by the unusual loudness, Adisa threw his hands over his knees and crawled down on all fours towards the front of his cell in submission. With begging hands balled up out of the bars of the cell Adisa cried out, "Forgive Me! Let me make it up to you! I will slaughter every soul in Ibis and do any of your bidding!"

"**Not enough child... I need every citizen to be humiliated and depraved. Their homes and holy sites burnt to ash and the soil they have lived on bloodied and ruined. Only you can Achieve this, Adisa. Only You.**"

A chill ran down the boy's back as in his head he heard the wails of women and fire crackling as his eyes were thrown from side to side.

Adisa woke up harshly, cracking his head up from his legs and getting a stark sense of déjà vu. Now the spirit was not in front of him but instead out of sight and replaced by an open cell door. The child was relieved and turned his head to his right, still seeing the lazy snoring soldier who was completely defenseless. Silently touching his hands across the floor, Adisa picked himself up to his feet and then slowly treaded outside of his cell, examining his feet while he walked as to not step on pieces of glass.

As Adisa reached the table where the man slept, his left foot came down hard on a jagged shard of glass. The sharp crack underfoot jolted the soldier awake to Adisa's dismay.

Before the man could rise, Adisa lunged. The pistol on the table was just out of reach, but the knife on the man's belt laid closer. In one smooth motion, he slid it free. The blade hovered at the soldier's stomach, barely

grazing it but close enough to kill, just out of reach for a counterstrike. The soldier rose from his half-scooted chair, but didn't dare advance.

They both froze.

Two figures locked in a deadly stillness, breathing as if it were their last. The soldier's eyes widened, darting to the pistol still holstered on the table. Adisa noticed and hissed, "Don't move, or I'll spill your guts."

Staring at the pistol, the soldier didn't care about Adisa's orders as he calculated how he could grab it, even if the boy cut him.

Then he lunged.

In an instant, his hand flew to the brass button of the holster, fumbling to unclip it, but Adisa was faster. The boy surged forward, redirected his blade, and sliced from the man's temple down to his jaw, ending with the knife buried above the collarbone.

Blood surged down Adisa's arm, dripping off his elbow as he held the blade hard.

He stared at his trembling hand, still gripping the handle, captivated by the violence he'd committed but felt no mercy. The soldier staggered, breath rasping, blood gurgling from his neck. Adisa let go and the body crumpled to the floor, boots kicking weakly against the tile in fading desperation.

Adisa reached for the pistol, unholstered it with ease, and stood silently.

His hand shook as he swept the weapon around the gas station with his eyes wide and breath quick.

Even in extreme distress Adisa thought for a moment about the only other soldier he knew was in his presence, that being the sniper on the rooftop. Adisa knew that this man was a sniper for a reason and was smarter than the other smooth-brained Ibisians, so he had to be clever with his next moves. Automatically, Adisa thought of the truck which was parked against the back of the gas station with its back on the wall level with the roof. This led Adisa to silently open the backdoor of the gas station where not long ago he had been led to his torture. While outside he angrily looked at his torture seat and crept past it. Moving as silently as he could, Adisa placed one foot after the other into the wheel well of the truck's front tire. He braced himself, then carefully stepped onto the base of the metal side mirror. His small fingers clung to the top of the frame, muscles tense, breath held, doing everything he could not to make a sound. With a slow,

practiced movement, he brought his other foot up onto the mirror. As soon as his full weight rested on it, he reached for the edge of the cab, gripping it tight. Then, with a quiet hop, he pulled his feet free of the mirror and hauled himself upward, barely making it onto the roof.

At the top, Adisa lay still for a moment, chest rising and falling in silence. He listened, scanned the surroundings, and waited for his heartbeat to settle, making sure no one had seen him, and that his breathing wouldn't give him away.

Adisa looked at the box in front of him, knowing once he reached the top of it, he would be in view so he would have to move with haste. In the boy's mind, it was better to act rashly than to overthink and get shot, so he committed. He scrambled onto the roof of the box truck, trading silence for speed, the noise of his ascent echoing louder than he liked.

Instantly in his sight, Adisa saw the soldier with his back turned to him, so he took his chance and fired towards the man, only to miss. Adisa crossed from the box truck to the roof of the gas station, pistol raised high. The sniper, unscathed until now, had already turned with his rifle locked on the boy.

But it was too late, and Adisa didn't hesitate to fire. He stopped in his tracks and fired two quick rounds into the man's chest, dropping him where he stood. The sniper's rifle hit the roof with a heavy thud, then he joined it on the ground, still clinging to life, gasping.

Under the glow of the half-moon, Adisa stepped forward, a quiet smile spreading across his face. He looked down at the man and fired onto his face, making his struggling breath stop.

Adisa knew that Utopia was not far but felt it would be appropriate for his men to come and occupy the place immediately, so he jumped down the box truck and opened the back door to the gas station.

As the child reentered his once torture chamber, he heard the sound of a phone settling inside its cradle which made him instantly point his rifle where he heard the sound come from.

Behind the armory counter, to his left, a bloodied hand slid off the phone and retreated below the counter. Adisa's eyes followed the blood trail that led to the armory, ending on the floor beneath the poker table which could only mean one thing.

Adisa slowly closed into where the soldier was, ready to finish his job. Biting his lip in anxiousness, Adisa turned the corner, gripping his

newfound AR-10 as hard as he could. Before he turned the corner, he expected the struggling man to be armed so he gripped his rifle hard and quickly turned the corner. When the boy's view was inside the bloodied armory, he made eye contact with the almost dead man on the floor who was squirming in pain. As soon as the two locked eyes, Adisa closed his eyes and shot five .308 rounds into his body like it was nothing.

As the smoke from his gun settled, it didn't even faze the child that the man was unarmed. The disrespect ran deeper than the physical as Adisa stepped over the body like it was a doormat, urgency in every movement as he grabbed the old, blood-smeared phone and quickly dialed Rakeem's home number. While the phone rang its first ring the boy thought about how quickly the Ibisian soldiers would come and how bad they would punish him if they caught him again. In his mind he rather would have died.

As it rang again, Adisa tapped the armory's counter in extreme fear for his life and by its third ring the phone had moved off the side of Adisa's face and was being punched in the air while he shouted, "Fuck! Fuck!"

In Rakeem's old home, a handful of boys lingered. Three sat shoulder to shoulder on a grimy couch that doubled as an ashtray, the dim light of the TV casting shadows across their faces. In the dim kitchen, one boy moved alone, focused on the task he'd been given.

While examining the measuring cup in the boiling pot of water, the dope boy making a cookie was the first to hear the noise. He looked where the noise was coming from and thought it was coming from the TV at first but then he reminded himself that this house had a phone. He smashed his cigarette down on the bare Formica countertop and then walked over to the phone which sat on an old wooden table which also seemingly doubled as an ashtray just like everything else in the house.

Before picking the ringing phone up, he looked at his lousy friends watching Baywatch on the TV while high, laughing their asses off at nothing and being just as bad as the junkies they sold to.

Once the phone was up to his ear, the first thing he heard was a distressed, "Hello!"

The voice on the phone was familiar to the boy but he had no clue who the person on the other end was making him strike a squinted face as he wondered if this was one of Rakeem's old clients.

Aggressively the boy spoke, “Who the fuck is this?”

Static was received through the phone then Adisa shouted, “Adisa motherfucker! Now I don’t know who this is, but I am at the gas station where we first met David! There are soldiers incoming, and I need men here as soon as possible, but do not speak of this over Radio! Is that clear?”

Even in the face of danger, the soldier wore a stubborn smile. He searched for the right words, but excitement got the better of him. All he managed was, “We’re on the way!”

As the soldier slammed the phone down, he heard Adisa yell, “Hurry your ass!”

In pure bliss, the soldier ran into the living room in front of the TV and yelled, “Adisa was on the phone! Get your asses up!”

The three boys on the couch began to belly laugh so hard that one of them fell over onto the floor, with one of them saying, “You're too funny you've been smoking that crack you’ve been cooking?”

The happiness of the soldier turned to rage then he stepped back and pushed over the old TV they sat hypnotized in front of, bending the bunny ears and shattering the thick screen. All three angered boys sobered up real quick as their comrade walked away. They knew him too well; he wouldn’t break a TV just to sell a lie. So, they obliged, rising from the damp, reeking couch they'd been sunk into for hours and following their friend out of the door.

Now on the road towards Adisa, two vans full of thirty soldiers in total were led by Paulo, with each boy thinking something worse than the other of what was to greet them at the gas station. Both vans drove hard, and no words filled the boy’s mouths, just liquor or anything to hide their fear of death. Even if they were filled with fear, each boy was as tough as nails. Even the drivers of the vans, including Paulo partook in war-chanting and the guzzling of alcohol. For a moment as he was driving Paulo looked back at the soldiers in the back of the van and wondered where Afia was.

He then reminded himself his friend was still out patrolling the city’s walls.

In and out of the van, every boy raised their rifles to the sky and sung along to songs they didn’t even know the words to but still every soldier said they sung it right. Upon arrival at the dreaded gas station, everyone looked at the small building and imagined the whole of Ibis’s army being around

and inside of it. The entire van that was bustling turned funeral silent with boy's peeking over each other trying to see if there were any concealed soldiers. Any soldier who'd been pessimistic about the situation found a moment of relief in the absence of enemy troops, but none let their guard down. It still could've been an ambush.

Side by side, the boys poured out of the perpendicular vans and rushed around the gas station.

Screams and stomps were heard outside the building as Adisa paranoidly listened, holed up with his rifle and counting rounds like flower petals to see how long he would last if his men didn't make it in time to assist him.

Adisa knew his best bet was to kneel behind the counter, rifle steady and aimed, but his eyes kept drifting to the lifeless body at his side, unable to look away for long, even with a battle seconds away.

Each passing moment dragged like hours. Every sound made him question, were those his men, or the Ibisians?

Then a thought slipped into his mind and clung there, if a bullet from one of his enemies took him out in this gas station, maybe it would be deserved. The death toll he'd stacked against his own people was monstrous. For a quick second, he tried to picture the number, the exact number, but guilt was quickly smothered by the instinct to survive. There was no room for reckoning, not now.

Suddenly, both doors on both of his sides burst open at once.

Adisa flinched, torn between which to aim at. Footsteps pounded in his ears, then came the shouting, childlike screams. Not Ibisian shouts but his own.

Even knowing that, he didn't lower his weapon. As his boys poured into the gas station, he kept his rifle trained on them and they did the same. Thirty of them in total, tense and wide-eyed, rifles lifted. One by one, they relaxed, and Adisa didn't.

They stared at him, at the strange marks on his skin, at the tremble in his body, like he was some wild creature in a cage.

Finally, the beast laid down his weapon.

Adisa exhaled hard, but his breath still came fast and shallow, as if he'd been running. He stepped out from behind the counter and walked toward his men, still carrying something none of them could see.

The Leader of Utopia stood before his men, diminished and beaten, his wounds all too visible in the eyes of his followers. Out of all the boys, only Paulo dared to meet his leader's broken gaze. Without hesitation, he rushed toward Adisa, extending his hand in a gesture of respect.

"Bring it here!" Paulo demanded, his voice filled with anticipation.

Adisa didn't take his hand, and he didn't rejoice. Instead, he met Paulo's eyes for a quick moment, and what Paulo saw there struck him as pain and torment. Seeing his leader look so broken hurt Paulo like a stab to the heart.

Without a word, Adisa swatted Paulo's hand away, his gesture cold and deliberate as if he was showing the rest of his soldiers, it wasn't a time to rejoice but a time to fight.

Adisa shouted, "Enough of that!"

Chills ran down the soldiers' spines as they heard their leader's first stern words in a long time. Every eye was now diverted to Adisa besides Paulo whose view was glued to the wall in front of him as he felt disrespect like he never had before.

Adisa's eyes were widened, looking like they had never been shut as he spoke again.

"We are at war!"

Even if the soldiers looked straight into their leader's eyes, welts were still visible on his face which made them scared of him. Instead of pitying their leader for the blood, which was spilled from him, they felt fear knowing how hard Adisa would take this not only towards his enemies but to his closest friends.

Adisa moved slowly among his still soldiers, noticing how their eyes looked down to his bare chest every time he drew near. He realized how he must have looked like hell, and he finally extended his arms, staring down at his wounds for the first time.

The sight hit him harder than he expected with burns from the pipes, the marks left by the tasers. His dark skin was marred, every scar visible even in the dim light. In the anxious rush of the night, he hadn't taken the time to notice the extent of it all.

He stood there for what felt like an eternity, staring at the ruined skin on his arms. For half a minute, the silence between him and his men stretched as his unflinching eyes told them more than words ever could.

His mind drifted back to the moments of torture, the first searing shocks of electricity that had coursed through him. He remembered the way the pain had blurred until the charge of the prods ran out, and they resorted to just beating him.

Adisa's gaze never wavered from his scars, letting his followers see the toll, not just on his body, but on his soul.

Only the sounds of tires screeching outside broke Adisa out of his tortured reflection and led everybody to the front door. Adisa pushed his way through his men to get in on the action and was the fifth boy to rush out of the door. Outside the gas station, three Ibisian vehicles sat freshly idling. Two civilian sedans flanked a truck with a mounted turret, already spitting rounds at the building and boys.

Adisa's heart raced as the turret unleashed its fury. In front of him, two boys were hit. One felt lifeless to the ground, his body crumbling in a quick thud then Adisa had to leap over him to keep moving. The other ducked behind one of the vans, and Adisa, along with the other soldiers, followed suit, desperate for cover.

The heavy fire was unforgiving to the Utopians who tried their best to fire at the Ibisian soldiers without getting clipped. Over Adisa, glass was shattered and sliced down on him and his soldiers, reminding them of the battle they once fought at the church against only one man. While the turret bullets ripped through the metal on the van from one side to the other trying to kill Adisa, the young leader got down on his stomach and fired at the turret from the side of the tire he laid next to. On the second bullet, the heavy gunner was shot right off of his gun and blown onto the dirt. Right as the armored man hit the ground, Adisa screamed, "Stop any man from getting on that turret!"

Guns continued to fire without stopping for even a second while Adisa's soldiers shot down anyone who tried to take the overpowered turret that made Utopia's rifles look like muskets.

Not a single other Utopian was struck as the last of the Ibisians were gunned down. The final few attempted to flee into the forest, but they were shot down dishonorably in their backs, their desperate escape cut short by the relentless fire of their pursuers.

Every Utopian grouped together and screamed while firing more bullets into the air, acting as if there were no more battles to be fought even if that was the farthest from the truth.

Before driving away the torture chamber as it would clear more reinforcements would come, Adisa ordered his men saying, “Grab every Ibisian’s wretched body and lie them flat on the road towards Ibis as far as you can to send a message to any other soldier who wants to step foot in Utopia!”

Adisa sat on the back of the white box truck that now was in Utopia’s possession, alongside the turreted truck. Inside the truck, the body of the fallen soldier lay in the farthest corner, shrouded in shadow, completely unnoticed by Adisa.

He lit a cigarette, the first in a while, and inhaled deeply, watching as his men lined the bodies along both sides of the road. A heavy silence struck him, knowing full well that this display would be met with swift retaliation.

-Chapter XXXVI-

In the shallow yet dark forest, three dim men stood next to a road, waiting for a convoy.

“That video is disgusting… I cannot look at this again. Adisa will burn for this.”

The soldier who spoke these words put his cracked second-generation iPhone down that was just playing a video of Utopian soldiers slaughtering Ibisian farmers that was recorded by a rooftop gas station sniper and distributed by Samir thereafter. As soon as the video was sent to the soldiers who all had smartphones thanks to Samir, it appalled them, making them instantly not even question the war and adding fuel to their violent tendencies.

“Don’t worry. He’ll be burning soon,” said the other Ibis soldier to his right, wielding a hefty old RPG-2.

All three of the soldiers sat in view of the gates of Utopia, wanting their enemy to see his home one last time in a spark of hope before they killed him. Headlights finally came into the soldier’s views giving their hearts an excited rush for they were to watch their enemy drown in hellfire.

Four vehicles were seen in the enemy's view and the rocket wielding soldier aimed the colossal tube right at the front van.

Every soldier around Adisa pestered him extensively on what had happened to him on the helicopter and in the petrol station. Of course he didn't respond, instead choosing to close his eyes and getting some rest while he puffed on his second cigarette.

Paulo, who was driving the leading vehicle in the line with Adisa, looked back at his annoying comrades and aggressively spoke, "Why don't you all shut the fuck up and let the man rest?"

Just behind the van, a fireball erupted, lighting up the road and tearing through the already battered vehicle. The blast that was meant for them jolted Adisa awake, ears ringing with the piercing shriek that followed. Every soldier was hit by the same deafening wave of sound.

Paulo caught the explosion in his rearview mirrors, which had been bent forward by the shockwave. Behind Adisa's van, the white box truck was now fully ablaze, flipped onto its left side and blocking the road. The van behind it slammed into the wreckage, hurling soldiers from the back straight into the driver's seat in a violent collision.

The turreted truck swerved hard to avoid the crash, nearly flipping over as it tattered from right to left but it stayed upright, its mounted gun still barking rounds toward the source of the rocket.

Paulo had no idea what to do and trying to keep his leader alive he sped off, not even looking back. Adisa then screamed, "Paulo Stop! We must find those men and kill them!"

Without question, Adisa's prodigy stopped the van and when it halted no soldier got out from fear until Adisa screamed again, "Get out or we are next! Find those motherfuckers!"

The two boys closest to the doors pushed both open to reveal a blinding fire and heat which instantly put a sweat on every Soldier. From past the carcass of the van, the turret fire stopped, and the gunner shouted, "They ran back into the forest! Follow them!"

Every soldier now sprinted side by side, vaulting over the flames as if they weren't even there, charging head-first into the forest.

Adisa wanted to follow, but exhaustion rooted him to where he stood. He stood alone beside the van, watching his men disappear into the trees. The hellfire, he realized, had been meant for him.

Only the driver of the white van had died, slumped in his seat. Adisa took a step and looked closer towards the boy he could have sworn was still moving even if he was engulfed in flames.

As the ringing in his ears finally began to fade, the screams of his comrade returned, sharper than ever, and it disturbed him to his core.

He stepped closer, intending to put the boy out of his misery. But the stench hit first of burning hair and charred flesh. Smoke stung his eyes, forcing them shut for a long, stinging blink.

Then came a thud.

A body hit the dirt as Adisa's eyes snapped open. The boy had rolled himself out of the shattered front window, still screaming, writhing on the ground.

Adisa raised his rifle again, hesitating. He could end it right there. Instead, he stepped forward and kicked dirt onto his soldier as he flailed, the ash and soil mixing into the burns as Adisa tried horribly to help.

Not knowing what else to do, Adisa shouted, "Roll! Roll!"

Adisa worriedly repeated those words until his friend's fire was put out. He dragged his friend away from the flaming van and saw that he was still breathing because his back moved up and down. Still, Adisa did not see the boy's face and was scared to, but he knew that this boy would more than likely not live for much longer, so he grabbed his soldier's right bicep and flipped him over on his back. When he flipped the boy over, the smell somehow worsened, sharp and sour in a way Adisa couldn't explain.

He tried to recognize the face beneath the burns, but it was no use. Deep down, he knew he wouldn't have recognized him even if the fire hadn't touched him. Half of the boy's compressed hair was patched up and burnt away. As Adisa got closer to look at his friend's red burnt skin, the soldier grabbed Adisa and opened his eyes painfully. A hot breath of air blew onto Adisa from the boy exhaling then the soldier apprehensively whispered, "I saw *Him*."

A chill overcame Adisa's unmoving body, with him letting out a painful exhalation as he knew who the boy was talking about even if the boy did not say.

He then strugglingly said, "We're going to hell, Adisa– All of us… He said he has my soul–"

The grip of the suffering boy became unbearable to Adisa, then he finished, "*And you gave it to him.*"

In his final exhale of words, the boy seemed to find peace while Adisa stood frozen, unable to blink, his wide eyes stung with something he couldn't name. The boy's last words clung to the air, suffocating his leader, not because they were foreign, but because they were almost his own.

There was no reason for the boy to suffer any longer, no need to speak, but still, he used his last breath to tell Adisa something he already knew.

The sound of branches breaking to his left, make Adisa break out of his trance and look at his soldiers who now had a hostage in between two boys' arms. Paulo with a face that was waiting for approval, stood in front of the hostage with the RPG in hand as the perpetrator kicked his feet around. Adisa diverted his attention from his soldiers back to the ground where the body was still laid with smoke coming from its clothes.

"Bring him to me," Adisa said in a stern voice, then his obedient soldiers threw the Ibisian right in front of him.

The soldier looked at Adisa's angry mug then he smirked and twinkle in his eye that Adisa disdained.

Adisa shouted towards him, "Look at what you have done! Blown a soldier to char that you have never looked at, thinking it was me!"

The soldier locked eyes with Adisa, his expression shifting from sharp to sour in an instant. Then he lunged.

Two shots rang out from Adisa's men before he could even lay a finger on Adisa, who hadn't flinched and hadn't moved an inch.

Without a word, the child leader stepped forward and kicked the dead soldier's head aside, then dropped to snatch the radio clipped to his hip.

He then said, "Make sure this fire doesn't get out of control, and I need that turret patrolling the area… As the enemy is near!"

Adisa got into the van with Paulo driving again a different group of soldiers now accompanying them. With the soldier's walkie-talkie now on his mouth, he clicked the button on its side and said, "This is Adisa of Utopia speaking… To the grave people of Ibis, I am delighted to say you have destroyed one of your own vans and taken only two of my soldiers while we killed every one of your soldiers in your fleet even though you had a turret which is now mine! Your attempts at breaking Utopia will never succeed and if you were smart you would quit now! I look forward to meeting Samir soon. He will be made an *example* of."

In a warmly lit bar where only Ibisian officials and politicians met at, the President stood next to his right-hand man David in the desolate bar with only a bartender accompanying them. Samir and David both joyfully smoked Cuban cigars and sipped on a mixed drink made with Amarula as if a war was not being pressed on under their command.

While both laughed over an unfunny joke, the radio that sat right in between them crackled and interrupted their conversation, saying, "This is Adisa of Utopia speaking…"

Adisa's speech continued on the radio with David and Samir not sharing one glance as the child humiliated them. The two stared at the walkie until the speech finished, and without even seeing each other they could feel anger emitting in the air. As soon as the radio call ended, Samir put his fingertips into his palm as he crumbled his smoking cigar that smushed loose tobacco in between his fingers. He then turned around from the bar and impetuously made his way towards the stairs which kept the bar underground.

David followed his leader and tried to keep up with his quickness, then he spoke, "Let me lead a patrol of soldiers, we will kill anyone near Utopia we see!"

In return, Samir stopped as he walked on the stairs and while looking away from his second in command he shouted, "Get it done!"

While outside the building, David got inside of his car and drove to his home to gear up for battle. The mayor stepped out of his car and walked towards his home then he had the Idea to bring his own son along with him to war so his only child could prove himself. His son was named Christopher, which was not a common name in South Sudan but didn't matter as the boy was a well-liked soccer player and an overall bright child. As long as Christopher could play soccer as his profession and get good grades then he didn't care about war, the topic that was his father's whole life.

The fourteen-year-old boy was sound asleep in his small room that only had a soccer ball on a makeshift shelf as decoration. Christopher's overhead light flashed above his bed, and it revealed his bright father whose white clothes looked over illuminating.

"Son. You must follow me into battle," The father spoke as the lightbulb above him reflected on his black aviators. David's son questioned

if he was dreaming or not, but nonetheless he got out of his bed and threw a gray long sleeve on. He didn't question his father's war obsessive ways as he knew he more than likely would not be fighting in the war, but only watching, hopefully from afar.

Christopher patiently waited outside for his father to throw on his oversized piece of white body armor so they could finally leave. David eventually came out after kissing his wife goodbye as she slept, not realizing he didn't even tell his wife that he was taking Christopher, then the two booked it towards the Ibis airstrip.

Once at the airstrip, David put the car into park and quickly pulled his parking brake up. The boy looked up at the empty helicopter in front of him that was next to the full van of soldiers.

David reached into his backseat, with his son wondering what he was to pull out, then the father revealed to his son a fresh white helmet, which he threw into the boy's lap.

"You will become a man today, Chirstopher," David said while lighting up a cigarette in his car.

The son looked down at the illuminated skull cap that was a clear, unscathed recreation of his father's infamous helmet.

Mayor Akech got out of his driver's seat and opened his trunk, with his uncomfortable son following at his side. He dug through his trunk until he found his very own white helmet, which was dirty and beaten to all hell. David slipped his helmet on with ease; the motion practiced like second nature. Beside him, his son fumbled with his own, shifting uncomfortably, the straps tugging at his pride more than his chin.

Without missing a beat, David turned back to the trunk, digging deeper until he pulled out his personal TEC-9. The weapon's edges were brushed with faint white paint, and the gun sported an extendable stock. For years David had used it as one of his most trusted guns even if it jammed more than it shot, but he insisted it was his, "Lucky gun."

On the sub-gun's stock was a dinged-up carabiner that David used to hold the machine gun on his belt loop as he pulled another weapon out. Without rummaging around this time, David pulled out a ten-inch short barreled M4 and handed it to Christopher who at first hesitated to pick it up.

The boy lifted the rifle as gently as he could, cradling it in both hands, his eyes fixed on it in reflection.

Christopher's mind drifted, back to the blistering days of his childhood, when his father used to drag him out to Ibis's backcountry, long before the walls existed. On days so hot the dirt shimmered with heat mirages the father and son would shoot at tin cans and sometimes vultures or hyenas with a short-barreled AK-47.

David had never taken training lightly. Even when Christopher hit his mark, a missed shot or the slightest mistake earned a smack or a sharp comment. Toughness and discipline were the lesson thrown at the boy. Sometimes his father filled a backpack with sand and strapped it to Christopher's back, forcing him to run and crawl until his legs shook.

Christopher had grown into a decent shot, great, even, but as he stared down at the rifle in his hands now, he wasn't sure if he could kill someone. Not like his father who did so easily.

Christopher directed his attention to his father and said, "I thought I was to ride along with you to war, not fight in it."

Right before entering the van in front of him, David looked at his son and said, "There is no option son."

Moments after, the father and son were in the green van that had just started, filled with unfamiliar and silent Ibisians dressed in all black. Christopher tried his best to blend in sitting next to his war ready father even if he was visibly flustered.

Before the vehicle drove off, high beams shined bright onto the men through their tinted windows, making the soldiers cover their eyes and scoff. David turned around and instantly knew this was Samir, so he spoke to the driver, "Don't take off."

Samir got out of his car which he did not drive and took a step towards the Van as he adjusted his white button up suit with a red tie. David got out of his seat and stepped down out of the started van to smell the aromatic exhaust that filled the air. With both feet firmly planted, David stood tall and saluted his leader. Before he could even hold the gesture, Samir struck his hand down, forcing it back to his hip with a sharp, dismissive swat.

"What are you thinking bringing that boy to war? Must I have more sense than his own father?"

The second in command moved his face back and thought of what the other soldiers to his side were thinking of him. He then responded, “My boy is ready for war! He will fight strongly or die.”

“I don’t need more of our men dead, especially not a citizen! He will get himself killed or kill all of you, it’s a lose-lose!”

David moved his feet and then pleaded, “Let me take him Samir. Let him show you who he is. I didn’t train him all those years for nothing.”

Samir’s finger met David’s nose, then he exclaimed, “Take the boy to war I don’t care, but when you have to tell your wife about his death, Remember I told you so!”

The conversation between the two ended with Samir walking off and the entire squadron knowing exactly what was said from the loud words. Christopher’s already anxious sentiment was sent even deeper and became much more painful, with the boy wanting to run out of the van and leave but he knew if he did, his father would put him down himself.

The van started towards Utopia and Christopher was the only Soldier with his head turned towards the window looking at his surroundings. He watched birds of the night sky fly near the tall grass and he longed to be like one of them, away from a war which he knew would not bring any good. It was a nice moment of peace, until copious bodies started to enter his vision right in front of the vegetation he longed for. The driver was the only other person who noticed the catastrophe, so he began to stop to everyone's confusion.

The mayor shouted, “What is this about?”

David’s voice faltered as he glanced through the driver’s window, spotting a stretch of Ibisian bodies lining the road, each one clad in black tactical suits, leaving no doubt about who they were.

His heart caught in his chest at the sight of fallen allies, but he rested a steady hand on the driver’s shoulder and said, low and firm, “Keep driving.”

He leaned back into the cold metal of his seat as his eyes drifted to the window, just like every other soldier in the van.

No one spoke and no one cried, but every man in that van recognized someone out there among the dead.

-Chapter XXXVII-

In the desolate back country of Utopia, seventeen beings marched as quietly as they could towards their home gates but still deeply fearing an ambush as things had been timid for the last half hour after hearing an unknown explosion on the front side of the walls.

In Afia's squadron, thoughts of Utopia being breached ran through their minds and put their senses at an all-time high, ready for whatever greeted them once inside of Utopia. The soldiers gripped themselves to Utopia's right wall that was opposite of the Nile and tried their best to be silent even if they felt someone could feel their heartbeat from a mile away. In a pretty and open spot, only covered in rocks and shrubs, Afia, who strongly led the skinny line of soldiers, put his hand up to signal, "Stop."

Quickly his memo was ordered from person to person and all of them readied their guns and leaned themselves against the stone wall for support as they aimed into the forest from their open spot where they could still see the almost rested moon.

In only seconds, Afia's hand moved from his front to his back letting his soldiers know they were okay to move again and that he had falsely stopped them.

In the first step, multiple soldiers saw blood get thrown into the wall and stone powder get dusted into the air from ambushing bullets. Every soldier hit the ground as their ears rang and surrounded themselves with grass, alive or dead. Adrenaline blurred the hurt soldiers' vision and flames flickered through the forest ahead, and all they could see was fire.

But Afia steadied himself through the blurriness as he caught sight of a soldier, almost invisible in the dim forest, his dark armor and darker skin blending into the shadows.

Afia locked onto him through the iron sights of his AK seeing the man's cheek was exposed, only shielded by a thin gaiter.

Afia pulled the trigger.
The shot punched through the soldier's face, clean and precise as he fell back on a thick tree.

Afia rolled over and moved over the sharp yellow grass he was surrounded by and tried looking at his soldiers to check if they were alive but all he could see was grass.

The Ibisian's fired many rounds into the grass blindly but mostly shot dirt that flew into the air to their dismay. Once the enemy Ibis soldiers had run through their ammo while blindly shooting, Afia shouted, "Charge!"

All surviving Utopian's ran alongside Afia who got up first and shot at the now visible enemies who reloaded and retreated deeper into the forest.

Standing near each other on neighboring trees stood Christopher to the right and David to the left. Both of them took fire heavily as bullets whizzed into the sides of the thick trees they hid behind. While David was screaming and laughing as he sent many bullets towards his enemies, Christopher was silent and trembling, only sending a few bullets to his enemies to rake in his father's approval.

Christopher watched as his father fired on a boy who tried running in on them and he watched the suffering boy fall onto the ground ungracefully and drop his gun. He looked over the defenseless screaming boy and fired at two other soldiers who he saw but missed horrendously at them even if he was confident, he could hit them. The rifle he was gifted by his father had a short barrel, so it sparked intimidating fireballs which scared the rifle's owner more than who he shot at.

Gun fire neared closer and Christophers ears were becoming almost deaf from it. Christopher, while shaking gave his rifle a glance which revealed to him that a bullet's casing was stove piped in the rifle's rusty bolt. Although he wasn't an expert, he knew his rifle must have not been operational, so he tried pulling the bullet with his finger out to no avail. Another round hit his thick tree which made Christopher let out a small girly yelp as he finally pulled back the charging handle on his rifle and let the bullet drop free to the ground. Christopher looked to his left to check on his father and saw that David was gunless on the ground with a Utopian on top of him.

The boy was borderline deaf and didn't hear the rushing soldier as all the white noise of gunfire and screams tuned everything else out. Even if he didn't want to, Christopher knew what he had to do.

Hands trembling, he aimed at the enemy, already limping from a bullet wound to the back of the thigh. Christopher realized this was the same boy he'd seen fall earlier.

The wounded Utopian raised an old, wooden-gripped knife and, with both hands, brought it down toward his father's face.

Christopher pulled the trigger.

A single round tore through the attacker's back, sending him crumpling forward with no strength left to strike. As the body hit the ground, the ringing in Christopher's ears faded and his heartbeat slowed. The fear that had once paralyzed him melted away.

Now all he could hear was his heartbeat.

He didn't wait for his father to stand as he stepped out from cover, rifle up, and opened fire on the enemy without hesitation. Bullets zipped past him, but he walked through the chaos like he couldn't be touched.

Near the last tree before the open field, a boy lunged out with a pistol and shoved it into Christopher's gut. In quick reaction, Christopher squeezed his trigger, shredding the Utopian's torso point-blank, then stepped over him like a stray branch in his path.

In the tall grass, another enemy rose to avenge his fallen comrade, but Christopher dropped him too like a professional, clean and ruthless.

With every life he took, something inside of him swelled. This wasn't war anymore, it was instinct. His heart raced with manic delight as he blew through more rounds. These weren't people anymore; they were targets to him like cattle.

Each shot felt like release, each kill, a step closer to the soldier he was always meant to be.

He held his breath as he fired, the rifle thudding against his shoulder, no regret echoing in the thunder of each round.

When the magazine finally clicked empty, more gunfire creeping through the field snapped him out of his trance. A flicker of fear returned, just enough to make him duck back into the forest.

David saw every move of his son and watched as Christopher ran back to cover next to him. Christopher did not even notice his father at first who

was proudly staring at him. The father with a slight smirk even through battle shouted, “You're a natural. Keep Killing!”

His shaking son looked at his father with a blank face and wide eyes that concerned David as the look he saw on his son's face was the look of no return. Christopher, with his white helmet that was now bloodied, reminded his father so much of when he was young and made him remember taking his first life.

David knew better than anyone how deeply taking a life could change a person. To him, becoming a man wasn’t about being in war, it was about how much of it you could endure without losing yourself.

The rifle in his son’s hand was clearly empty so David shouted to the soldier behind him, “I need a .223 Mag!”

Even if he didn’t want to, the soldier obliged and threw the magazine out of his own rifle to Christopher, leading him to fight with only his pistol now. This soldier just like the rest did not like the idea of such a newcomer being in this tough of a battle, but he did see the potential in the boy. As soon as the magazine was back in the boy’s gun, he opened himself up again out of cover and began to fire into the open, with noticeably less men now in the field, which was odd, but the Ibisian’s chalked it up to most of them dying.

Christopher knocked down two more enemies, becoming clearly the soldier with the most kills in this battle by a long shot.

Bullets began to hail from the left of the Ibisian soldiers which made David, and his men direct their attention to the flanking soldiers.

Three men near David were gunned down and he looked around for Christopher to help with the smart soldiers, but he was nowhere to be found. With his head turned, David was grazed in his hand by a pistol bullet which made him hunker down lower than he was and fearfully put his radio to his face.

“We Got Utopians coming in from every side of our position! Send the Chopper to the right side of Utopia’s walls! You’ll see the hellfire from miles away!”

Christopher walked back into the open on the other hand, still firing and pursuing two more boys he saw next to the wall that the Utopian’s originally walked along.

One of the soldiers, Afia, had noticed, just before he ordered the Utopians to change position, that an older comrade had been shot through

the hand and could no longer use his rifle. Instead of moving forward with the others, Afia stayed behind to help him to safety, even as his soldiers moved to catch the Ibisian soldiers off guard.

The leader of the Utopian squadron while helping the fifty-year-old man questioned if any of his other allies under Adisa would have helped this man besides him. Afia and the wounded soldier found themselves in what felt like an unwinnable standoff against the boy in the white helmet who seemed to be an unstoppable force who moved like a killing machine ripped straight out of a movie. The two Utopian's sat behind a rock, with the squirming soldier holding his hand and Afia assured him, "We are going to make it out alive, just follow me through the grass."

Afia ducked away from the rock that he knew his enemy approached and army crawled towards the part of the forest that held his comrades. After multiple movements of his arms, Afia looked behind himself to see his comrade painfully dragging himself through the dirt.

Christopher made it to the large rock that he was so sure his enemies were behind and realized his enemies were gone but not far. In the smashed down grass trail next to the rock, A moving foot was seen by Christopher who then walked in the trail with his rifle pointed to the ground. The struggling soldier heard the steps along the grass behind him and closed his eyes in a last resort for comfort. Christopher was now victoriously standing over the man and he pointed his barrel at the back of the man's head. Before he could fire the round, the sound of brush moving to his left caught him strange. Heat entered Christopher's throat and blood poured down his opened throat that Afia had shot. His rifle fell on top of his potential victim as he stood for one last moment and turned to look at Afia right in the eyes. Without even thinking, Afia shot his rival in the forehead which had so much energy that it unclipped his helmet and blew it clean off his head.

Afia ran over to his friend after being the victor of the two-man war and pointed his rifle towards the forest, hoping he didn't have to deal with any more gunfire at the moment. He stood on top of the soldier just as Christopher did, but instead of offering a gun towards him, he offered his hand and pulled the Soldier up on his feet. The soldier was immensely grateful, and, in his mind, he wondered if Adisa would have thought as quickly as Afia.

David, who got a peak at his son's helmet flying in the air and his only son falling ungracefully to the ground, felt crushed and didn't even want to kill the boy at that moment as wanted to be as close as he could to Afia's face. Even from afar, looking at the boy through trees, David recognized Afia and collected every piece of information he could to remember the boy completely from his short and unkempt hair to his small, squinted eyes. The anger of David could not be contained though, as his screams were let into the air and his rifle pointed right for Afia. He shot two rounds with both missing Afia and one of them going into the suffering soldier's body. More bullets rained towards Afia, and he noticed quickly that his comrade was dead, so he dropped him into the grass and kneeled with his rifle pointed at the clear white helmet of David.

Afia fired his AK, landing a shot clean into David's shoulder, the very one his cheek was pressed against as he aimed. The impact shattered bone and sent David to the ground, teeth clenched in agony as he fell from Afia's view. Flat on his back, David stared through the trees at the glimmering African stars, until they were swallowed by a dark oval he recognized instantly as the helicopter he had called in.

For a moment, the pain dulled. The chopper's gunner began to light up the field from above, mowing down Utopians with merciless precision. Ropes dropped from its open belly into the torn-up grass beside the battered wall.

Gunfire rained down on Afia, forcing him to run and dive into the forest. He shouted to his men, "Retreat to me!"

Boys broke from cover, sprinting through gunfire, many of them falling before they reached their leader.

David, bleeding on the forest floor, watched the chaos as boys were shot through branches above and coughed up a laugh thick with blood.

When the last visible Utopian had reached Afia, he raised his hand in a silent order to move. The boys followed without question, racing through the trees. Afia, unwilling to waste more lives, turned his head just once toward the roaring helicopter and commanded, low and firm, "Keep running. Don't shoot the damn chopper!"

He knew if they tried to shoot the chopper that their position would be spoiled, and they would be slaughtered with ease in mere seconds. Only eight out of seventeen men remained in Afia's Platoon which was very evident with the small group and struck the leader with grief.

No helicopter was in sight now, and Afia pulled his radio out, saying, “This is Afia speaking. A battle broke out between David Akech and his Ibisian squadron against ours, which has led most of my men dead. Their helicopter came in and slaughtered many men to my dismay, we are on the right side of Utopia’s walls-”

With the radio still on, Afia heard the sound of gunfire behind him, close enough to be in the group and he turned around to see the last two men in the group with their rifles pointed up at the now close helicopter.

Without question, the gunner in the helicopter full of Ibisian’s let loose on the two stupid soldiers with his mounted M60 and blew them to shreds for all their comrades to see. Arms and blood were splashed everywhere, and Afia began to run and so did his soldiers. Not only were the two boys who were stupid enough to try and fight the helicopter killed, but another soldier was as well who didn’t even fire.

All the men followed Afia’s lead through some more trees and then hit the dirt just as he did. The helicopter searched for the rest of the soldiers with lights pouring down through trees for a few minutes, then, David ordered, “I’m fucking shot! Rush to Ibis before I shoot the pilot, and I fly!”

The helicopter veered off, no longer hovering above the treetops. Silence fell. The last five Utopian soldiers remained crouched in the underbrush, still as stones, until the echoes of gunfire faded and only the birds dared to speak.

Afia was the first to rise.

He walked among his comrades’ bodies, eyes sharp, face unreadable, until he spotted movement. One of the soldiers was still breathing, barely. Afia couldn't tell if this was the boy who had tried to kill the pilot. It didn’t matter.

No one deserved to go out like this, so the boy raised his rifle, exhaled, and ended the suffering with a single shot.

-Chapter XXXVIII-

The sun was now high over Utopia and Adisa prepared to show himself to his people after his long hiatus. They planned for Paulo to walk out on

stage and then introduce Adisa back into Utopia where he would then lead a great speech. Adisa stepped out of an hour-long hot shower, one that his people could only dream of, then he wiped his mirror clean of steam using his towel. His bare body was now visible to his own eyes and yet again he was reminded of what Ibis had done to him. He examined every little scar from his head to his toe and felt repulsed at his own physical being.

From the corner of his bathroom, under a light that illuminated steam, his closest companion made himself noticed by words, saying, **"You look like shit."**

A towel was used by Adisa to cover his privates up then he said, "Well-"

He stumbled on his words and the shadowy man who was still dark under illumination began to laugh.

"**Embrace the marks of your torture. Not with shame, but with purpose. Your people will not meet you with judgment, but with fury for what Ibis did to their leader. Show them your scars. Let them see the truth.**"

Adisa looked down on himself and then said, "You are right my friend."

As soon as his mouth shut, Adisa's wet feet slid across the smooth tile floor, and he found himself pinned against his wall. With the immense fear he felt for this spirit, Adisa let out a scream that was then put out by his master who threw his formless but solid hand over his lips.

"You know what else would look good on you?"

Adisa stood with the back of his head pressed firm against the wall as the dark being rested its fingertips lightly on his stomach, right on his abdomen. The airy touch began to seep into his flesh, the fingers crawling beneath his skin before retreating, leaving behind black markings etched into him, one agonizing inch at a time. He didn't know what was happening, only that it burned. The pain twisted through him, silencing any scream before it could leave his throat. When the final curve of the mark was carved down his torso, a sudden, deep stab of pain hit just above his navel. Through all the pain, Adisa was lost and was not physically able to give a reaction as it seemed his body was frozen. He had no clue what the spirit of his wealth had just done.

The shadow took his hands out of his tool and walked backwards to get a better look at what he had done. Without saying a word, the being disappeared, his ether mixing in with the steam and becoming one.

Adisa was finally let free and dropped to the ground where he squeezed his fingers and breathed the most painful of breaths. He sat for two whole minutes getting over the pain until he rose up and finally looked in the mirror. Now along his stomach sat the permanent markings of the word: “UTOPIA” and under it was the blotch of his territory lines that sat on top of his belly button. The child leader had thought about getting a tattoo, but this felt like something different. It felt like a mark of a beast, of which he had become. Nonetheless, in his mind he knew his people would not care about it as it showed his nationalism.

Adisa got half dressed, wearing black dress pants held up by a brown belt and combat boots which were a strange combination but fit Adisa well. No shirt was worn as Adisa walked into his kitchen to see his closest ally Paulo who he did not speak a word to. Adisa opened his liquor cabinet and took out a bottle of expensive brandy that was originally Cyril’s.

He placed it upon his island and then began to cram his face full of dry sourdough bread and wash it down with the liquor.

Paulo looked in disgust and questioned how his leader did that. Adisa caught Paulo’s judging eyes with the bottle about to go in his mouth and said, “What are you looking at? Get in the car and mind your fucking business!”

The leader of Utopia knew that he could disrespect Paulo because he knew that he would get assassinated before Paulo would call him on his wrong doings.

Paulo just once this time did try and speak up for himself, saying, “Ad-”

He was cut off by Adisa who shouted, “I'm just trying to take the edge off! There is a lot of pressure on my back Paulo, which is something you wouldn’t know much about!”

Utopia’s Igor felt disrespected by his leader’s unknowing words as he truly did try to lead Utopia while Adisa was gone.

Once Paulo reached the driver's seat of the car, he thought about his leader’s alcoholic tendencies which had never been shown but would be revealed in these tough times of war. Another thought that reached the second in command's mind was the question of what Adisa would truly do

to Samir, David and the people of Ibis. In his mind he knew it would not be pretty, but at least he would be on the surviving side of it.

From two blocks away from the speaking stand, the screams of Utopians blared as if they were an inch away from Adisa's ears while he and Paulo drove to the city's center followed by multiple soldier's cars. Before Adisa left the car, he patted his thighs in ecstasy and excitement as he had missed the power of his people. To the car's left, the crowd stood strong, looking like one beast to Adisa who was biting at the bit to speak to his people.

The soldiers who were already in the crowd screamed and pushed at the people who overstepped their boundaries and acted as rabid as animals. Paulo opened the car door and rushed to the top of the stage, with the whole crowd then going silent and being still. Once he reached the microphone, he was anxious to speak as in a way he wished he didn't have to give up his role as temporary leader of Utopia. Nonetheless he began to shout.

"I shall waste no time as I know the people need what I am to show you. I welcome you, the *Father of Utopia.*"

In his last sentence, feedback overcame Paulo's microphone which led Utopia to be confused as to what he was going to show. Paulo stepped off to the side of the stage and looked down at Adisa who walked up the stairs to the stage.

Another pair of feet stepped up to the microphone, replacing Paulo, and for a breathless moment, the crowd did not recognize him. To the people of Utopia, he was just a shirtless child, scarred and marked in ways they couldn't yet understand. It wasn't until his voice rang out, familiar, and fierce, that they knew for certain their leader had returned.

"Utopia!"

Like never before, people screamed and smacked each other like God had been revealed to them just off one word. Women and men both fainted and people overcame the barriers holding the crowd in place. Soldiers fired their rifles into the air, warning shots meant to push the civilians back, but the crowd only inched away, still screaming and still excited. The gunfire was swallowed by the roar of voices, louder than war, louder than pain. Even Adisa had to cover his ears, if only for a second.

Before speaking again, a small child had been placed by their mother onto the stage and the child nagged on his pant leg and looked up at him. Adisa smiled and held the child up on his right shoulder and people cheered some more. He picked up the child and held him at a normal level then he leaned into the microphone and jokingly said, “How did he get here?”

He began to laugh and then a mother was pointed out to him in the crowd, and she was let through to the bottom of the stage where she received her child from Adisa who lifted the baby down. Adisa blew kisses at the two girls and put his mouth in front of the microphone again.

“Hopefully your cheers are all out now.”

Utopians laughed and so did Adisa who looked back at Paulo and patted him on the arm.

“My people, how I have missed your grins. The smiles of my beautiful people who I have been given the honor to lead! This war that crept onto Utopia and snakingly bit into its neck is a battle that is worth fighting for! This war is unlike any other as we fight against a grave evil to Africa. An Evil, which is so rotten it, has taken up our walls and everything my people do but claim that it is light and we are dark! Ibisian’s are tricksters as I learned first-hand with David Akech of Ibis who falsely tricked me by offering his hand in friendship to strengthen Ibis and Utopia. He called himself the leader of Ibis and the mayor of the Capital! He in fact was not a leader but a puppet moved by Samir Moses, President of South Sudan!”

Gasps rippled through the crowd. He had kept the truth buried as he had been mostly silent even to his men. Now, by naming the president, he hadn’t just drawn a line, he’d broken it.

The conflict had just been escalated to a new level.

Adisa continued, “David was used as a puppet by Samir who drawed him out to be an ally! I believed this horrible lie until Samir showed himself to me by murdering my newfound partner, dumping her body in Utopia’s Street and then kidnapping me.”

Adisa stopped for a moment and swallowed nothing, trying to regain his strength against thoughts of agony. In that brief pause, the weight of Adisa’s silence allowed his listeners to think for themselves. The pieces fell into place, and they understood where those scars came from. While outrage flared in their minds at the brutal treatment of their leader, a

deeper, colder emotion settled in. Fear overloaded their brains in what would be done to them if Utopia were to lose this war.

Adisa's tone lowered as he spoke next, "While in captivity, I learned that this shadow leader of Ibis is the man who got my mother pregnant with me…"

The young leader paused again, careful not to call Samir his father in whatever came next. Whispers spread through the crowd as Utopians turned to one another, caught between disbelief and dawning realization. Even the soldiers were struck by the revelation as Adisa had never told them. But in hindsight, his silence made sense as he was filled with shame.

"It showed me that this incoming war would be a harsh and personal one. Even the battle with Cyril and Ameen were egged on by Samir.

This is a battle of related blood where an old man's past mistakes and jealousy take him to try and destroy his son who he never knew! These attacks on Utopians led by Samir and David are harsh as we are fighting now against the President and means most of South Sudan! We might not have as much money as these men, but this does not matter as the will of my people is stronger than any matter of armor or power trying to end us! Although they hate us and our policy of free food and walls, they still try to copy things we do all while spitting upon us! I believe this war will be a turning point not just for South Sudan or Africa, but for the whole world! Utopia is the last hope! *Long Love Utopia!"*

"With this war, Utopia has no hope… The only thing that can be hoped for is Adisa gets caught in the line of fire."

In a dimly lit basement beneath a run-down bar, a few people chuckled lightly at Abel's words. Meanwhile, in the heart of the city, Adisa's followers stood rigid in the crowd, forcing out hollow laughs at the exact same moment. Two worlds, stitched together by the relations of the brothers. Anytime anyone in the Anti Utopia Coalition stopped speaking, the annoying yells of Adisa's people unwantedly lingered within the stone walls of the basement.

Only under a week ago, four men stood in this basement and devised plans against Adisa, but now the word had spread a bit and eighteen more men, and five women joined them. Abel quickly became the face of the A.U.C. Even if he was young and not too street smart, he knew the most about their enemy and was also the most passionate. The smart child spoke

three times a week in the basement, with thoughts of rebellion being thrown around and a few drinks as well.

Abel mirrored Adisa as both were leaders of two very different groups who were drastic in what they wanted to do. It was surprising that no one on the city streets on an average day heard Abel's anger from below and reported him.

With the war starting, many joined because people either went harder into Adisa's way or strayed far away from his ideals harshly as they didn't want war. The people who strayed away quickly found a home with the A.U.C. and put their lives towards its cause. Not a soul in the group was Pro-Ibis and each person didn't want them to win just as they didn't want Utopia to win either as both options would lead to mass casualties. It was in everyone's favor that Utopia should not be fighting in any wars in the first place as it was supposed to be against the violence the rest of the country faced.

"In vengeance, Utopians will push for this war and crave bloodshed, but the medial people will deny Adisa for his travesties and hopefully come to us."

Abel walked back and forth the stone floor a couple of times and then continued, "We just need to catch him with his pants down and the revolt can start."

In the small crowd in front of him, one of the women spoke, "How do we do that? How can we catch him in possession and then show people? It is too big of a rumor to just tell people about as it will spread like wildfire and lead back to us in an instant."

Abel again walked back and forth and thought of an answer. He closed his eyes and said, "No, no. We can't just tell people about Adisa's wrong doings. We have already talked about this. We must instead show them. In a perfect world, yes, we could catch Adisa red handed with a bag of coke, but the thing is, he keeps his hands clean of the dope. We would have to use one of his men."

Bilal, who was to the side of the room's speaker, looked at Abel and said, "The war will take us to hell and back as a people, Abel. We have to think quickly."

Abel turned to his friend and spoke, "*I know this.* Give me time please. This meeting is dismissed."

Every A.U.C. member walked up the stairs back to the empty bar where no one was at as everyone was still listening to Adisa. Abel was the only boy out of everyone who didn't go up the stairs, but instead he sat alone in the dark basement. When the trap door slammed shut, Abel knew he had only one choice left for his group. He exhaled and reached into his pocket, pulling out the single item he'd kept hidden there.

It was small, cold, and unfamiliar. A black mirror that faintly reflected his anxious eyes. Though he'd never used a phone before, he pressed the glass circle with the cube icon, and the screen lit up in a harsh square of white light. The display blinked to life, showing the midday hour and a date Abel always found helpful to track.

He swiped across the screen, revealing its inner world. There were only a few icons, but one stood out, a green square marked as: 'Phone.'

Afia tapped it with purpose, and a single contact appeared on the screen, bold and unmistakable.

SAMIR.

Without waiting a second longer, Abel clicked the name and listened to the phone's beeps that echoed in the dead silent room. Abel's eyes ran around the room looking at art they had made and looking at the wooden gun cabinet in the corner of the room which held guns gifted from Samir.

Only after two long beeps, Samir picked up the phone and Abel straightened his eyes. Not a word was spoken from Samir as he waited for the boy who he knew was calling to speak first.

"Hello Samir."

Static spoke, then Samir said, "Of what news do you bring me? I know Adisa is back!"

Afia shook his head and said, "No, no! I need your help with an idea I had for Adisa," The boy licked his lips and then continued. "We both know we have to catch him with his pants down, right? But how do we do this? We both know we are not going to catch him–"

Samir responded, "You will see soon, golden child! I will supply you with the means to show everyone what he is doing but you must wait."

The phone call ended with the phone still at Abel's ear, leaving the boy with more questions now than answers.

-Chapter XXXIX-

Chicken legs wrapped in foil paired with bread were thrown through the air towards Utopian families out of the back of a van by Adisa's hands. This was the first time Adisa had come to feed his people with his men as he felt it was necessary to do so in these trying times. Adisa mostly sat and watched his men throw the food as he smiled and waved to his citizens but every hundred or so pieces thrown, he would do it and whoever got the piece of food from him would kiss the foil he touched. Once every family had received their food, the line of single people moved forward. Adisa had always made it clear; families were to be fed first, always. Most of the

singles were homeless, and many fell to their knees, pleading for food or shelter. Adisa didn't even look at the beggars and never acknowledged them as his soldiers did the pushing.

After brushing off yet another beggar, Adisa reached into the van and tossed the next meal, another piece of bread and chicken, to the first person in line. He threw it before even looking. He usually didn't bother but something urged him to lift his eyes and so he did.

The man was already turning away, his back now to Adisa. He wore a filthy, torn hoodie, and the loose sleeve on his left side fluttered in the wind. The sight struck Adisa like a memory as he looked at the empty sleeve.

He nearly dismissed it as coincidence, until the man turned, and locked eyes with him. A harsh stare was put towards Adisa, one that screamed of angst.

Adisa's Recognition struck like a whip.

"Stop!"

Adisa's voice cracked through the crowd and his arm shot into the air, palm open, then sliced downward to point at the man.

Before his finger could stay on him, the hooded figure bolted.

Two of Adisa's men sprang into action without needing orders. They chased him down, tackled him in the dirt, and dragged him back toward their leader.

Once the man stood before him, Adisa looked confidently into his face, just slightly higher than his own and saw a unique expression. A rare, perfect blend of fury and fear.

Not the kind of fear that screams or pleads. The kind that should've died long ago and been buried beneath time. Instead, it clung to the man like a parasite, feeding quietly.

Instead of a smack from Adisa like the man expected, the child laughed like a maniac and shut his eyes as firm as he could.

"Take your hoodie off and show everyone how much of a freak you are!"

The homeless man blinked a couple of times and didn't find Adisa amusing at all. He knew the hoodie was going to be torn off, so he stood completely still with a disappointed face at Adisa as the soldiers around him ripped the clothing from his back. It revealed his now unbandaged stump.

Laughs from Adisa were thrown at the man which made everyone around uncomfortable. Even Adisa's soldiers couldn't find themselves to

laugh no matter how hard they tried to fit in, with only arranged smiles shaping on their faces. None of the citizens in line were familiar with the limbless man who was being broken down, but they were introduced to him by Adisa who spoke proudly.

"Ahh, my old friend who I can't remember the name of. Why don't you introduce yourself to everyone?"

The inflamed man clamped his lips and managed to keep his peace even if he wanted to kill the boy. Adisa turned his head back and forth in disapproval of the man's tranquility, then he said, "Well even if we don't know this man's name, let me tell you our story! In our presence is the only surviving enemy in the revolution to create Utopia. This man was a drug dealer who I punished by taking what you see here is missing from his body."

Adisa's index finger was on the surface of the poor man's stump and then the boy let his finger down and used both of his palms to turn the man away from him. He pressed his small foot against the inside of the man's knee, forcing it inward until it buckled. The unbalanced man collapsed, his chin slamming into the dirt.

Still without saying a word, the man used his single palm to lift himself off the ground with struggle. The old victim marched away without a glance back.

Adisa burned with the urge to finish what he'd started, to complete the job he'd only half-done. Through his blood thirst he knew the spirit wouldn't approve as this was a rule given that Adisa didn't dare to break even if he thought it was stupid. The whole point of the man living was for him to spread Adisa's word, but it seemed as if he wasn't doing much of that anymore. Still, Adisa knew the spirit had a plan for everything and breaking this rule would be a massive mistake.

The man had to live.

Clouds gathered over Utopia for the first time in a long while Adisa stood stiff and silent before three crosses at the far edge of his property.

The nameless wooden markers, fashioned from acacia limbs and bound with stringy strips of bark, creaked softly in the wind. The breeze slipped between them, whistling past like a ghost.

Before the crosses laid a patch of disturbed earth, brown, uneven and still settling. Beneath it, Nyma and the other two martyrs rested, shoulder to shoulder, in a shallow grave.

When their bodies had been found, Paulo led the men in laying them to rest. He gave a single order, to bury them with their feet facing Adisa's land, so that even in death they'd look toward the open hills where wind rustled in fountain grass.

But the dirt and placement of the crosses told a different story. Even a fool could see they hadn't been buried facing the gentle slope of the land, but toward the cold, unforgiving stone wall that boxed it all in.

Adisa's hollow grieving towards the girl he barely knew was stopped when from the corner of Adisa's eye, he noticed a group of boys sauntering through the dirt towards his home. Of all the boys walking, Adisa recognized none, except Afia, who stood at the front. He had forgotten about Afia entirely, lost in the chaos and weight of the war he'd chosen to carry. It wasn't just Afia he'd forgotten and seeing him again unearthed another memory. The memory of the death of Mosi who truly didn't deserve what he was given.

After Mosi was killed, Adisa never expected to see Afia again, and if he did, he assumed it would be under the shadow of vengeance.

He was proved wrong as he strutted down toward his house and spotted the group of battered boys gathered there, none of them even looking at him.

Adisa followed them into his kitchen, where he noticed Afia who looked enraged at Paulo and was yelling an inch away from his face like a rabid pit bull.

Afia spitted, "A fucking ride home woulda been nice!"

Both boys now looked angry, with Paulo matching Afia's mean mug. The other soldiers placed themselves behind Afia with their chins high and their arms crossed to show that they wouldn't interfere if the two boys began to bang on each other.

Paulo screamed back at Afia, "We switched the radio channel because–"

Adisa interrupted the argument by squeezing his hand in between the two boy's chests that were tightly pressed together and shouting, "What is going on?"

Afia swiveled his head to his side and saw his once leader and gave him a look of surprised hatred. He turned back to Paulo and then back to Adisa swiftly and said, “When did–?”

He shut his sentence down and now Paulo had a straight look on his face because he knew what was to come.

Directing his attention on Adisa, Afia spoke loudly, “You’re why they didn’t speak on the radio! You got back and everyone was too distracted with you instead of my squadron that got wiped out by David and his fucking Heli!”

Afia took slow steps towards his leader while speaking and swaying his body back and forth like he was ready to punch the boy who would get him killed for such actions.

“You wanna watch how you talk to the leader of the free world?” Paulo interjected with his clear message to Afia, then the anger between the two escalated when Afia shouted, “Ass-licker!”

Adisa smartly stepped back sharply just as Paulo threw a hook straight into Afia’s jaw. The boy recoiled, then struck back, his knuckles landing squarely on Paulo’s nose, drawing blood and making him walk backwards with wide, swinging steps.

Paulo staggered against the granite slab in the center of the kitchen, let out a scream, and charged forward. His fist came in wide, a wild swing meant to end the fight.

But Afia slipped aside, quick and clean and drove an uppercut into Paulo’s liver as he flew past.

The punch folded him, and Paulo dropped to the floor, gasping for air.

That’s when Adisa shouted to the soldiers watching from the sidelines, eyes lit with amusement, “Stop them!”

All four of the soldier’s looked at Adisa and then looked right back down at the fight while Afia kneeled over Paulo and clobbered him right in the side of the face while he wheezed out. Another punch was thrown, and Adisa ran and tackled Afia off of Paulo who was surely to get punched to death. Adisa shadowed over Afia who was under him, and the boy tensed his face up and squirmed out of Adisa’s grip. Behind them, Paulo had his back against the floor while he wheezed trying to get his breath back from Afia’s liver punch. Adisa stepped down to the floor and moved past Afia,

hurrying to Paulo's side. He hauled the boy to his feet, then jabbed a finger at him, then at the soldiers lining the room.

"You—and the rest of you unhelpful motherfuckers *take a walk*!"

Paulo shook his head looking back at Afia and then was the first to get to the front door. The rest of the soldiers who walked out looked behind them and saw Adisa and Afia who were staring each other down with Adisa shouting to him, "Put that gun down on my island and then me and you need to talk!"

With their eyes still on each other, Afia while breathing like a pig put his pistol down and tried his best to cover his thirst for blood towards Adisa. Even if he hid it well, his vengeance was visible as ever to Adisa as one of his soldiers now obviously wanted him dead.

Afia broke the silence by saying loudly, "Why didn't my men get any help? Our group of seventeen was shot down to five! The sounds of the helicopter should have brang Utopians to help us!"

"You think I don't have enough to deal with Afia? Not a soul I know of heard of this battle and if they did there woulda been help! Simple as that," Adisa returned.

Adisa's finger pointed to the ground in a clear show of anger and almost parental dominance.

Afia asked himself, "Why the hell am I even talking to you, Adisa?"

Silence filled the room for a brief moment then Afia continued, "I told Paulo I would fight until you came back, then I would leave this hell for a better life!"

Adisa madly smirked, then Afia reached to his left to grab his gun peacefully so he could leave the room. Once Afia's hands had gone up, he looked at Adisa and still reached for the gun but knew that he had made the wrong move.

His leader with wide eyes held a now fired pistol with smoke rushing out of his barrel. Afia's fate was sealed the moment he told Adisa he was leaving Utopia. Adisa's pride would never let him walk away–not without consequence.

The boy with a hole in his palm, grabbed his left hand as blood dripped quickly down to the floor as if it needed to leave his body. He screamed and even through all the teeth gritting pain and fast heart beating, Afia slowly threw up both of his hands and shouted, "I don't want to kill anyone else… Just let me leave!"

Adisa loved the blood that made it to his floor and shook his head while showing his teeth.

"Get in my car," Adisa ordered quietly.

Afia's pleading face looked towards the ground and then he leapt at Adisa who then opened fire on him again right at his stomach.

This pain was different from the pain of his hand, and it made him drop to the red floor and squirm in agony. With no control or fight, Adisa loomed over Afia and tugged on his enemy's shirt till he was dragged out of his house.

A trail of thick blood was led all the way to Adisa's passenger seat, where Adisa placed the limp boy as he bled out. Afia went in between states of blackness and slow breathing as his own blood began to become commonplace in his lungs. He opened his eyes again to reveal Adisa driving in Utopia's crowded city streets where no one batted an eye at either of them surprisingly until a single little girl stared right at Afia. Once the little girl in a blue and white shirt stared at him, his vision went out again as it became easier to fall asleep than to fight the pain of being alive.

One last time, his eyes were opened as his head leaned against the beige space between the passenger window and the backseat window. He didn't move his head and looked in the side mirror of the car to see Utopia's gates behind him and forest grazing next to the car.

Still within view of Utopia, Adisa pulled over onto a muddy semicircle shoulder where his car settled like it belonged there. Afia opened his eyes just in time to see Adisa rounding the front of the vehicle, staring directly into him.

He blinked, just as the passenger door beside him flung open then his body spilled out of the door like a ragdoll, hitting the earth with a long exhale. A gust of wind escaped from his lungs as Adisa stood over him, laughing.

That eerie smile on Adisa was something truly sickening.

Adisa gripped the boy's shirt, yanked hard, and dragged him into the forest. Pebbles, roots, and earth jabbed at Afia's spine, but the pain in his stomach was too loud to let the rest register.

They stopped once deep enough.

Afia looked up and saw Adisa on top of him, his worst enemy and his once brother.

Adisa stared down, and his gaze locked onto Afia's torn white polo, now soaked red on one side.

"I wouldn't put you out of your misery for a million dollars," Adisa said, voice low and full of hate.

"You're going to rot slowly outside the walls of Utopia. You don't deserve to die in her arms."

Afia found the last of his air, gritting a wordless grunt through his teeth. Adisa only smiled, taking pleasure in the pain.

Then the pain began to dull, Afia's face stilled, and his body quieted.

With no reaction left to feed on, Adisa stepped back and turned away from his once closest friend that he now didn't care one cent for.

Afia heard the tires crunching in the dirt, then in his ears came nothing but the wind. For the first time, the sleep felt like relief, and he could feel himself slipping toward the end.

And it was peaceful.

Not a thought showed itself behind Afia's eyes and he surely thought that his time had come until the sound of footing through dirt made it clear that maybe Adisa was on his way back to finish the job.

An unfamiliar voice beside him spoke, "Who is this one?"

Afia's forearm was clenched in the grip of an unknown man who began dragging him through the thick, sedge-choked forest. Dazed but conscious, Afia let his eyes open slightly. A harsh vignette darkened his vision, but he could still make out the figure and it clearly wasn't Adisa.

This silhouette was broader, clad in shadows with a black military helmet catching bits of broken light.

Before Afia could process anything more, a flat and cold metal pressed against his skin wrapping around his arms, locking tight. The sensation jolted his nerves awake.

Then came a shout.

"Drive!"

Afia's pained curiosity had peaked so he opened his eyes again to reveal the man kneeling and silently staring at him while he was surrounded by a bleak van's hard interior. The presence of another person came from behind Afia's head and the person spoke, "We'll give him this."

Words of the second unknown man went into Afia's ear but did not entirely form. Right after, A sharp small pain went into the prisoner of war's shoulder that he ignored as it was nothing compared to the pain, he

felt in his stomach that gushed warm blood. More words were exchanged with voices speaking over each other, fragments that Afia only half acknowledged. For a moment, they made sense, then, suddenly, they didn't.

The voices dissolved into gibberish, warped and distant, as a heavy heat bloomed inside his head. His thoughts went fuzzy, and his vision blurred, then the pain went silent.

An hour and a half had ticked by on a loud ticking clock in Afia's newfound room. Afia awoke to the sound of the ticking clock, but he didn't bat an eye at it. He was sitting almost upright, and he looked at his two feet that sticked up from the thin white blanket he was covered by. Through his blurry sight that he tried to recollect he looked at the uneven orange stone walls that closely surrounded him. The walls felt like something out of a dream and were almost homelike to the child. To the right of Afia, an opened window situated itself right in the middle of the long wall, where birds outside signed like it was their passion. A coat hanger stood next to the window that had what looked like a large trench coat that Afia squinted at because he truly couldn't tell what it was through his tainted vision. Afia returned his view to his bed and tried to lift his left arm a tad bit and was stopped by the metal chains holding him to the bed. With his other arm unrestrained, he lifted his bandaged right hand and realized that he couldn't move his fingers even if he tried. Even if his fingers were unusable, he slid his stiff hand under the sheets he was covered in and lifted them slowly to reveal a stained gown over his stomach with no more blood rushing out of himself. The blue coverings alerted the boy that he was now in a hospital which he had already guessed but, he now wondered if he was in a Utopian hospital or not.

Afia's attention was quickly diverted to the wooden door of the room that opened and through the uneven glass of the door he saw the faint silhouette of a soldier leaving his room. The door shut and he realized that the coat hanger was not in the room anymore which made him feel stupid as all along it was a soldier in all black in the corner of the room guarding him.

Afia directed his attention back to his wounds, and he pulled up his gown to reveal his upper stomach had been completely wrapped around

with bandages. He exhaled and put his garment back over his uncovered self, then he closed his eyes.

Afia yanked at his left arm with a grunt, hoping the chains would snap and set him free, but they held firm.

Frustrated and confused, he let his anger settle and his head go back. His breathing slowed as he turned his gaze to the small window to his right.

Through the narrow pane, a gray sky stretched overhead, muted and endless. At the bottom edge of the frame, barely visible, were two gray hangars in the distance. His vision, still foggy, slowly began to clear.

There was only ever one hangar in Utopia, a crumbling relic on an old airstrip, now a dump where the homeless lingered.

Wherever this place was, it wasn't Utopia and Afia only had one other guess.

The chipped golden knob of the room's door twisted and from it appeared a proper looking man who wore a black suit. He had a gray beard and a blank face that was directed straight at Afia.

"Afia… Afia… Afia."

The boy squeezed his eyes together and said, "Who are you?"

Loud off-putting laughs from the man filled the room that appeared out of nowhere from his blank face, then he said, "You don't remember me, Afia? I am Samir Moses… President of South Sudan, the man who saved your life after you rammed through my city's gates?"

Afia was taken back at this comment as this was something too brash for him to do and he truly did not remember this event. Samir looked at Afia who was laid down and recognized quickly that the boy truly was confused and did not know what he was talking about.

"God you really were that drunk, you stupid kid… You told me in exchange for your life that you would kill Adisa! You even told me his plans and exploits."

Slight memories made themselves apparent to Afia, some of which made him remember drunkenly speaking to this bearded man and guns being pointed at him. In a brief flash he even reheard the sounds of metal breaking and his car being crashed against a tree.

Samir gently took a few steps closer to the boy and quietly said, "You even told me that Adisa killed someone you knew… Mosi, you said."

Afia cracked his neck at Samir and felt remorse at how stupid he felt for doing something that dumb. He was not the type of kid to do such a thing.

He quickly exclaimed, “You got the wrong guy! I don’t have a clue what you're talking about.”

Samir kneeled next to the bed and uncuffed the boy’s wrist from the bed then said, “Throw on your clothes and then meet me outside the door.”

Afia’s breathing grew shallow as the man turned his back and walked out. He didn’t need confirmation, he *knew* this was the leader of Ibis, and he knew he’d messed up beyond repair. Whatever promises had been made, there was no escaping this.

He glanced at his clothes but didn’t bother to touch them. Instead, he forced himself upright, the motion hitting him like a blow to the gut. Gritting his teeth, he limped across the room.

At the first story window, he eased himself onto the ledge. One leg, then the other until his feet touched the damp earth outside the small brick hospital. He paused, scanning the empty lot. The clouds hung low, threatening rain, and the silence felt too perfect.

Afia turned right, toward the back of the hospital where cars were parked, hugging the wall in a desperate attempt to stay unseen.

But it was useless.

From the direction of the window, a voice shouted, “Hey!”

The sound of a bullet traveling went right over the lucky boy’s head then he hit the corner of the stone hospital with his head turned away from where he was going. Where one soldier stood to Afia’s left, another lingered on his right on a smoke break, half-watching the world drift by.

He caught sight of the limping boy just as Afia turned his head, unaware. Without warning, the soldier stepped forward and landed a sucker punch square on Afia’s chin.

The angle was brutal, his head twisted with one leg up as he ran. Afia dropped, limp, hitting the patchy asphalt with a dull thud.

His world went black.

Warm yellow walls all around himself were the first thing that Afia saw when his pupils unblurred. An old film camera on a tripod with two men at the sides of it were the only things in front of Afia, with one of the men being recognizable as Samir and the other remaining unknown.

“He’s up,” a voice said from behind the boy.

Afia tried to get a look at the soldier behind him, so he turned his head to his left only to be met with the barrel of a gun pointed only an inch away from his head. He looked away from it, not giving a reaction but being distressed, then he turned his head to his right and saw another gun barrel. His eyes now stared at his lap where no hands whereas they were tied over each other with a prickly rope on his metal chairs back.

Both men standing before Afia wore sour expressions, Samir’s was controlled, and almost uncaring but the other man’s face was twisted with pure hatred. He stood to the right of the video camera, half-shadowed, but even in the dim light, Afia could see the fury radiating from the man dressed in all white.

Afia tried to think on who the man was, and it finally took him back to the night before in battle where he was the last man that he shot. This is when Afia had a feeling this would be the last room, he would ever step in. He had messed up too much for forgiveness with Ibis.

David glared at the child, his arms tightly crossed, the absence of his black aviators revealing a bitterness etched deep in his eyes. In the dim corner of the room, he locked gazes with Afia where confusion was painted across the boy’s face, while hatred radiated from David.

A flash of last night's chaos surged through the general’s mind, memories of agony and rage swelling into a tumultuous tide. He was battered and bruised, screaming for Afia’s death as he was being bandaged up from his bullet wound. It wasn't until he returned home that his despair truly crashed upon him.

Standing at the door, his wife was awake long before dawn, eyes wide as she knew Chrisopher was gone, and she could feel it. The absence of Christopher was a wound too fresh, and as she fell to the floor in tears, David’s attempt to comfort her was met with a violent rejection. “Never come near me again,” she spat, and in that moment, the rift between them widened, leaving David standing alone in the shadows of his choices.

David mentally returned to the underground room where Afia sat and clenched his jaw and fists while he noticed he was still staring at the boy even through recollection of his worst memory. His wife’s screams, even though they were memories, sounded and felt as real as if it happened right in the moment.

Samir took one step towards the camera and clicked a button on it which made its film reel begin to turn and make an activating noise. Right when the President knew Afia was being recorded, he joked, “Not the best runaway I've seen. In a hospital gown Afia? Where were you going to go?”

Afia didn’t answer of course, then he earnestly said, “What do you want, Samir?”

The captor in this situation made sure to stay out of the camera, but he got closer to Afia and then said, “If you want to make it out of these walls alive, I need you to tell this camera everything that you told me only a couple nights ago. After you do this, I will send you on a plane to wherever the hell you want to start over.”

Being as hopeless as ever, Afia thought for a second and then shook his head at Samir in obedience, cleared his throat and then looked into the camera and said, “Adisa has been my leader since the first days of Utopian revolution, and he has fallen from his promises and grace. I left his rule after he murdered my cousin who stole drugs and tried to sell them. He only did this because Adisa has done the same thing since Utopia has started and those drugs were Adisa’s own!”

The boy felt himself getting emotional and stopped as the pain from Mosi passing had been too much to take on for him. He still regrets listening to the boy’s pleas of wanting to ride with Adisa.

Samir opened his mouth and said, “What else? You had more to say Last time,” Samir spoke, trying to push Afia to release more.

From the big man’s lips, he whispered, “The Spirit,” while over exaggerating his lips and hands.

The devil in the van speaking to Adisa popped into Afia’s mind again, with him feeling extremely unsettled as it was a memory he tried to cram away.

Disgracefully, Afia looked back up at the camera and stuttered, “The Devil…”

He regained himself and then said, “The Devil is Adisa’s closest friend. That is why he has the power he has. I saw the spirit with my own two eyes. Adisa walks with him, and the devil uses Adisa’s hand to do his work, and it will lead all of Utopia to hell!”

A tear made itself clear on Afia’s face as it ran down his cheek, but the boy was not crying. The tear showed itself without control, as if even speaking of what he saw tipped the boy to his edge.

The film was still running capturing Afia's dismay and all Samir said was, "Good."

The room was filled with silence, with the Film being the only thing that made noise. Samir and the soldiers behind Afia stared at each other as if they were waiting for something and Afia wondered why guns were still pointed at him. David was staring at the ground and Samir coughed to get his general's attention, which surprisingly worked. Afia noticed that when David looked up like a distressed and cornered animal right at him, the two soldiers at his sides put their rifles down.

David opened his mouth, eyes locked on the boy, but no words came. He didn't want to speak to him, and he didn't even want to waste a breath. All he wanted was to kill him, and the fact that he had to stall, to speak, only made his blood boil hotter.

He took a few short steps toward Afia and extended his hand. Just within the frame of the camera, between his fingers, he held a small white square. He stopped right in front of Afia's face and from Afia's view, it was a Polaroid. In it was a smiling boy who looked just a bit younger than him. Clutched between the boy's hands was a cracked soccer ball, the kind that had clearly seen countless games and days in the dust.

For some reason, Afia couldn't look the boy in the eyes. Every time he glanced near them, his chest tightened. His gaze darted around the photo, searching for anything else, until finally, his eyes locked with the boy's.

At that moment, he remembered them as the same eyes he had seen the night before, staring back at him from beneath a white helmet, just before he pulled the trigger.

David gulped as he looked down at the boy. He knew that Afia recognized his son, and he was in anguish.

The father's voice was barely more than a breath, but he forced it out. "Do you know this boy?"

Afia slowly lifted his head to meet David's gaze, but the man holding the Polaroid couldn't hear him as he was drowning in the memory of his wife's grief, the sounds of her sorrow echoing through his mind.

"No," Afia muttered, the lie heavy on his tongue as he stared into the eyes of the grieving father he had created.

Silence fell like a blanket, thick and suffocating. After what felt like hours, Afia spoke again, more firmly this time, "I don't know him."

A tear slipped from David's eye. He wiped it away with the same hand that held the Polaroid. Without a word, he slipped the photo into his pocket, then stood motionless, eyes still locked on the boy before him.

"His name was Christopher," David whispered.

Where the photo had once hovered now stood a dark pistol. Afia didn't say a word. He couldn't as he was shocked to his core.

Without hesitation, David pulled the trigger and the boy's features collapsed inward, and blood sprayed across the tan walls behind him.

Samir shut off the camera and looked at David, who now stood with the pistol lowered.

Soundless lament made itself all too familiar in the room.

-Chapter XXXX-

Sunset was barely visible through the clouds that built themselves around Adisa's home as the orange light it gave to the earth tried its best to make it through thick gray clouds but failed. A day of no fighting led Adisa to plunge into hours of drinking while his closest soldiers and women accompanied him. Earlier in the day, after Adisa dumped Afia's body, Paulo and his leader drove the town and ended up picking up two girls who were a little older than them. Now all four of them were sitting around a small fire on Adisa's patio, while the two boys told intoxicated war stories that the girls did not want to hear. Adisa of course told most of the stories and grabbed the girl's attention more than Paulo as the girls were not there for one of Adisa's goons. All four of them passed around a bottle of whiskey and danced around the fire with their silhouettes against the sky that was half gray and half orange.

As the orange in the sky surrendered to the grim gray overhead, the two girls hoisted up Adisa, who was so drunk he could barely stand. Slurring and stumbling, he weakly gestured and mumbled directions, leading them, more or less, towards his room.

Paulo followed only into the kitchen while pestering the girls about being teases and finishing the bottle by himself. After enough stumbling to finally reach Adisa's room, the two girls tossed the drunken boy onto his bed. He was already asleep when he bounced on the bed, just as he had been the whole way while the girls dragged him down the hall.

The two girls hit and nudged Adisa endlessly, but he was completely blacked out, but the girls continued to lightly smack him for fun. Playful hitting became old quick so the girls resorted to looting Adisa's nightstands and taking as much cash as they could find and putting it into both of their small purses. Even if they could have left at that moment successfully, the

girls fell asleep on both of Adisa's sides while cracking fun at the boy before they finally rested.

Even through the most concrete of drunken slumber, Adisa was awoken by his own legs shaking him awake and rain pouring outside of his open window that had let water drops invade his room. He lifted his torso up and his vision ran around the room uncontrollably, while his stomach begged him to throw up. Even if his vision was moving and unclear, he noticed outside of his open window a moving figure in the rain that took long steps. Without question, Adisa drunkenly crawled over the wooden foot of his bed and fell onto the floor. He didn't feel the pain from landing harshly on his right arm through the adrenaline rush and hardness from whiskey. Adisa got up just so he was out of view of the opening and looked at his nightstand tops for his pistol but realized that it was not in the room but instead on the kitchen Island where he had placed it.

Now looking over the bottom of his window, mouth breathing heavily, Adisa looked at the night's moving rain and noticed a clear pair of eyes staring into his room through the darkness. Being drunk and out of his mind, Adisa without giving any thought jumped over his window and took a few muddy steps towards the eyes with his left shoulder leading the way in case he had to throw a long right hook.

He shouted slowly, "Hey! Are you a soldier?"

Adisa's words barely were loud enough to advance over the booming rain and the man did not show the pink inside of his mouth and remained untelling.

A strong gust of wind came from Adisa's right and almost knocked the small boy over who could barely stand normal in the first place. When Adisa moved his head back to normal after the flurry of water, he realized that the stalking man had now moved closer. With wide red eyes, the man who moved closer to Adisa revealed his identity with his unique single arm. In the only hand of the man held a small knife that was illuminated by peeking stars. The knife of the man looked like a child's first knife, with a red plastic grip that the man used his fingers to scratch on through his anxious excitement.

Even if the silver blade stuck out like a sore thumb, Adisa did not notice it one bit until the spiteful and disabled man held it in the air while screaming. While the man ran towards Adisa, the boy didn't move an inch or let anything come out of his mouth, even when the blade made it right

above his left collarbone. Both Adisa and his old victim were almost face to face, as Adisa was shorter than the man, but they still looked into each other's outspread eyes. Rain rushed down both of their faces and the man that attacked Adisa waited for a reaction as that was all he wanted.

Adisa's reaction came late, his clenched teeth made that clear. He shoved at the man, struggling to get him off, until he finally overpowered the unbalanced attacker and pushed him away.

The knife was still lodged in Adisa's side, but he knew he couldn't afford to pull it out as he would bleed heavily. His eyes darted across the green earth, searching for a better weapon.

Before he could lift his gaze, the man's only fist crashed into his face, nearly knocking him off his feet. Adisa staggered back, rage bubbling now. He really wanted to kill this man.

His eyes dropped to the blade buried in his side. He considered pulling it, but something else caught his attention, a rock lying just ahead. He stepped back, grabbed it quickly, and it fit his palm perfectly, like it had been waiting for him.

The attacker lunged, desperate and sloppy, swinging his fist wildly. He missed, stumbling forward, his arm low and his body bent.

Adisa didn't hesitate to bring the rock down, crashing down onto the side of the man's head, landing square on the jaw. A sharp jolt ran up Adisa's arm, and the sickening pop of bone echoed in his ears as the man's jaw dislocated. The attacker dropped to the mud instantly.

"Ah… Ah."

The man grunted towards the ground and sounded like he was toothless while he tried his best to talk without his moving lower jaw. Adisa laughed at the man's pain and then lowered his body down and hit the man on the back of the head with the rock. This second blow left a crater that filled with blood on the back of the man's patchy head and the man went still as the rock Adisa held. The boy's laughter faded, swallowed by the sight of blood soaking into the dirt. As it mingled with the earth, so too did the weight of what he'd done settle in. Something about this act made it to where Adisa couldn't take pride in his actions for once and almost made the boy disturbed.

Adisa gave that seed of remorse no space to grow. He let the rock slip from his hand, watching it roll back to the ground like it was returning home.

Something about this fight felt different than anyone else Adisa had killed, but Adisa could not truly see that at the moment.

With a knife still comfortably lodged in his own skin, Adisa crawled back into his home and rested between the two unfamiliar girls while blood rolled off his body and got comfortable with his white sheets.

Water ran down the bones of dead cattle, where no meat remained as crows' stomachs became bountiful from the dead animals' tithings. Abel watched the bones that did not move anymore and thought about the failed ranch he was given from his late uncle who he held so dear. He tucked himself to bed in his lonely house and as soon as he shut his eyes, the ring of a phone came from his floor. The boy stumbled out of bed in his underwear and tried quickly to retrieve the phone that was deep inside his pants pocket. He read the only name that it could be on the phone and answered the call with Samir surprisingly speaking the first words.

"Abel!"

The boy looked around his room and then said, "Yes?"

Samir urged, "Tonight I have proof. It should be getting delivered to the bar as we speak. You will need to set up the projector at Utopia's center and use it to show the people what Adisa has been up to."

The phone call ended, not making much of a conversation as Abel only spoke a single word.

Abel, even if he was comfortable in bed, threw back on his clothes and ran into the city, his shoes being flooded with dirty water after running through puddles but not caring. Raindrops the size of cocoa nuts splashed all over Abel making him sopping wet from head to toe, but the boy ran so fast that he thought he could dry himself from speed.

Abel made it to the empty bar and slowed down then he walked under the nylon overcovering that swung around from the wind and looked around the tables of the bar to see no box. The boy looked behind the bar where the trapdoor was and noticed a large wooden box that he questioned how it got there. It was known to Abel that Utopia had been infiltrated multiple times as he constantly got boxes of arms from sources unknown. Without looking at the contents of it, Abel still knew exactly what was in the box, so he opened the rusty trap door and carefully pushed the box down the corridor for later use.

Abel ran through the city streets, going from one ally's house to the next, knocking on doors and urging them all to meet at the bar as soon as possible.

Just thirty minutes later, he stood in the bar's basement, practically buzzing with excitement. Before him, every member of the A.U.C. stood drenched in sweat and rain, looking exhausted but still present.

"I come bearing the best of news," Abel boomed.

The people in the small crowd were awoken by Abel's uproarious words and glued their eyes to the boy. With the crate directly in front of him, Abel slid his blade under the lid and pried it open, repositioning the knife as needed to lift each nail with care. The group watched in silence as the box gradually revealed its contents.

The first item he pulled out was an old-world film projector, its two film reels still attached, dusty but intact.

Next came a folded white tarp, and taped onto it with Scotch tape were a black-handled hammer and a small strip of nails. Abel slapped the tarp down beside the projector with a heavy thud, then reached back into the crate.

At the very bottom, he found thirty black cloth masks. Without a word, Abel began tossing them out into the crowd.

Everything was now pulled out and Abel with a stony face shouted, "Tonight we have proof of Adisa's crimes! I need all of us to be armed with guns and to wear these masks as we wake our people up with this film and end this war!"

Abel hit the projector in shaken anxious excitement then he spoke again, "I need a squad to put this tarp and projector at Adisa's speaking stand. Then I need the rest of us to wake every citizen in Utopia up and act as if we are preparing for Adisa to speak."

Everyone in the room now felt it, that same reckless feeling, the kind that could get them all killed and yet, not one of them flinched.

Abel stood before them, speaking without restraint, his voice trembling with a frisson he could barely contain.

With masks now on, everyone in the room reached for the pistols and rifles Samir had supplied them with long ago. The quiet hum of purpose filled the air as each weapon was claimed with no hesitation and no turning back.

Two parties split up, one spreading the word, and the others setting it up.

The doors were hit like the soldiers usually did and no questions were asked. Utopian citizens, like the herd they were, moved in unison. Even in the rain, they walked toward the city square, gathering in silence, all waiting for their leader.

No citizen in the history of Utopia had objected to going to see one of Adisa's speeches but people could easily guess what would happen if they did.

Not a single Utopian soldier was visible on the streets, every last one of them was holed up at Adisa's or Rakeem's house, doing what they did best by drinking.

By the time the citizens began to gather, the white screen was already strung up between two wooden pillars. The projector, however, was still being tinkered with, struggling to stay dry in the downpour. Despite the freezing cold and the relentless rain pouring down like a jungle storm, the rebels setting up the projector didn't hesitate to strip off their clothes, draping them over the device to protect it from the elements.

The first hundred people were out in front of the empty speaking stand and people started to ask the pretending soldiers, "Where is Adisa!"

Atem, who stood in front of the crowd responded, "Adisa is on his way, this is urgent!"

Those whose doors had been slammed shut didn't hesitate, they went straight to family and friends, knocking on their doors and spreading the word. The A.U.C. had barely to lift a finger, as the people did the work for them.

Before long, it was clear that every citizen of Utopia had gathered. There were no more houses to knock on and no more people to round up. Even through the dark, relentless rain, the mass of bodies was so large it could be seen from a mile away.

Abel cut through the side of the crowd, moving toward the front. He stood tall, his voice booming to his people, "Start the film!"

The warm film began to be shown, and every citizen's eyes were glued to the boy in a hospital gown on the big screen and what he said. On Adisa's speakers that were usually reserved for his tongue, Afia spoke, and the words became very clear to the crowd.

The crowd was so absorbed in the moment that none of them noticed the masked A.U.C. members slipping away. They knew time was running out and that soldiers would be flooding the square soon, searching for anyone responsible for what was unfolding.

Unlike the usual violent and noisy crowd, this time around the people were silent and attentive like they were in school listening to a teacher.

All at once, a wave of wrath swept over the crowd, a feeling that seemed to rise from nowhere, yet matched the exact moment Adisa killed the intruder with a rock.

Though no one witnessed the murder, when it happened, something inside the people shifted. The love they had once held for Adisa vanished, replaced by an insatiable thirst for revenge.

Even before the boy's death was revealed to the crowd, his final words ignited something. The murmurs began, growing louder, until they turned into shouts calling for Adisa's fall.

Only one soldier patrolled Utopia, clearly not doing his job well as he sat in one of Rakeem's old cars next to a dock on the Nile and smoked inside the car. The child got to the brown end of the cigarette and rolled his window down to throw it out into the rain but as soon as the window let the cold outside air into his car, he heard the shouts of a crowd that he thought was just his mind or just the rain making odd noises. He kept the window down even as rain hit his face, but he truly wanted to know if this noise that sounded like one of Adisa's crowds was real or not. The strange noises continued on, so the soldier decided to roll his window up and drive into the city to see if what he was hearing was real or not.

He turned the corner of a building after not driving for long and instantly noticed the giant crowd that had formed, but Adisa was nowhere to be found. This prompted the soldier to drive to the front of the crowd quickly while radioing in, "We got a crowd at the city square!"

He reached for his AK in the passenger seat of the car and then exited the vehicle. The people on the right side of the crowd turned their eyes toward him, hurling curses and trying to break through the barrier that separated the peasants from the higher-ups. Remaining unbothered, the soldier fixed his focus on the screen, unaware of the hatred that was slowly growing for anyone like him.

Just as his gaze lifted to the screen, it happened.

He watched in horror as Afia's head was blown off, the gruesome image playing out in front of all of Utopia.

It was then that the soldier realized something had gone horribly wrong. Panic gripped him, and without thinking, he ran toward the light source, kicking the projector over into the mud. The film reel spun and twisted violently, spiraling out of control.

Paranoid, the soldier instinctively pointed his gun at the crowd, the cold metal offering him a false sense of security. He pointed it at the crowd, who continued to snarl at him like rabid animals, their teeth bared in an unrestrained fury.

Through the rain he shouted, "Which one of you did this!"

None of the citizens responded with an answer as they weren't even paying attention to who started the film. Citizens began to pile over to the soldier over the barrier and he could tell they weren't coming near him to show admiration or give an answer.

The soldier lifted his gun quickly at the five men that approached him and yelled, "Stay back!"

With his rifle in his right hand, he used his now free hand to reach for his blocky radio on his hip. He put the radio to his mouth and all he spoke out was, "They're!" before one of the men lunged at him which resulted in the soldier firing right over a crowd-goers head.

Another man got closer to the soldier and pushed the child down which resulted in the soldier dropping his AK and picking himself out of the mud to run away towards Adisa's compound. Many more of the crowd broke through the barrier and the man who pushed the soldier picked up his dirtied AK and raised it into the air and shouted, "To Adisa!"

Violent shouts from all of the crowd agreed with him.

-Chapter XXXXI-

Paulo crashed through Adisa's bedroom doors and screamed, "Adisa get up now!"

The sudden noise jolted all three of them awake. Their eyes scrambled to the window, realizing it was still dark outside and none of them were happy about it.

Paulo's screams shattered the quiet as he clicked on Adisa's lamp. The light flickered to life, but it wasn't the brightness that fully roused Adisa. It was the girls' screams, piercing the silence, that cut through him.

Their eyes locked on the bed they slept on, where their clothes and the sheets were soaked in still-wet blood coming from Adisa.

Adisa bolted up and noticed that the blood was coming from the knife that was in his shoulder, that is when he realized the drunken mistake he made not too long ago was not a dream but instead a reality.

The two girls were now out of bed jumping up and down while still screaming like banshees. Through all the screaming, Paulo clearly noticed the immense blood and asked, "What has happened?"

Even if a question had been asked, the girls didn't stop screaming. Their shrill cries pierced through his thoughts, and his ears rang with the weight of the grave mistake he had made.

He stared blankly at nothing, frozen for a moment, before anger exploded inside him. With a sharp growl, he turned to both sides of his bed and shouted, "Shut up!"

In an instant, both girls went dead silent while still looking down and breathing heavily at their bodies bloodied state.

Adisa put his feet onto the ground off his bed and in annoyance pulled the knife out from his body which let more pain and blood rush over his body. The girls gasped when the knife hit the ground after it was dropped, then Adisa who barely could stand from the shock walked over to his window and stared at the body he had created as it laid in the rain.

In that instant, Adisa knew he had made the greatest mistake of his life. The spirit that had once filled him with power was likely gone forever.

He wiped his face with both dry hands, his fingers dragging over his skin, as if trying to erase the weight of his own actions. His hand ran through his short hair, and then, unable to contain it any longer, he snapped.

"Fuck," he shouted, the word sharp and desperate.

He turned around to see all three of the people in his room staring at him like he had grown hair on his back and become a beast.

"That stupid armless fuck is dead outside my window! I need him cleaned up…"

Paulo put his hand up to Adisa like his leader was a lion that he was trying to calm down and spoke, "Listen I got soldiers already coming in from Rakeem's, but we have bigger things to deal with Adisa…"

The weight of stress and blood loss bore down on Adisa, his eyelids growing heavy as the world around him blurred. He teetered on the edge of unconsciousness but managed to steady himself, pressing his palms against the windowsill to hold himself up.

The two girls yelped once more, panic rising in their voices. Paulo, desperate to help his struggling leader, reached out to him, but Adisa swatted him away.

Adisa uncomfortably sat and then through his teeth said while looking up at his crony, "What other *things* Paulo?"

At this point Paulo felt scared to tell his leader of what was going on outside because of Adisa's already distressed composition but nonetheless spoke as he had to.

"We got a crowd at the front gates of this compound Adisa. It's the people they're angry. Afia worked with Ibis and sold us out and now they know of our secret!"

Adisa slowly looked up at Paulo with a straight face, then he gave the same look to the girls, and he harshly said, "Let me get dressed and I'll be out…"

He stopped and then loudly continued, "But in the meantime, Everybody out!"

Paulo was the first to leave the room, stepping into the hallway with a quick, tense motion. The girls followed shortly after, their footsteps hesitant but steady, leaving Adisa alone with the weight of his thoughts.

The leader of Utopia put his head into his hands and without proof he knew that Paulo was right and that this was the fall back for what he had done to the one-armed man.

While he put his clothes on, he talked to himself, with him saying, "How could you be this stupid? Why did you leave Afia?"

The ego filled leader of Utopia knew that he shouldn't have let the boy suffer and that he should have just put him down.

When Adisa returned to Utopia, he had thought that nothing could be worse than the torment he had already endured. Just as quickly as he

settled back into his normalcy, things took a turn for the worse as one of his closest soldiers betrayed him.

He forced himself to push the thought of the damned child out of his mind as it was better that way.

After throwing on his pants, Adisa stared into nothing for a second and then felt the strong urge to slap himself on the side of his head. He began to breathe heavily and then his attention was directed to his window as a lightning bolt nearby struck splittingly. It struck Adisa with fear, then he looked to his bed to reveal at the foot of it stood Satan. The being stood balefully in front of the bed and even with no eyes Adisa felt that he was staring at him.

It didn't speak, prompting Adisa to back up in fear, not knowing if his master would reprimand him.

"**You had one simple rule, Adisa. *Only one*!"**

More lightning struck outside this time being even louder than before.

"**From now on you are without my aid and are left alone to rule over the bits and pieces that will be left of Utopia. It would have been so easy me and you. But in the end, you couldn't listen. *I always have a plan, and you couldn't see it!* The people never loved you; they loved me as I worked through you!"**

Again, lightning flooded the ears of Adisa being so loud that he now covered his ears and shut his eyes to end the pain.

Adisa slowly opened his eyes and gazed out the window, realizing the rain had instantly stopped. Before he could process it, his body betrayed him. Weakness washed over him, and he collapsed to the floor, his body hitting the hardwood with a thud.

Fear consumed him as he lay motionless, unable to move. Across from him, the Devil stood, watching with an eerie stillness. Their eyes locked, two souls meeting in a silent standoff.

The convoy of child soldiers drove up the steep road to Adisa's house, each of them fully aware of the drug dealing that had been happening under Utopian noses. At the bottom of the hill, even through the thick night, they saw the massive crowd of Utopians gathered. The citizens appeared unarmed, but their vengeful energy was unmistakable.

Honks and shouts sliced through the night as the soldiers demanded the crowd move out of the way. In response, the citizens retaliated, hurling handfuls of mud and wet dirt at the vehicles, slamming their fists against the cars, and shouting curses at the soldiers.

The soldiers, growing increasingly disgruntled, reacted by hanging out of their windows and pointing rifles at the civilians, their voices loud and threatening.

In the chaos, something unexpected happened. Boys in the convoy, those who had fought alongside the citizens just hours before, aimed their weapons at the very soldiers who had once been their comrades. The shift in tension was instant.

As soon as weapons were drawn, the citizens fell silent, their aggression fading in the face of the real possibility of death. They knew, all too well, that if they didn't back down, they'd be shot.

Despite their anger, the crowd pressed forward, unarmed. They had weapons supplied by Adisa for the war, but they knew better than to carry them now as holding arms would be a clear invitation for violence.

All of the convoy made it to Adisa's gate, and they shouted to be let in by the secure soldiers who were already inside of Adisa's compound. The soldiers still pointed their rifles at people and while the gate was slowly opened at the front of the crowd the civilian who took one of Adisa's soldiers' rifles, upped the gun towards the back of an open soldier and prepared to fire. People around him of course noticed this and his fellow citizens egged him to shoot and watched in happiness as the man said he would.

The man of course being over twenty and in great physical shape fought with Adisa's men in a few battles that had occurred in the war with Ibis, but after seeing what he saw on the projector he had regretted the lives he took.

He said quietly but aggressively, "They'll pay!"

With his finger on the trigger, his sight picture became filled with an elderly man who looked right down the barrel. The old man wrapped his boney fingers around the barrel and adjusted it towards himself.

The young man then shouted, "Move!"

Ordering shouts from the bloodthirsty man didn't affect the old man who kept a tight grip on the barrel even as the soldier shook it around. At last, the boy yanked as hard as he could on the barrel, wrenching it from the

elder's hands. In one swift motion, he aimed the rifle right over the old man's shoulder, his finger hovering near the trigger.

The gate had fully opened, and the convoy of cars began to pour into Adisa's compound. The man lined up the exposed boy in his sights, preparing to take the shot.

The old man, steady despite the tension, slowly lowered the barrel again. He met the man's gaze, his voice calm but firm.

"If you kill one of them, you kill all of us."

The words struck the boy like a blow and his face went blank, and for a long moment, he just stared at the rifle. Finally, he lowered it. The old man's words rang true.

Instead of slamming through the master bedroom doors, this time Paulo slowly opened them while saying, "Adisa?"

It had been a good while since him and the girls left the room, and Paulo was honestly scared to intrude on his leader.

After saying Adisa's name, Paulo peeked his head around the door to see if the coast was clear. With his first aid kit in his hand, No one entered his vision, and he guessed that Adisa was in the bathroom, but when he looked to the floor that is when he saw his leader. Adisa laid still on the floor looking as if he had seen a ghost while he blindly stared at his bed's foot. Paulo rushed over to him and picked his leader up and dropped the first aid kit on the ground for Adisa. He held his leader's upper body up and wondered if his best friend was dead.

Adisa moved his eyes around a little bit and confirmed that his heart was still beating. Paulo let out a sigh of relief and opened the blue plastic box up with his free hand and then began to wrap Adisa's wound up with gauze to stop the bleeding. While Paulo moved the bandages in a circle around Adisa's wound, he said, "The soldiers have made it to push off the crowd, but they still want you…"

Adisa began to slightly cough, then he said, "I know."

Just as Paulo finished tending to Adisa, an excruciating pain shot through Adisa's stomach, seizing him with a force so sharp that he clenched his teeth, his eyes snapping shut.

Behind his closed eyelids, visions of his people flooded his mind. He saw them running backwards in terror, their skin covered in blood and their

screams echoing, loud as ever. His unseen stomach twisted and churned, as if something was writhing inside him.

In his mind, limbless figures stumbled through the carnage, weak hands futilely attempting to cover their mortal wounds. The ground beneath them was disturbed, dirt rising into the air like a storm.

Then, the carnage stopped as he watched an explosion move in reverse through the crowd he had been speaking to, the deafening blast shattering his vision and sounded warped.

Suddenly, he opened his eyes. Paulo's voice had awoken him, repeating his name, but Adisa couldn't shake the image of his people in pieces.

"Adisa... Adisa!"

His stomach had stopped churning, but he was now extremely hot and cold feeling sweat had begun to roll down his face. Adisa looked down at his stomach and froze. It was extremely swollen when just seconds ago, his midsection had been flat, like it always had been. He wasn't fit by any means, but his frame had always been slim and boyish.

Now, his stomach bulged outward, taut and misshapen, like it belonged to a man decades older, appearing as a grandfather's beer belly.

The rest of his body remained lean and youthful, but his gut looked foreign, grotesque. As he stared, a cold dread crawled up his spine.

Adisa shook the weirdness of his stomach off, then he got himself up off the floor and confidently told Paulo, "I know how to win this war."

Paulo stood completely still and looked at his leader with loads of confusion, then he spoke, "How Adisa?"

Adisa looked behind Paulo to the open door and asked, "Are there soldiers in my house?"

Paulo looked where Adisa had his eyes and then answered, "Yes, they want to see you."

The child leader put his hand up and said, "Follow me outside, me and you must talk about this in private."

Utopia's second in command shook his head up and down and then followed his leader out of the door where a group of eight of Adisa's men waited for him.

Right when Adisa made it out of his room and saw his soldiers he exhaled and put his eyes to the floor as they began to ask him questions.

"Are you alright?"

“What are we going to do Adisa?”

“Why did Afia sell us out?”

“How are we going to win now?”

All the overlapping questions made Adisa feel nauseous, so he walked into his kitchen where he ignored his men and the two girls who stood in the kitchen. With the sink running hot water, the girls used rags to try their best to get the dried blood off of their skin and it barely worked. When Adisa walked toward them, they stepped aside without a word, dropping their red rags to the floor before quietly taking seats at the island. His soldiers and the women nearby watched in uneasy silence as their leader tried to fight off his hangover the only way he knew how, by drinking more.

They all watched as he threw back mouthfuls of whiskey, the glass bottle rising and falling in his grip, his newly bloated stomach protruding shamelessly. Disgust flickered across a few faces, but no one dared to speak. Adisa felt their eyes on him, heavy with judgment, but he no longer cared. Whatever grace he once carried had long since abandoned him.

With a dull thud, he slammed the bottle onto the counter, then turned and made his way toward his soldiers.

Each step brought fear, each of the boys wondering if Adisa was about to lash out, if he would choose one of them at random to make an example.

Instead, he placed a hand on Paulo’s thin shoulder and, in a low voice, said,

“Let us speak outside.”

As Adisa walked to his patio, he thought heavily about what his next move would be and how he would do it. He knew that no matter what he said, his words would be of no substance to his people who now knew he was corrupt. The trick in his mind was not for them to forgive their leader, but to forget. Adisa knew this very well and asked himself how he could wipe their minds fresh.

Money?

More Food?

Substances?

He knew that giving his people material would only last for so long before they kept asking for more until he was ran dry. Adisa stopped moving in his patio and stood still as he realized the trick was not to give, but to take away. All that mattered to Adisa in the moment was that the

Capital fell and if he could carry out something drastic enough his people would practically do it for him.

Only now did he understand, the explosion in his vision hadn't been a metaphor or a warning. Instead, it was a premonition, one that hadn't happened *yet* but could if he allowed it to.

A false flag attack, plotted and executed by Adisa, but pinned on Ibis was the only light he saw at the end of the tunnel. With it, the war would be over in days as his people, blind with rage and vengeance, would spill Ibisian blood without hesitation.

When the dust settled, it wouldn't matter if they rejected him. By then, Adisa would have more power, more wealth, and more control than ever before. Especially if he killed the President as then he could practically take his place. Resentment couldn't touch a man who held the keys to their survival. He would be unstoppable and merciless.

The idea, that was so wrong on every level, latched itself onto Adisa and overpowered any other thought of ethics or morality.

Paulo shut the slider door, and Adisa broke out of his reflective trance. Both of the boys stood next to the extinguished fire pit and out of the two Paulo looked distressed as he listened to the sounds of the angry mob. Adisa heard the unseen shouts but seemingly paid no mind to it as he took a step closer to his closest soldier.

"You are going to think I am not right for this Paulo, but you must listen and realize this is our only way out," Adisa said with a shaking finger pointed at Paulo.

The leader's hands moved over to the sides of his face as his fingers tapped vigorously into his temples.

Paulo then asked, "What is this plan, Adisa?

He asked the question softly and awaited an answer that he knew would be outlandish.

"The only way to win this war is to take from our people... To a point where they have no other option but to direct their rage at Ibis."

The small smile on Paulo's face turned into an unpleasantly curious guise and he asked, "What else can we take away? Food is already by the scraps and there is only–"

Adisa orderly put his finger up and then interrupted Paulo by saying, "After I am done speaking to you, you're going to go over to my shed and grab a shovel. After that, I want you to walk through my house to the front

door where the two girls will be waiting for you. I will also be at the door, and I will pass you a small cardboard box. *Without* raising suspicion, you will drive out of this compound with the girls and drop them off wherever they tell you. I don't care if it's across the city."

Stopping to speak for a few short seconds, Adisa caught his breath and then continued to speak, "Once both of the hooers are gone you will drive to the city center and walk to where my people stand when they listen to me. To finish this, it will be as simple as digging a small hole anywhere in the middle of the stretch and then you will place the box within the hole, cover it up and leave."

Adisa lowered his tone and Paulo struck out of his silent state and said, "I know what you think you're going to do Adisa. Taking away something from the people. Their lives? I am not stupid!"

At all times Paulo was at Adisa's side, but this struck him as wrong, then he listened as Adisa spoke again.

"Calm down, calm down. Me and you both know if we blame this on Ibis, our people won't stop until Samir and David are dead, and the city has collapsed. This is how we win!"

"What about my mother? What if someone *you know* gets blown up in the crowd?"

Adisa shook his head and disgracefully said, "The lives of the few weigh less than the thousands that will die if our people turn against us and we lose this war. That is why you can just grab your mother when I speak and move her!"

Silence overcame both boys with their minds speaking so many words and being louder than the unseen crowd past the walls.

"I have always been your most loyal soldier. But this is even too much for me to think about!"

"That's why you leave here, and you bury the box so this war can be finished. I will pull the trigger Paulo, I'll be the one to blow it up, then there won't be anything else to think about."

Dread flooded Paulo's trembling mind in pure and raw form even though no blood had been spilled yet.

He turned away from Adisa and walked towards the shed to his right side and knew if he didn't carry this out it would happen either way but with him dead. The boy assured himself that if he was on any side it would have to be Adisas and that his leader always had a plan.

With his shovel now in hand, Paulo stepped into Adisa's house and tracked mud all the way to the area before the front door. The two girls who were playing with their hair stopped doing so, as Paulo entered their view.

Adisa and Paulo gave each other a disappointed look as the box was transferred between the two. Silence and angst were seen between the two boys and Paulo exited the house with a box in one hand and a shovel leaned against his shoulder. Screams of the large mob became closer and Paulo got another look at the rabid crowd he wished he could make disappear as it had given Adisa all types of bad ideas.

The two girls at Paulo's side got into the backseat of Adisa's car, which Paulo was given the order to drive. In the front seat sat the box of explosives and the dirty shovel that reached from the floor to the roof.

Paulo manually rolled the window down once he made it to the gate and shouted to the soldier on the inside, "I got to get these girls home, Adisa's orders."

The soldier shook his head in approval and said, "Good luck..."

With the car and the crowd now face to face, the gate had opened, and they were now mostly unprotected from the bloodthirsty crowd.

Four soldiers stood tall in front of the crowd while being outside of Adisa's gate and they pointed their rifles at the crowd and shouted, "Move to the sides!"

A couple rows into the crowd where people had not yet moved over, a good-sized rock flew over people's heads and crashed right in the middle of Paulo's front window. Even if the rock had just hit the middle of the window, it left an impact across the entire windshield that made Paulo's view obstructed. Not a soul in the crowd moved as Paulo's car came to a complete stop now while the citizens hit on the car and let out their hatred.

The soldiers on the outside of the gate knew that the citizens wouldn't move but when the rock came through, every soldier knew what to do. Full-auto fire shot right over the civilians' heads which made them move closer to the sides of the roads and out of the way of the car.

With his head now stuck out of the window, Paulo took his chance and peeled through the dirt down the hill as citizens jumped out of the way of his car as if they didn't, they were sure to be crushed.

Both girls were quickly dropped off at their homes with no words spoken between them and Paulo. Before the boy drove off to the city center, he sat in the car for a long minute, wishing something would get in his way and stop what he was about to do, whether it was a lightning bolt or a falling tree.

Nothing stopped the boy from driving all the way into Utopia's desolate heart where no one stood as everyone was at Adisa's compound. Once he was stopped in Adisa's loud sedan, he looked to his right to see the dreaded box that he wished he could dump and drive away. With his left fingers, he lifted the loose packing tape that kept the cardboard boxes top on and once the top opened Paulo peeked inside to see green and white packaged rectangles with wires and letters written all over them. Even if he knew what was in the box, looking at the bombs with his own two eyes overcame the boy with an unsettled feeling. Paulo quickly shut the box and sucked it up, trying his best to ignore his dire actions. He then exited the car and as his feet hit the ground, his nose was filled up with the cool air of Utopia and he wished so badly that he could run away from all of this mess, maybe even to Ibis. But Paulo knew if he took refuge in Ibis, Adisa would just get another soldier to do his dirty work and that he himself would end up dead just like Afia. In the end he lied to himself and trusted his leader, trying to shift the blame off himself.

Strong and aggressive steps from Paulo smacked against the mud while the guilty boy spun his head around to look for peeping citizens like he was a tweaker. One person seeing him out in the complete open would end the operation failing and Adisa more than likely killing him.

In the center of the open dirt where citizens usually stood proud, Paulo drove his shovel into the ground with haste. The first few scoops were thick with mud but soon gave way to dry soil. Still, with each shovelful tossed aside, his stomach sank deeper.

When the pit was shallow but wide enough, he nudged the box in with his foot, his movements careful as he didn't want to set the bomb off.

A queasy unease stirred in him as he glanced around once more, then, with jittery hands, he covered the box, packing the dirt in just enough to mask the disturbance. No one would notice as their eyes would be locked on Adisa and not the ground.

-Chapter XXXXII-

Ameen's pistol was placed in front of Adisa's groin where its grip hung over the edge of his pants. After Adisa readied his pistol, he sat in front of his front door with two soldiers behind him.

He was now ready to speak to his people and was more anxious than he could even explain as he exhaled slowly and closed his eyes. It was as if part of his confidence and charisma had been taken away.

Adisa realized he had no other option but to go head on with his people, so he opened his door and put a confident stature on even if his eyes instantly were thrown onto the huge stature of the crowd in front of him. No matter how tough he looked, Adisa was truly intimidated by his own people who he could even see through his gate's bars. Once he walked down his house's steps, the crowd knew it was their infamous leader and raised their voice even higher while no one said a good thing about the boy. Mouths moved by the hundreds, a wave of angry murmurs and shouts rolling through the crowd. As Adisa drew closer to his people, the world felt less real, like a nightmare he couldn't wake from.

He passed his soldiers without a word, and they followed silently, sensing the weight of the moment.

When he reached the closed gate, he stood just inches from the throng of furious faces. Malice burned in their eyes as they pressed forward, desperate to reach the man they once followed.

Adisa raised his voice, letting it boom through the bars.
"My people! What is this ruckus about?"

Not one of the resentful civilians stopped talking or insulting Adisa, with people throwing pebbles that clinked against the cast iron bars protecting Adisa. He looked at the outnumbered handful of soldiers outside his gate aiming guns at the people and pushing them off, making sure no one even so much as touched Adisa's grand walls with a ten-foot pole. Adisa clenched his fists and rolled his thumbs around his skin in anger and then ordered, "Fire into the air!"

The four lone soldiers outside the compound in an instant fired multiple warning rounds off with each of the boys trying to fire the last shot and outshoot the other. Now the crowd was not dead silent, but as silent as it could be.

"Now I ask again! What is the reason for this!"

Adisa, after shouting, breathed heavily and stood still while awaiting an answer from his people. Even after all the waiting, not a single word rose from the crowd. Only silence.

A thousand eyes locked onto Adisa's, heavy with quiet disappointment.

They had believed in him, believed he was different, something rare, something better, but now he had proven he was just like the rest.

Adisa scanned the faces before him, men, women, children. Each one wore the same expression, not anger, not fear… but heartbreak and distrust.

For a brief moment, his face softened, the weight of his failure pressing down on him. He had truly messed up and now, he could barely bring himself to meet their gaze even if they were his own people.

He knew, deep down, they would never look at him the same again.

In a more quiet and somber voice, Adisa said to his people, "I will speak when the sun rises! All will be explained…"

Adisa turned his back on his people and began to walk away as they started to talk against Adisa again.

Once Adisa stepped inside his home, he got a sense of déjà vu and slowly walked into his kitchen where he picked up the bottle he had just partaken in and found solace in it.

All of his negatives were flushed away as he accompanied himself with his vice while whistling and pretending that he felt great. The boy was antsy for his speech and just wished that the sun would come up sooner. Adisa knew this speech would be the most important one in Utopia's history and would change the tides the other way in his odds.

Buried beneath the weight of betrayal from one of his most loyal soldiers, and the knowledge that soon an explosion of his own making would tear the city apart, Adisa lit cigarette after cigarette, letting the smoke cloud his thoughts. His hands trembled as he dropped the needle on a classical vinyl, blasting the music as loud as the speakers would allow. Violins and pianos wept through the walls while his mind unraveled, each note a thread pulling him further from sanity.

Adisa blinked and the bottle he was glued to was empty and his body was sore from dancing around by himself. The black sky that he had been too familiar with that night had started to turn a navy-blue, so he boosted himself up and lit himself another cigarette.

Both of Adisa's front doors were opened by him and he was greeted by the view of his soldiers all sleeping outside as they didn't want to hear his loud music. They all had their backs against his house, snoring as if they hadn't rested in nights.

Paulo made his way back to the compound and was outside with the soldiers as well, but he was the only one awake. Adisa gave him a glance and Paulo gave a short smile towards his leader and the shake of his head.

In a sudden, unhinged spasm, Adisa yanked his pistol from his side and fired round after round into the dirt, inches from the sleeping boys' feet, his laughter cutting them like broken glass. Paulo jolted first, scrambling backward in terror. The others followed, springing up and fumbling for their rifles with bleary panic in their eyes.

Adisa stood hunched, staring at the smoking pistol in his hands, the barrel still warm. His voice slurred with liquor and spite as he grinned at them.

"You all woulda been dead!" he barked, laughter still clinging to the edges of his breath.

He was the only person who laughed out of the entire group as everyone else was shaken as a leaf. Adisa knew the prank he played was quite unfunny but laughed to himself and then said, "Get up I have a speech to get to!"

All of the boys got up quickly as they couldn't not listen to their leader and while each of the soldiers in the group looked at Adisa's back, he stopped and put his hand up. The almost marching soldiers stopped in place and stood up tall as Adisa turned his body around. In a drunken voice Adisa said, "You know, for someone as funny as me, one of you has gotta laugh at my jokes."

Each one of the soldiers exchanged uncomfortable glances at each other while their leader's eyes zoomed around at each one of them. Adisa's prying eyes instantly stopped on the closest boy to him, who was a younger soldier that he did not know the name of. He was the runt of the group and when Adisa locked eyes on him, he felt his stomach drop. The leader of the boys put his head back and tried his best to show that he was looking down at the boy he took a few steps towards. In a tense display of his own

insecurity, Adisa swung without hesitation, driving his fist into the boy's stomach. The blow forced the air from the boy's lungs as he collapsed to his knees, his gun slipping from his hands and clattering onto the ground with his face twisted in breathless pain.

"Don't any of you ever ignore me again," Adisa said while he looked up to the rest of the unhurt soldiers.

The crazed leader directed his attention back down to the struggling boy and the rest of the soldiers immediately thought that Adisa was going to kick him while he was on the ground, but their fears were subdued as Adisa said, "Get your ass up and run to that gate and tell our men that we are all getting in cars and going to the city center. If you do not run that whole way, I will use your own gun to blow rounds through your back. Do you hear me!"

The boy looked up at his leader who he looked up to once and painfully muttered, "Yes sir…"

With no gun in hand, the boy ran to the gate even if every time his feet touched the ground it felt like he was being punched again. The whole way, even as Adisa moved, he watched the tortured soldier making sure he didn't mess up the entire way.

Paulo got into the same van as Adisa and thought how he didn't approve of his leader's tasteless actions, but he justified it as if you are a leader you do have to show your dominance in the group.

Squeaks of the automatic gate that were usually so loud seemed like nothing to the boys as the screams of the excruciated crowd drowned out anything in a mile radius. Adisa's convoy pushed through the gates without hesitation, none of the vehicles as courteous as Paulo's had been. They didn't slow down for the citizens as they didn't have to. The people either moved, or they'd be crushed beneath the tires and spit out of the other side. Each soldier was armed, but staring into the faces of the unarmed, murderous crowd pressing against their windows, fear gripped their hearts. Even Adisa, always brash and composed, kept every limb inside the van as he knew if he reached out, something would be torn off and devoured like a meal.

The line of Adisa's convoy beat the crowd down the hill and to the speaking stand and even with no people in sight, Adisa worriedly rushed from the van to his underground speech preparing room.

Paulo and Adisa were the only people in the cement room by Adisa's request, and the rest of the soldiers readied themselves for the imminent crowd.

Citizens who speed walked down the hill took long steps while almost tripping over themselves until they made it to the speaking square.

Soldiers looked at the giant crowd swarming where they stood as they rocked their knees back and forth and bit their lips in anxiety.

A childish back-and-forth broke out between the crowd-goers and the soldiers, both sides hurling curses and shouting death wishes until the air filled with hatred.

Adisa knew that when the soldiers and citizens went face to face, they would exchange harsh words which pressured him to not wait for the speech and to get it over with. In the dark room with only two overhead lights, Adisa looked at his open palms while he pondered about how instant the people's reactions would be today. If he could pull this off, then in his mind he did not need the Devil.

In the closest corner to Adisa, Paulo stood with his rifle in his hands and silently watched his leader who he looked up to but questioned if his mind was going downhill and if Utopia would survive what was to come next.

Yet, in his heart, faith remained.

Paulo was the only person besides Adisa in the entire world that knew after this speech, Utopia would burn hard in war, and it would either catch Ibis in its flames or it would fizzle out in the dirt.

In the underground room, from his back pants pocket, Adisa revealed a small green box with a lever on the side of it that he seemingly admired. A small black antenna rose from this mystery electronic item and Paulo tried his best to notice what it was. With a befuddled and droopy face, Adisa looked up at Paulo who he barely remembered was there and said, "Do you know what this does?"

Paulo gave him a straight face and silently shook his head to say no even if he clearly knew what it was.

Adisa got up with the remote in his hands and slowly raised it to the roof.

“This right here Paulo… This is a shift. This will shift this war our way and tear the enemy to its knees.”

Adisa stood in front of Paulo with a straight face that broke into a quick witted happy one as he laughed. Paulo obliged in the joy and started to chuckle along with his leader. For some reason, Adisa’s happiness spilled over into Paulo, and soon they were laughing together– laughing uncontrollably at the destruction yet to come.

Every time Adisa walked up his steps to speak to his people, his head would be held up high and he would be eager to speak, but this time, even through all the liquor Adisa watched his feet each slow step they took towards the most important speech of Utopia’s history. The crowd was quieter than it had ever been, so quiet, Adisa could hear the wood beneath his feet creak with every step.

As he climbed the final stairs, his head rose into view and so did the crowd, an angry mass sprawling before him like a living lake.

If the mob had seemed enormous outside his gates, the morning light now revealed the full scale of their fury and their judgment.

With his feet now level with the stand, Adisa looked out. The crowd stretched before him like a cliff’s edge he was meant to fall from. Very visible fear gripped him and there was no use in hiding it now.

He stood at the mic and his breath caught, heartbeat hammering in his chest loud enough to count each one. For a moment, he wondered if the silence was just in his head.

Not a single cheer rose from the crowd. No smiles either, just a sea of cold, angry faces. It rattled him, shaking loose what little confidence he had left.

Every eye was locked on him, and it felt like their eyes were clawing at his skin, scraping through to his mind.

Finally, Adisa leaned into the microphone and took a long, trembling breath. Instead of opening with the bold words he’d rehearsed, he simply muttered, “I have heard the most damning of things.”

The crowd started to throw insults at their leader and talk back and forth to each other, which Adisa knew would happen.

As Adisa tried to get his act together, Paulo rushed alongside the deadly crowd, trying his best to look over the huge mob for his mother and hoping that he could find her in time.

Adisa boomed again, “I did not create Utopia for nothing! I didn’t create Utopia for drugs or money as clearly enough has been taken away from me for that to be useless. I created Utopia for a vision we all have.”

The words of Paulo’s leader became jumbled false apologies and semantics that went into one ear and out the other as he frantically scanned faces for his mother.

“Everything I have done was for my people! And now with no evidence the people I have held so dear come to me with false accusations spat by our enemies! How can my own people do this!”

Adisa’s temper had risen after these last couple of lies and once he finished his sentence his looked over the crowd and caught a glance at the small baby, he once held at his return speech. The moment his eyes landed on the child, Adisa froze, his breath catching and lips moving without sound. Panic whispered through him as he didn’t even know where Paulo had planted the bomb. For all he knew, it could be right beneath the child’s feet.

A surge of dread threatened to paralyze him, but he blinked hard, forcing the thought away. He couldn’t afford to think like that, not now. He reset his mind, shoved down the fear, and focused on what he had to do.

People began to half listen to what Adisa was saying and with the golden morning sun behind Adisa’s head, he said, “I never once have touched drugs in my life! It is a complete lie to think I am involved in such a thing.”

After a lot of running, Paulo got a clouded glance of his mother’s face as she stood right in the middle of the crowd under where he placed the bomb. He settled his rifle on his back and began to push through people who grabbed into his skin and yelled at him. His mother locked eyes with him as he ran to her and looked away. Then she took a double take and remembered that this soldier was her son as she barely recognized her boy.

“Paulo!” The mother spoke in a sad tone, then Paulo grabbed her by the arm, and she said, “What are we doing?”

Paulo gave her a serious look and said, “Follow!”

She obliged quickly as her son looked serious.

Adisa began to boom again, saying, “The lies spread from Ibis through Afia are disheartening! The fact that these lies were shown on screen in our

walls means we have been infiltrated by the enemy! These lies that are spread, gain traction to destroy Utopia from the inside out when really, we should be gathering and stomping down the Capital to end the corruption in South Sudan!"

The Leader of Utopia realized it was time to end this speech and shamelessly put his hand into his pocket where the detonator sat waiting to be clicked. Adisa turned away from the microphone and fake coughed to his right side and inched his fingers down more to gradually press down on the detonator. The lever had been pressed down completely, and Adisa began to swing back towards his people and take his hand out of his incriminating pocket. Before his middle and longest finger could escape from his pocket, dark dirt had already lifted into the sky along with a few poor souls. Blood and fire reached out like grasping hands, claiming the damned in an instant. Some died where they stood, others, engulfed in flames, staggered through the chaos, their burning bodies setting others alight in their wake.

The explosion sent a violent wave of heat and wind crashing into Adisa, slamming into his chest and stealing his breath. A deafening ring consumed his ears, drowning the world in silence and dragging half the crowd into that same dead, buzzing void.

When the explosion hit, Paulo was thrown back with his mother. His grip on her slipped, and both of them nearly toppled, scrambling to stay upright in the chaos.

She screamed instantly.

As Paulo's vision cleared, he saw a glowing yellow ball around his mother's head. Blurry fire as ash fell behind her.

Though he couldn't hear a thing, the open mouths of the wounded surrounded him, twisted in agony. The buzzed-out sound of their screams filled the silence in his head. An acrid smell of burning hair invaded his nose as he frantically slapped at the flames, beating them down until the fire was gone.

Her hair was extinguished, but half of it had been seared away, leaving her still howling in pain and sadness.

Together, they moved, stumbling over limbs and crushed bodies, trying not to look down. Each step was horror-filled as hands, bloodied and shaking, reached out from the crowd, smearing desperation and life across Paulo's skin, begging for help he couldn't give.

Blood and dirt coated everyone, and Paulo found himself staring into panicked eyes that looked back at him, searching for something whether it was hope, reason or answers. Paulo gave them nothing, just a face pale with guilt.

This was his doing, part of it, at least but the boy did his best to get rid of the guilt.

The blood that soaked him and his mother's clothes wasn't just blood, it was familiar. It belonged to people they once knew.

The chaos was worse than Paulo had imagined. Nothing in his mind had ever touched this.

Adisa stood petrified at the top of his stand, looking down at the steaming crater that was filled with dark bodies that were missing pieces of themselves. His blind soldiers, who had no idea of the plan, surrounded him for protection and waved their guns around as they watched the brutality that occurred right before their eyes.

Citizens ran in circles with their injured hands in the air and parents tried their best to leave the crowd with their children unharmed and their eyes shut from the travesty that occurred. Living people joined the dead as they wept every tear they could to sink into the moved dirt.

Adisa caught eyes on a lone man with his torso burst open that let his insides fall out as he walked like a zombie through the crowd.

The deafening from the bomb had permeated by the loudest of screams, not only from women, but even from men too.

"*Why*! Who did this?"

Paulo's mother screamed questions as they reached the outer ring of the disrupted crowd. Once they made it to the outside of the crowd, Paulo's mother planted her hands and knees in the ground and screamed like she never had before.

Paulo stood tall and looked at his trifling mother on the ground and wanted to cry as well. He knew this was his fault, and he wondered if God would forgive him. The boy felt the need to comfort his mother and rested his hand on her back softly and when he did so his mom slowed her crying. She got off her hands and looked deep into her boy's eyes and Paulo truly felt as if she knew what he had done.

"Why has this happened, my son? How did you know of this? Is this punishment?"

Paulo lyingly shook his head and said, “No, no. I just wanted to see you and that is why I pulled you out of the crowd. It was God saving you through me. This had to have been Ibis… It had to be.”

A moment of realization came over the mother even if her intuition told her that Paulo was lying and then quickly picked herself up. Paulo was confused by this odd reaction, then more weirdness struck him when his mother screamed, “*Ibis!*”

Even people with their only focus being escaping, looked over at her and the false puzzle pieces in their mind were put together. In obsessiveness, Paulo’s mother ran back into the crowd and began to screamingly repeat, “*Ibis… It was Ibis!*”

She plunged into the crowd, and Paulo shouted her name, desperate to pull her back, but his voice couldn’t reach her. She ran deeper, swallowed by the chaos, spreading the rising tide of revenge she could no longer hold back.

With the certainty she spoke in, it was as if this message she was giving was predetermined.

Paulo quickly lost his frantic mother, but he still heard her screams as she told person to person.

The quick feeling of sadness in people had switched to hatred and angst once people realized this was the attack of an enemy. People who were just running or at their knees grieving stopped in place and had hypnotized faces from what they had heard.

The protected leader of Utopia who had a wall of men around him, noticed the screaming and took his chance to linger through his worried men back towards his microphone.

He shouted, “Who has done this! My people we must fight!”

Paulo’s mother shouted through the silence, “*It was Ibis!*”

Every single person in the crowd heard her yells and now the reason for the attack was falsely known.

Adisa faked a surprised face at the lady’s words and then yelled, “It was *Ibis!* It all makes sense; I try to describe my innocence, and they bomb my people! *Utopia*… Take arms!”

Bodies were left behind, dropped like burdens and the dying were abandoned in the dirt. All of Utopia, once frantic in grief, began to slow. Their worriedness gave way to a blind march, a vengeful, drone-like stepping in Adisa’s word towards their homes to retrieve weapons.

The crowd dispersed to their homes, and Adisa stood still, watching in quiet awe as his manipulation took root and bloomed before his eyes.

Paulo stepped onto the stage where Adisa and his soldiers waited, standing in eerie calm for their army of drones to return. Without a care in the world, Adisa asked Paulo dryly, “Is your mother alright?”

Now eye to eye, Paulo gave a small nod and quietly answered, “Yeah.”

Adisa turned away from his most loyal puppet and calmly addressed his men.

“Good, good. We will ride with our people to the Capital, but some of you will stay and defend Utopia’s walls. Keep your radios close.”

From around the corner of a nearby building, the soldiers on stage heard the steady rhythm of boots striking the earth. Then they saw them, thousands of armed citizens turning the corner, weapons in hand, faces hard. They carried the very guns Adisa had once handed them to fight for justice. Now, they would use them to finish the war.

Adisa chuckled darkly and muttered to his soldiers, “Be glad those guns aren’t meant for us. Let’s burn a trail of fire to Ibis.”

His child soldiers gathered at his side, stepping into formation as he approached the vast crowd, a sea of men, boys, and even women, all with weapons slung over their shoulders and war in their eyes. The sight surprised him, but he welcomed it. More soldiers meant more strength.

When the two forces met, they merged into one, their rifles swinging in rhythm, their faces carved from stone.

Adisa, the architect of it all, marched at the front.

He believed he was right and now, nothing could stop Utopia, whether they were right or wrong.

-Chapter XXXXIII-

Every piece of dirt around the forests that surrounded Utopia were stomped on by soldiers as they marched towards Ibis, confident that their marches could be heard from miles away. Saplings were crushed underfoot as the soldiers advanced, each one bracing for an enemy to emerge from behind every tree they passed.

Not to the side of tree, but atop of one, an Ibisian with a radio already in hand watched as his enemies treaded right below him. He stayed as still as possible as he waited ten minutes for all the men to pass by, and as soon as the mob cleared from below him, he started his radio and cringed when it made a loud beeping sound.

The darkly camouflaged soldier whispered into the radio, “We are in deep shit, a crowd of thousands of Utopians just crossed from under me! We must kill them before they reach Ibis. Over.”

Right when the soldier spoke, he over adjusted his posture which led to the thick but young rual tree branch snapping on his crouched legs and his walkie-talkie dropping to the forest’s dirt. He quickly caught himself on the next branch and tried his best to reach for his pistol that was buttoned into his holster as he knew gunfire awaited him.

Under the tree, a small group of men that were behind the main army watched as the black box fell and perked their heads up to the top of the tree. The moment the branch snapped, every head in the group snapped toward the sound and there he was. A sitting man, swaying in the bustling tree. Without hesitation, they opened fire, rifles thundering in unison, tearing into his body. Bullets ripped through the Ibisian until gravity took over, and he crashed through every branch on his way down, landing hard in the red dirt below.

The soldier was observed dead instantly after he clashed onto the ground as the group looked at him, but the soldiers just making sure, or just

for fun, raised their rifles and blew another ten rounds into the man's corpse.

From right in front of them, Utopian soldiers ran back with their rifles up and shouted, "Are there more?"

The small group watched as hundreds of men came out of the woodwork to scan the area, then all their attention was put onto the radio that sat on the ground as it began to spurt out static sounding words. A young child in the part of the horde stood right next to the radio and curiously he picked it up. His father then patted him on the back hard and shouted, "Run it to Adisa!"

The child looked up at his father in awe, then took off running toward the front of the massive crowd. His sandals flew from his feet as he darted ahead, doing his best not to trip or twist an ankle. Soldiers cursed at him, swinging out with their hands as he weaved past their bodies, ducking and dodging until he reached the front lines.

There, in the distance, stood Adisa, guarded by three soldiers like a knockoff secret service.

The boy held the radio high as he approached and Adisa barely glanced at him at first, indifferent. But when his eyes finally settled on the device, he froze as the walkie wasn't one of theirs. It smelled of Ibis.

"Move aside. What is this?"

Adisa spoke frantically then moved through his men and took the radio right out of the boy's hand and then the younger child spoke, "It is from a dead enemy. An Ibisian radio."

With grit, Adisa raised his chin in approval and gave the boy a squinted stare, then the radio began to buzz again, saying, "Helicopter inbound over the forest, we will not let them get any closer to Ibis!"

Adisa's eyes opened sharply, and he shouted, "Get everyone together I need to speak!"

The soldiers scattered like their lives depended on it, each one regrouping even though they hadn't strayed far.

Adisa reached for a low-hanging tree branch, gripping it with his small hands. With a grunt, he hauled himself up, using his upper body to pull over the bending limb and inch toward the tree's center for balance.

Perched among the branches, he felt a bit like a primate, but from this vantage point, he could see everything. An endless sea of his soldiers

stretched beyond his sight, weaving through dense vegetation and thick trees.

Adisa felt no need to waste any more time and shouted, “We have a dilemma. A Ibisian helicopter is soon to arrive, and it is bound to see us even if we are covered by treetops. I know this forest and I know what is in front of us and that is an opening where it would be disastrous if we were seen there by the helicopter. In only about fifty yards behind the opening in the trees will be revealed and if we walk there the helicopter just might be waiting for us. That is why every one of us must run across this field to not be caught where we can take refuge in the next forest! Now follow my lead!”

Adisa swung around the branch and directed his attention the other way, then he let his hands free and dropped his feet onto the ground. He stayed still with his back turned to his men and then he raised his rifle and began to run and scream to which his men followed doing the exact same.

After only a couple seconds of running, the wet treetops the men were covered by had disappeared and now forming gray clouds were placed over their heads.

The leader of Utopia, who led the charge, made it across the seventy-five-yard flat and then stood in the forest as he watched his men run across the plain to regroup where he now stood. He set one foot on a rock to rest, then realized he could stand on it. When both feet were firmly planted atop the boulder, echoes began to roll from behind him in the sky.

For a moment, Adisa’s heart skipped a beat.

He scanned the faces of his soldiers, once fierce, now turned as gray as the looming clouds above. The hundred or so men running towards him all raised their rifles skyward, pointing through the trees, waiting.

Waiting for the chopper to break through the canopy and rain hell down on them.

There would be no cover and no defense out in the open.

Adisa lifted his rifle too, aiming at the sky. He was no longer pretending to be fearless, this time, he was truly afraid as the helicopter could wipe them out within seconds, and they all knew it.

Paulo ran across the field, just getting out of the first forest and the sound hit his ears. His heart stopped just as every soldier froze in place, but he kept running.

New sounds followed as the rumble of engines grew louder, closing in fast. Making soldiers turn their rifles toward the road beside them, bracing for an ambush.

Paulo's ears rang with the thud of his own heartbeat. Time seemed to slow. His vision tunneled.

Then, from just beyond the treetops ahead, the black bird emerged.

The helicopter didn't hesitate, banked to the side, and without warning, unleashed fire into the open field.

What seemed like rocks seemed to fly from the sky and chop Utopians up from head to toe all around Paulo. A few desperate shots rang out toward the helicopter, but they were nothing against the roar of the 7.62x51 rounds that poured from the sky without pause. Most of the soldiers didn't want to peek out of their hiding places and shoot as it was an automatic death sentence.

Anyone who dared cross the open plain was met with the same fate of being cut down instantly, so movement ceased. The running stopped and most of the soldiers froze in the cover of the first forest, knowing that stepping into the clearing meant death.

The field had become a killing ground covered in blood and many bodies.

To Paulo's right, men were blown to mist and let their rifles join them in the dirt. As he continued to run, a soldier right at his side was gunned down. When the soldier fell, he tried grabbing onto Paulo and eventually grabbed his gun and fell to the ground with it. Paulo knew he would be next to be shot and that he couldn't turn back for his gun so he dropped to a deep gulch where it would appear he was dead. His bended arms cracked on rocks and cuts went from his pinkies to his elbows as he tried his best to stay still as he endured the sound of gunfire and dust.

Paulo kept his eyes on the sky, heart pounding, watching as the gunner readjusted himself to face him. As he played dead, he wished desperately for a rifle to be thrown down to him. In the end he had nothing. All he could do was wait, hidden and helpless, hoping to reemerge once the storm passed.

Then, as if in answer to his prayer, a shot soldier tumbled into the gulch, landing half on top of him. Paulo recoiled at the warm, sticky weight and he hated the sight of the man's blood that was leaking on him. He

pushed the struggling man off and that's when he saw a wooden bolt-action rifle slung over the man's back with a short, blued scope glinting in the light.

Without sparing a second glance at the wounded man's reaching hand, Paulo unslung the rifle and ignored the man's pleas for help.

The helicopter, still circling overhead, began to turn with the pilot directly toward his position.

Still sitting, Paulo brought the rifle up and aimed it toward the pilot's shadow. His hands trembled from the adrenaline as he tried to steady his breathing. All he had to get off was just one shot.

But the chopper began to turn away, right as the gunner opened fire again.

Two rounds tore near the gulch, kicking up more dirt around Paulo.

Even if the dust was flying, Paulo knew he had the side of the pilot in sight and realized he only had one shot or else he'd be dead.

He held his breath and kept the scope as still as he could and pulled the trigger.

Through the dirt, he watched the shadow inside the cockpit slumped forward.

The chopper immediately lost control, spiraling then crashing hard into the dirt road nearby in a cloud of fire and smoke.

Paulo lowered the rifle, his hands still shaking.

He'd survived, for now.

"*Shit!"*

David Akech screamed a single word as the helicopter came crashing down in front of his convoy, thousands of men halted in stunned silence. The twisted wreckage slammed into the earth like a warning from the gods, the first brutal sign of the battle to come.

Ibisians and Utopians alike had marched in with confidence, certain they could crush this sudden battle with ease.

But this violent display of power shattered their certainty and showed both sides this battle had a lot more coming.

All twenty of the 6x6 military trucks belonging to the Capital that went in a slow line slammed on their brakes as the struggling chopper came down right in front of them. The large groups of men in the back of these trucks felt the heat from the explosion and their ears began to ring. Even if

their ears were deaf, they followed their fellow soldiers out of the trucks and onto the dirt where no fire had met them yet.

Close by, paying attention to the sounds of enemy trucks, Utopians celebrated slightly at the destruction of the helicopter.

Adisa and the soldiers close to him heard enemy stomps to their left and realized that more soldiers were coming from the road and if they didn't retreat to the other side of the forest where most of the soldiers were, Adisa could be killed or captured.

Paulo stood out of the gulch with the rifle raised in the air victoriously and Adisa saw him. Without saying a word to his men, Adisa walked to Paulo and said, "You son of a bitch!"

Paulo gave a big smile as this was the most approval Adisa had ever given his closest ally. While looking at Paulo, Adisa noticed the happy face of his comrade turn disturbed and then from behind Adisa the sound of gunfire returned. Both boys hit the grass as gun fire flew over their heads from both directions.

Ibisian soldiers overcame the forest that Adisa had just left and overpowered the few men that were left on that side. From behind Adisa and Paulo, Utopians fired towards them from across the field.

Ibisian citizens had volunteered to fight alongside the heavily armored and seasoned Presidential soldiers. They crowded next to the Ibisian soldiers dressed in black and both occupations tried their best to keep their act together as men were mowed down next to them.

Adisa stumbled his hands around his pants until they met his radio on his belt and over the gunfire he shouted, "Me and Paulo are in between both forests. Try not to fucking shoot us!"

Barely any men heard Adisa's message as the sound of rifles firing between both forests was immeasurable.

Paulo and Adisa dropped to their stomachs and began to army crawl, dragging themselves as fast as they could across the covered ground toward the forest. Forty yards of dirt to crawl between them and support.

They slithered past bodies they recognized, faces they couldn't bring themselves to look at. Almost every corpse was someone they had once known, and they did their best not to brush against the bloodied limbs as they moved.

Survival demanded focus, but the weight of the dead clung to them with every inch they crawled.

The whole gloomful way to the forest scooting their bodies against dirt, bullets would strike right next to both boys' skin and raise the beats of their hearts to where they would match the gun fire.

It felt like hours until the two boys that were pivotal to this war made it to the forest and Adisa was the first to get up and run towards a tree.

He peeked out from the side and looked at Paulo while trying to avoid gunfire so he could make sure his friend was alive, which was the most respect Adisa had probably ever shown towards Paulo.

Adisa saw his best comrade's head poke out from the yellow grass and lift joyfully and pained at the same time as he was grateful for his rib cages to not be clenched against the earth any longer. Just as Paulo's feet stretched flat against the ground, Adisa watched in horror as a chunk of his friend's side was torn open by a sudden gunshot.

Paulo collapsed instantly, his rifle dropping and his body slamming back into the dirt.

Adisa dropped as well as he grabbed his friend's bleeding wound. The bullet shot by David had been aimed for Adisa but missed and shot right into Paulo's side with this being the first time he had been shot. A ragged, circular chunk of Paulo's side had been torn open by a grazing bullet, the flesh red and raw. Blood spilled freely from the wound, pooling beneath him as his body twitched in shock.

He was alive but losing blood fast.

Adisa urgently screamed, "I need a car and someone to get Paulo help right now!"

Adisa felt like he was watching his friend die right in front of him. As he looked down at Paulo, a deep sadness crept in, something he hadn't felt in a long time.

Around him, several boys scrambled with their radios, urgently calling for help. Adisa couldn't help but wonder if there was even enough time.

One soldier gripped his walkie and barked into it, "Paulo's been shot, get a damn car out here now to bring him back to Utopia! And send the gunner truck!"

Adisa locked eyes with his soldier then he shouted, "And tell them to hurry—or it's their fucking head!"

Without another word, the soldier nodded and repeated the command, then dropped the radio with a trembling hand.

Dragging Paulo behind a tree, Adisa looked at his friend and realized he didn't look as bad as thought he did.

To get his mind off of it, Adisa fired his AK-47 the best he could and shot at any peeking soldier that carried a rifle.

Many men next to Adisa died and whenever one of his minions would get shot down, someone from deeper in the forest would take their spot to meet the same fate. As soldiers shot and ran up, fell to the ground and died, Adisa would glance every once in a while, and question if he would see the same exact boys do it over and over again.

Adisa's rifle clicked empty meaning another magazine was spent. Just as he reached for a reload, the roar of engines cut through the chaos.

From the road to his right, a truck barreled into view, a mounted gun swiveling on its bed, manned and ready. Behind it, tucked close in its shadow, followed a van in tight formation and purposeful.

The cavalry had arrived.

Soldiers looked in amazement as the mounted PKM on the back of the truck blew through many rounds, almost cutting down trees and taking the lives of many Ibisians. The tank of a truck went off roading through the plain and made its way to Adisa who realized the truck probably didn't know where he was. That is what prompted him to pull out his radio and say, "I hope to God the driver in that truck has a walkie… If your listening *keep* driving and I'll tell you when to turn left."

Not a single Utopian took a bullet with every enemy round screamed toward the approaching truck and van, riddling their frames with holes. The truck's windshield shattered under the pressure, and the driver, doing his best to stay alive, was sliced by flying glass.

A back tire was hit next, causing the truck to jerk and slow under the relentless hail of Ibisian fire, but the gunner on the back didn't falter, he kept firing, relentlessly, his weapon chattering like thunder.

Adisa's heart pounded as if they took out the gunner truck, the enemy would surely redirect their fire to the van.

As the two vehicles neared him, Adisa sprang to his feet and shouted into the radio, "Turn now and back the van up!"

The drivers obeyed without hesitation. Veering hard, the truck shielded the van as it slid beside it, while the gunner continued to unleash a storm of lead on the Ibisian line.

David Akech was pissed and tried his best to blow off the gunner's head with his FAL rifle but continuingly failed as the gunner had a welded and homemade bullet proof wall surrounding his gun. The failed shooter cursed and kicked his feet.

When both cars stopped near Adisa, no stoppage of shooting happened.

A soldier and Adisa lifted Paulo's limp body into the now-open van, bullets shrieking through the air around them like angry wasps. Fire rained down, but they moved fast and determined.

Adisa held on until the last possible second, then gently let go of his friend and slammed the van doors shut.

Without a word, the soldiers climbed beside Paulo and the van prepared to lurch away.

The plan was simple, the truck would reverse, and the van would follow just like last time. An issue stopped this when the flat tire on the truck had other ideas. It had sunk into a land hole, the rubber spinning helplessly, unable to find grip.

For a moment, the gunfire from Ibis's side went quiet. Then, a low, rumbling growl emerged in the distance. Adisa heard it before he saw it, a deep, black brick rolling across the plain.

Scanning through the haze, he spotted the T-72 tank, kicking up a plume of dirt as it aimed down on the van. It slowed briefly; its barrel locking eyes with the convoy.

The truck's engine screamed as the driver stomped the pedal, but the vehicle only spun in place, grinding its ruined tire into the dirt. Behind the wheel, the driver let loose a stream of curses, pounding the steering wheel in rage as death rumbled closer.

Despite his impending doom, the gunner held his position, firing round after round at the tank. The bullets pinged uselessly off the armored hull like mosquito bites against a beast.

The van's driver saw what was coming. If they didn't move, they were dead. He threw it into reverse, the sudden jolt slamming Paulo against the metal back wall of the van. Ahead of them, the truck exploded in a burst of fire and metal.

Shrapnel flew around, its door torn free and embedded in a nearby tree like a thrown blade. The gunner didn't stand a chance. Fire surged into the open mount, consuming him instantly in a searing, inescapable inferno.

Flames grazed the van's windshield and without hesitation, the driver yanked the wheel hard right and gunned it across the plain, trying to outrun the tank's gaze, the long, unblinking barrel still tracking them.

Soldiers laid down suppressing fire, doing everything they could to protect the fragile vehicle as it darted through hell, but the van wasn't invincible. Enemy rounds tore through its rear panels, punching through just inches around the silhouettes of the men inside.

The driver of the van ducked down as he slammed the gas with as much pressure as he could, trying to escape under the storm of gunfire.

Then, just as the van was nearing the road with freedom within reach, the driver jerked once and slumped forward, a clean shot dropping him where he sat. His head landed on the horn, letting out a long, haunting wail as the van began to spin out of control.

Everyone in the van was certain it was over as a tank missile was moments from tearing through the metal shell around them.

But in that instant of paralyzed dread, one of the two soldiers beside Paulo snapped into action. Without hesitation, he reached over the lifeless driver, shoved the door open, and let the body fall onto the dirt. Still moving, he slid behind the wheel and slammed the gas as the tank round screamed toward them.

The van fishtailed, tires clawing for grip. In the rearview mirror, the soldier caught the glow of incoming fire, its flame licking at their heels.

Then, by what could only be called an act of God, the missile missed by inches, streaking past as the boy drove fast, detonating just beyond the narrow road. The explosion rocked the van, shaking it like a toy in the hands of fate.

The boys inside let out a chorus of wild cheers as the battlefield finally vanished behind them.

While some boys cheered, other boys pressed themselves against rocks and trees with their hearts beating through their shirts as an alien metal beast that spit fire from its mouth approached them. The tank as it spewed rounds was like something from a nightmare that you couldn't just run or hide away from.

Even Adisa felt a flicker of horror. His mind raced, searching for any way to stop the slow-moving beast. Then something clicked and he knew he had to act quickly.

His men had gone silent, frozen in fear, terrified of drawing the tank's attention and being blown to pieces. Adisa twisted his head to the right, peeking past the rock he knelt beside. He locked eyes with a nearby boy and shouted, "I need everyone firing at the tank, blind it! Aim for the viewports and get me that RPG!"

The boy nodded, then turned to shout the orders. The call spread like wildfire, boys yelling to each other from cover with their fingers on triggers. Gunfire cracked as they tried to cloud the tank's vision with a hail of bullets.

Adisa didn't believe for a second the rounds would pierce the tank's ballistic glass but that wasn't the point.

A deep rumble cracked through the air. The tank fired again, its shell landing near a crowded group of boys by Adisa. In an instant, they were gone, vaporized into red mist. Adisa flinched, eyes wide, breath caught.

Then movement came from behind him.

A middle-aged soldier appeared, finally with the rocket launcher in hand.

Without a word, Adisa took the old RPG-2 out of his hands. He checked the weight, the grip, then nodded grimly. In a flash he ran off to his right, seemingly away to the side of the soldiers.

Inside the tank, chaos brewed. Bullets peppered the hull, cracking the reinforced glass. Visibility was vanishing.

"We're close to being blinded!" the gunner yelled.

The commander snarled, slammed a fist, and leaned into the periscope. That's when he saw it.

Off to the edge of the battlefield, standing on a rock, a boy, holding something.

"There! Shoot that boy!"

The autoloader slid in a fresh shell. Then, the barrel turned and locked at the feet of its new, seemingly foolish target.

A flash of fire erupted behind Adisa, hot backblast then a rocket streaked forward and flew straight into the tank's barrel.

Adisa dove from the rock, rolling through dirt and debris, heart pounding in his throat. He braced for an explosion.

But none came.

Only more gunfire.

His eyes snapped open as his plan had seemingly failed.

Still, he knew what he saw. The round had gone inside.

He peeked out from behind the rock, watching as the tank shifted, its turret adjusting then it fired.

A deafening *boom* erupted, and the explosion tore inward. The barrel became a flaming tunnel, turning the crew inside into cinders. Fire shot out from the hatch like a furnace as it burst open. It fell still, smoke and flames pouring from every seam.

The beast was dead.

Adisa made it back to where he stood in the first place and in the opposite forest, he noticed a man in white, sticking out like a sore thumb. He recognized this man as David and aimed his AK at the man and looking at him through his sights he realized this rifle wasn't cut out to shoot him accurately. His view glanced below him, noticing Paulo's scoped rifle he had dropped when he was shot.

Adisa ran down and grabbed the gun quickly, realizing when he made it back to cover that it had his comrade's blood on it.

With a now better view, he watched as his enemy's rifle dispersed shell casings, and he screamed with his black aviators above his large mouth. David moved quickly in and out from behind a tree, but Adisa knew that he could easily pull the shot off and kill this man. Through the glass, Adisa tracked David's every move and planned to shoot him in the head.

Adisa knew seeing his red blood splash along his white garments would be satisfying.

He fired the gun off, pulling the trigger too aggressively sending a round into the tree David peeked out from.

As a bullet struck the tree right in front of him, David reloaded and looked around at the amount of bodies at his feet. He knew that Adisa did not care if his men died as long as they pushed to their enemies and then went right through them to the Capital. David at this point saw more bodies and blood

than dirt around the trees his men covered behind and that is when an injured soldier rushed to him and said, “We should retreat and defend Ibis! This is a useless battle.”

The pistol holding younger soldier stared at David all while the leader of this Ibis defensive measure gave him a completely unreadable stare. David, without a detectable emotional look on his face shouted out, “No, we must keep this fight on!”

A few men around David heard this and were shocked as they were clearly having a rough time even if they were killing a good number of Utopians. The young soldier then pleaded and said, “I beg of you David! We will all be stomped–”

Without looking, David swung his rifle to the side with his eyes still on the battlefield and shot the questioning boy, leaving his own soldier to lay deceased on the ground just like the rest of the bodies around them.

No Ibisian saw this senseless crime that David acted didn’t happen, but a lot of soldiers radioed into Samir and asked to be alleviated of this treacherous battle. Men all around David backed up and slowly stood off from him besides around a hundred men and while David fired, he heard a staticky voice that he knew very familiarly.

“David! This is Samir, you must evacuate the area now. The death count of our people has risen too high! We have lost too much!”

The leader of this fight against Utopia stopped his firing and pressed his teeth together in anger of what his leader had to say. Men all around him already started to back away deeper into the forest as they were following Samir’s orders, but this disheartened David who wanted to lob off Adisa’s head. With angst, the second in command of Ibis spoke, “No! We are staying here and fighting till Adisa has been killed!”

In no time to think, the radio started up again and static came from Samir’s end. It broke after a few anxious seconds and Samir spoke, “Do what you want David… You are asking for death.”

David moved his eyes around for a second with the walkie still raised to his face and then he put it down and dropped it and shouted, “Keep fighting till we have Adisa!”

The Utopians quickly realized the Ibisians were retreating, just as Adisa had predicted.

After failing to snipe David, Adisa lost sight of him in the chaos. He caught him in his sights again, but paused, realizing the man was worth more alive than dead. Lowering his rifle, he raised his radio to his mouth.

"All soldiers of Utopia, push forward! These cowards are running away, and we outnumber them greatly!"

His voice crackled across radios. Those without walkies heard it echoed from nearby belts or barked by comrades. The command was clear.

The words drained color from even the hardest soldiers' faces as they knew stepping into the open meant walking into bullets. The line moved anyway.

As bullets flew, those in front became shields, falling dead and clearing the way for those behind them. Adisa knew what he was asking and knew the cost. So, he led by example, stepping out first into the killing field.

His presence alone pulled others from cover.

The plains offered no mercy or cover, only scattered rocks and fragile saplings that bent in the wind and broke under gunfire. The Utopians were slaughtered in droves, but they didn't stop. They were already committed and already exposed.

Bodies filled the low-lying gullies like makeshift trenches. From there, rifles barked back, Utopians firing blindly into the tree line, where the Ibisians had taken cover, fading into the forest's shadows.

Adisa watched the advance unfold and his jaw clenched. He knew the strategy was cold and he knew it would cost a heavy toll.

He also knew the Ibisians had no fight left, only the illusion of defense.

A few loyal men stuck with the optimistic David in the one hundred versus a thousand fight that was occurring. In just a few blinks, bullets and screams tore through the air, and almost every man around David dropped. His idea to keep fighting collapsed with them. The thought seemed foolish now and almost suicidal.

Only five men were around the trees that David was protected with and when he looked around and saw this, he abandoned them and rushed off into the forest while bullets from Utopian's just barely missed him. David's feet pounded against the dirt as he ran, lungs burning and heart

screaming in his chest. He dared one glance back, toward the forest's edge where the enemy surged forward.

David watched as the last of his loyal platoon was cut down.

A Utopian rounded a tree and fired point-blank into the face of one of David's men. The sight jolted something deep inside him. His grip loosened and his escape, his rifle hit the ground and was left behind, forgotten in the grip of tunnel vision and panic.

There was now fight left and all he could do now was run.

David ran without stopping, swerving behind trees as he heard the footsteps of his enemies chasing near as their little feet broke branches. No enemies were in sight, but David could still hear them with their shouts, boots pounding and rifles clattering. He knew he couldn't keep running as his legs were failing him and his lungs felt like they were lined with needles.

The trees were his only chance.

Without thinking about how out of place his flashy white outfit was, he scrambled up a low tree. His arms strained, barely strong enough to pull him from one limb to the next. The branches creaked beneath him, but he didn't stop. He climbed just high enough to crouch, on a shaky perch, holding his breath and trying to disappear.

Men were now in his sight, running fast with their rifles at the ready. David held still, heart pounding like a war drum.

He told himself they'd pass, but as soon as his tree came into view, one of them looked up. Then another. Fingers pointed, voices shouted, rifles snapped toward him like jaws.

David knew he was done for and then thought about how easy it probably was to see him. He then shouted down, "I won't get down for you savages!"

From just behind the group of soldiers, Adisa emerged, rushing forward before slowing to a confident stroll at the base of the medium-sized tree. He clapped his hands as he walked in a slow circle, eyes scanning the branches above.

A sharp laugh slipped out.

He laughed, grinning as he took in the sight of his enemy, hunched and trembling in the tree's spindly limbs.

David, pale and clinging to a shaky branch, looked down into the eyes of a boy who had already won.

Adisa kept circling like a predator that already knew its prey couldn't escape.

"*Oh* David, get down from that tree and if you try any funny shit there will be a hundred bullets that will meet your skin."

From atop the tree while looking down, David whimpered, "Fuck you child!"

Adisa turned his back to the tree and said, "Alright then David, have fun falling down."

He then looked at his soldiers and said, "My men… shoot at the base of this tree until it falls."

Quickly from David's high direction he begged, "No, no, no!"

His pleas were too late.

The soldiers formed a half-circle around the tree and raised their Soviet rifles in unison. Then came the roar, round after round ripping into the fever tree, shredding it like paper. Chunks of bark flew in every direction, and the whole trunk shook violently, swaying like a tree full of ripe cherries being shaken loose.

In moments, the middle of the tree had been chewed down to a splintered stick. The boys paused, watching and wondering which direction it would fall, and whether the branches would crash down onto them.

It began to lean, then it dropped, clearly toppling in the direction of the gunfire. All the soldiers stepped back instinctively, besides Adisa.

Halfway through the fall, David tumbled out and flung from the shaking limbs. He hit the ground with a thud, bouncing off the hard dirt and landing in a twisted sprawl which resulted in Adisa grinning.

Slowly, he began to walk toward the Ibisian general, savoring every step. David writhed on the ground, struggling to pull air into his lungs after the brutal ten-foot drop to his gut.

Adisa looked down at David who was on the ground and smirked as his enemy touched his stomach and tried to mutter out, "I broke my r-rib."

In pure bliss, Adisa lifted his heel up into the air and then thrusted down right on David's upward facing stomach that had already taken a hit. David was red-faced and veined with strain, gasping for air as if his ribs had collapsed inward, threatening to pierce his vital organs. Adisa shifted the weight of his foot, watching David writhe on the ground looking like a wounded animal.

While still having his foot on his victim and staring deep at him, Adisa turned his shoulder to his men behind him and said, “Get a few cars here. We need to get him to Utopia fast.”

David’s eyes went back into his head as Adisa lifted his iron foot off him and he wished he could talk bad towards the boy, but he really couldn’t in his state.

-Chapter XXXXIV-

Like moths to a flame, every one of Adisa’s soldiers, brutally injured or untouched, all gathered around their leader in a smaller crowd than before as the death toll had gotten quite high. Adisa did not stand on top of a

mighty tree anymore, instead he stood on level ground in front of the collapsed tree that David thought he could hide in. With rope tying his wrists to his ankles, the Mayor of Ibis laid down with his mouth in the dirt right next to Adisa who stood confident, but tired.

The boy's shoulders were held low after running and shooting a rifle for a solid hour as the sun began to peek through the clouds.

Even within his fatigue, he spoke up to his people whose weariness also crept through them.

"After long hours of battle, I know my people are itching to get home to their families. This will come, but now I must ask for the success of this war that you all must stay here and defend the outside of Utopia, so late in the night, we can charge on Ibis and destroy it!"

Scoffs and forehead smacks were heard from the crowd and then Adisa shouted, "If we return home now, we will have to refight the same battle as we did today!"

Men questioned why they couldn't just push on Ibis now but didn't mind as it meant resting a bit while Adisa attended business.

From behind the crowd, lights were shined by headlights from the field into the forest and all the soldiers readied their guns again. Adisa looked over his soldiers as they all realized that the three cars that pulled up were from Utopia and one of them was Adisa's own car. Everyone aimed their rifles down and Adisa began to walk towards his crowd as everyone rushed to the cars as they wished to return home. Before Adisa could rush through the crowd, he looked behind himself at David and then looked at one of the boys who shot the tree down and put his arm on his shoulder.

Adisa recognized this boy but could not put his name together, so he said, "What is your name boy?"

The soldier who was starstruck responded loudly with his childish voice, "Ibrahim!"

Taken back by this familiar name, Adisa looked at the soldier for a second and then said, "Grab David and follow me!"

Ibirhim followed Adisa through the thick crowd while dragging David who's injured ribs dragged along the rough earth below him. While shoving through his men, some soldiers grabbed onto their leader's skin and begged him to go home but Adisa ignored this. When Adisa reached the line of gleaming cars, he slid into the driver's seat of his own, freshly vacated by the soldier who'd brought it there.

Shouting to Ibrahim, he ordered, “Throw David in my car, then get in the van, we have to move!”

Ibrihim was now breaking a sweat after he dragged a full-grown man as fast as he could out of the forest, but he still shook his head obediently to his leader and threw the valuable man into Adisa’s car and shut the door.

The moment the door slammed shut, Adisa threw the car into reverse, speeding back with the two vans following him like loyal shadows. He led the charge toward Utopia, while the soldiers outside watched him with their eyes full of longing for to return home soon.

The mirror looking towards the back window of the car had been set to reflect David right into Adisa’s view and the boy examined his enemy with much enmity. Adisa’s eyes were rarely on the road for only a few seconds the whole drive. Most of the time, he watched David, who laid in an eerie silence, almost peaceful. Suddenly, something shifted. A thought, hidden from Adisa, jolted the man in white from his stillness. His eyes darted around the car, wide with fear, and he began breathing sharply through his nose like a runner mid-sprint. Adisa noticed immediately.

The bound-up man shouted out, “You think you’ll win this war, Adisa? You and everybody in Utopia are dead even if you kill me and Samir.”

David’s quick words startled Adisa and caught him off guard, but it didn’t stop there.

“You think your people won’t find out what you did?”

A condescending laugh came from behind Adisa that made him stress for a moment, but he assured himself that there was no way his people would know that he had bombed them. Adisa decided to speak back to his enemy, breaking his laughter and saying, “I have no clue what you are talking about David. I do know one thing. This war had ended the moment that bomb was set off.”

David shrieked, “No! You do not get what you are doing, Adisa. You are simply just a child!”

Veins popped out of David’s face that was pressed against the butt of the car seat and Adisa watched in pleasure as his enemy squirmed around in anger. Adisa studied the familiar face, watching as the man seemed to search for the perfect last words to leave a mark.

He tried to beat David to it by saying, “I am just a child, yet I got every man in my city to approach yours and now we are waiting at your doorstep until I give the word to attack–”

David interrupted, “You know what Adisa… I used to know Ameen.”

Adisa immediately looked down at his pistol in his cup holder that had Ameen’s name etched into it that was clearly visible to David. He had a bad feeling of what his hostage would say next.

“I didn’t know him too well, but I must say… he was a mean son of a bitch. You know something about that don’t you?”

Only the sound of the car’s engine was heard in between the rough staring between Adisa and David through the reflection. Adisa gulped and David saw half of Adisa’s uncomfortable face through the mirror and continued saying, “God, I can only imagine the things he did to your mother.”

Adisa’s past grief for his mother had been short-lived, buried beneath the weight of everything else pressing in on his life. Whenever her memory surfaced, he smothered it, replacing it with something easier, something kinder. Now, David’s words cut through his defenses like a blade to the chest. The memories of that night flooded back, harsher and more relentless than ever before, crashing through his heart with force.

It took a few seconds, but Adisa showed his anger by sucking in the tear he felt coming and slamming on the breaks in the dirt as hard as he could. David’s neck met the back of the passenger seat, and his hip slammed right into the hard glovebox.

He exhaled and then started to laugh with a wheeze as Adisa pushed his driver's door open so hard it closed itself on his way out.

Adisa stepped in front of his car and locked eyes with the soldier in the van behind him. Without speaking, he pointed firmly as a command that needed no explanation. The soldier understood what his leader required of him.

As he held the creaky door open with his body, Adisa reached in and grabbed David by the collar. With his eyes shut, David braced himself, hoping for mercy in whatever was coming next.

Ibrahim met with his leader and watched as Adisa dragged David from the car and threw him to the ground. Fury consumed Adisa as he kicked, shouted, and lashed out at his enemy, as if no amount of violence could ever be enough to settle the storm raging inside him.

After a few brutal face kicks that Ibrahim watched with open eyes, Adisa lunged at Ibrahim with his finger high and screamed, “Hold his hand under this fucking car!”

Ibrahim looked around and then shook his head up and down even if he was unsettled at this anger that he had never seen on this level before. While Adisa angrily rushed back to his driver seat, Ibrahim cut the rope behind David’s arms and let them free which led to David trying his best to escape, pushing himself off the ground even if his face was in the dirt. This squirming proved to be too much for Ibirhim’s strength, so he quickly got off of David and pulled his small revolver out from his pants.

He hesitated for a second as he looked at his enemy that could not sit still and still tried to roll over. Ibrahim swiftly used the pistol to whip him directly on the back of the head, which slowed his roll. David now was subdued with his head buzzing and his left arm now contorted behind his back painfully.

After slipping his handgun back into his pants, Ibrahim then tucked David’s tensed right hand in between ground and the balding tire. With his eyes now closed, the boy smacked on the metal on the back of Adisa’s car two times signaling for him to drive. Ibrahim opened his eyes for just a moment as he waited for the car to move, but curiosity got the better of him.

He watched as the black circle rolled over David’s hand, crushing it from thumb to pinky in a quick act.

Utopia’s bitter enemy lit up with pain, screaming into the sky, his neck straining and his body shaking as bone shattered beneath rubber. Even after the car passed, relief never came. David slammed his forehead into the ground, eyes squeezed shut, trying to bury the agony any way he could. Adisa stormed over to his obedient soldier and the writhing man beneath him, grabbing Ibrahim by his shirt back and tossing him aside like a ragdoll. He needed to see it, to *feel* David’s suffering for himself.

The screams weren’t enough.

He knelt beside David and gripped his wrist, lifting the mangled hand to examine the damage. Skin torn and bones shattered, the hand looked barely human. As it rose from the small pool of blood, each finger dangled limply, pointing toward the earth as blood dripped in a slow, steady stream. Still, Adisa felt no satisfaction. He let the ruined hand fall and reached up to open the car door hovering just above them.

Ibrahim, now pale and nauseous, backed away toward his van. The sound of crunching bone against the dirt still rang in his ears, and the memory made his stomach twist.

Behind him, Adisa shoved the screaming David into the back of the car, this time not onto the seat, but down on the floor.

The rest of the ride, David said nothing and made sure to keep his mouth shut tight.

Above the bar they usually gathered beneath, Abel and the rest of the A.U.C. sat in anxious silence, nursing beers and smoking cigarettes like it was the end of the world. Most of the city had gone off to fight for Adisa against Ibis, but the A.U.C. wasn't fooled as they saw through the flimsy story pinned on Ibis after the bombing.

Few words were exchanged. They simply waited, dreading the return of the bloodied and broken, as the city would soon carry the cost of a war.

All they had wanted was to expose Adisa and when they finally did, it was all overturned by Adisa's calculated countermoves. He was always one step ahead.

The work they had risked their lives for now felt meaningless. Some among them, heavy with doubt, were already toying with the idea of walking away from the group for good, giving in to the weight of their pessimism.

Abel knew that if Ibis did the bombing, they would have more to lose than to gain and at the least Samir would have told him the plan. The damned brother knew that this was all done by Adisa to cover for his actions that just almost caught up to him.

While staring in the bleak street in front of the bar, Abel was jolted in his seat by a buzz in his pocket. His vision went from stagnant to moving and he quickly pulled his phone out and got out of his seat. All of his comrades stared at him in questioning.

Abel turned the corner of the bar and without even reading the name on the phone he answered the call. Without even a second passing, Samir shouted, "*What the hell!*"

He slammed his fist against his thigh, eyes wide with disbelief as he watched hundreds of his own wounded soldiers limping and bleeding through the gates of his city.

Abel had no idea what to say so he let Samir get his anger out as he continued, “I did not set off that bomb I swear to God! Just when I think things will turn around, it backfires in my face.”

Abel uttered, “Calm down. It is neither of our faults–”

“No but it is Adisa’s fault! He bombed his own people and now this war is being raged even harder with my men retreating! You need to tell the people of what Adisa has done!”

Abel returned, “Who's going to believe me now? How do you–”

The President interrupted, “And Abel, no matter what in this world happens… You must keep me alive. If worse comes to worst!”

Samir while pointing at the phone hung it up, Leaving Abel with a deep pit in his stomach as the pressure increased and the battle against Adisa seemed impossible.

When Adisa made it to Utopia, he felt relief and drove through his gates wishing there were people to greet him, but he realized that people were more than likely laying low in their homes as this was a time of war.

The brief thought of Paulo entered his mind as he drove up the hill to his home and he quickly forgot about his friend when he remembered that he had a torture toy in the back of his car.

When his car parked, Adisa practically jumped out of his car and made it to David’s door as quickly as he could.

The rest of the small group of soldiers got out of their vans and cracked their backs in relief to be home.

Adisa dragged David out of the car who barely looked alive, and with his hands on both of his hostage’s wrists, Adisa looked at his comrades and said, “Move my bed to the side and set up a rope for this motherfucker to be swung by.”

All of the soldiers silently obliged and ran into the house one after the other like ants in a colony.

Adisa held his enemy in his grip, a rush of ecstasy flooding through him as he reveled in the power he knew this brutal bond would bring.

The Mayor of Ibis was his ticket out of this war and into something far darker. What he knew he would do wasn’t war, not in any honorable sense. It was the desecration of a people, a cruelty so deep it could never be called anything but pure, unrelenting terror.

David didn't peep at all even when he made it to the now odd-looking master bedroom with Adisa's bed in the corner and a light glowing from underground out of the floor. He looked at his surroundings and wondered what dark fury of torture awaited him below Adisa's abode.

Adisa made it to the top of the steps that went below to the basement and pushed David down the stairs as he was still tied up for him to have the hard way down. The man hit his head against the corners of the hard steps and found himself aching more at the bottom where he investigated the dimly lit room.

Adisa was the next to step into the room, his gaze sweeping over his victim's body before settling on the dimly lit space beyond. In the center, a single rope dangled from a metal U-shaped pull-up bar. Cobwebs clung to the walls, thick and suffocating and to Adisa, the desolation seemed fitting for his friend's new home.

The short rope that had a lanyard knot tied into it was awaiting David, and the bloody man was hoisted upside down in the middle of the room with the bottom of his head just a touch over the ground. Blood dripped from his body onto the floor and Adisa looked at him up and down and could not get enough of what he was looking at.

This was the culmination of enough hard work to kill a man and lots of fate on Adisa's side.

While Adisa self-gloated in his golden space he had created in his mind, he was brought back to reality when from below him, David muttered, "Let me at least make one call to my wife before you do anything."

The soft creak of the rope swaying echoed through the room and as the sound settled into the silence, a darker thought slithered into Adisa's mind. His gaze hardened as he realized now, it wasn't just David who would suffer. Adisa stared at David for a long, silent minute, offering no answer to his pleas. Without a word, he turned away and as he reached the top of the stairs, he flipped off the basement light, and closed the trap door above him, sealing his victim in darkness.

Ibrahim and two other soldiers stood in Adisa's room and their leader stared at them and then said, "In five minutes go down and wrap the man's hand up so he doesn't bleed out. Where is Paulo?"

One of the soldier's spoke up and said, "He is being kept in the little girl's room here, a couple of the soldiers have already gone in to see him."

Adisa realized that he should have gone to see Paulo first instead of dragging David as his men could have done that, but now he had a selfish purpose in doing so.

The child leader walked down the hallway to Cyril's daughter's room and opened the door to be met with warm air and five soldiers and two doctors all standing around Paulo.

The leader of Utopia did his best to act like he cared the most out of anyone and wailed, "Oh my God, is he alive?"

Adisa pushed past his soldiers and the two nurses who were dressed without scrubs.

Paulo was wide awake, and Adisa put his hand on his friend's chest as the closest nurse assured him, "There was no bullet to remove, He is all patched up and he will survive."

A crocodile tear with no facial reaction came from Adisa and he muttered, "Are you sure? I can't have my best soldier die on me!"

Both nurses shook their heads yes and even Paulo thought his leader was overreacting.

"I'm alright Adisa… Just calm down," Paulo spoke without an interruption in his voice.

Adisa's hand was now on his ally's cheek, then he turned back to the rest of the people in the room and said mournfully, "Let me be alone with Paulo. Thank you for your help, nurses."

The nice ladies smiled at him, and everyone evacuated the pink walled room that had been turned into a sick bay.

Adisa looked at Paulo who looked drugged up, then he put his attention to his friend's I.V. stood and tried to read what they were giving him. The door shut behind Adisa and then he said, "They giving you good shit in here?"

Paulo looked up at Adisa and for some reason felt scared. He chalked it up to being high and then responded, "Yea… Doesn't make me want to be out fighting any less though."

Adisa smirked and took his hand off his friend and then the two stared at each other in silence.

"You know, we pushed the Ibisians back to their walls and captured David. We are occupied all over the outside of their territory now," Adisa said proudly.

Paulo's eyes lit up for a moment and he said, "That quick? Those cowards couldn't put up a fight for shit! In only a couple days of war we have the second in command of South Sudan. Where is he?"

Both boys shared a laugh beneath the makeshift yellow hospital light, an awkward fixture of steel and plastic set on wheels, casting a dim glow over them.

Adisa responded, "David is right under us in the small bunker the old mayor was holed up in."

Within the excited eyes of Paulo, a thought popped into his mind which made his eyes simmer down. He asked Adisa this thought, saying, "How many of us died?"

Adisa was taken aback by the question, and for a moment, the two locked eyes in such heavy silence that they almost believed they could hear the hum of the light above them.

"I don't know…As many that were needed to die," Adisa responded disgracefully.

Paulo put his head back into his pillow in reaction to Adisa's remark and he realized that this remark maybe wasn't as bad as it seemed, and his medication could be making him think the worst. Adisa's words almost felt like a weird sentence in a dream to Paulo, with its plain absurdity and no remorse.

He came up with excuses for his leader and realized there was nothing wrong with what Adisa said.

As they both didn't talk to each other, Paulo wondered if Adisa even said the sentence in the first place when he very clearly did. Adisa finally spoke up to show the main reason why he even visited Paulo in the first place through his busy schedule and said, "You know Paulo, that cousin of yours, Loro…

I forgot his number as it's only saved on Rakeem's phone. Could you retell it to me?"

At this moment Paulo knew that Adisa wasn't coming in to check up on him, but instead to get something out of the interaction which was the usual in any conversation with Adisa.

Paulo held his head and said, "Ah shit Adisa. Let me think what it is… Remember I just got shot."

The boy standing above the immobilized Paulo, clouded him with untrue comfort and said, "I know, I know. Take your time."

After Adisa said this, the number came instantly to Paulo from the deepest crater of his mind and he said, “Two Four Nine. Eight Four Seven, One Five Eight Zero.”

Adisa exclaimed, “There we go. I have a quick business proposal for him that needs to be done tonight. I will tell you about it later; You need to rest.”

Even if he wanted to know what Adisa needed to secretly call his cousin for, Paulo watched as his leader turned from him and left out of the door.

The leader of Utopia, walked past his men and nurses dismissively through his own house and then walked into his room where he shut the door behind him. He went to the corded phone on a small wooden nightstand next to his bed and picked it up and did his best to remember the number that was given to him. On his first attempt he got the number right, leading to a couple rings of the phone.

Tripping over bottles and other assorted trash, Loro barely picked up his old landline phone in time for Adisa. In his blaring apartment room that was being hotboxed along with Humph, He used his ashy fingers to lift the phone to his face.

Loro said loudly, “Hello?”

A silent voice Loro could barely hear over his CD-Player responded, “Is this Loro I am speaking with?”

Adisa awaited a response as he heard Loro yell at the slow humph to pause the music. Humph quickly did so after falling on his face out of a lazy boy and then Loro responded, “Yes, this is Loro. Now who is this?”

“It is Adisa, we haven’t talked before, but you know my friend Paulo.”

Loro looked back at Humph excitedly and then chipperly responded, “Yes, I do! Is this call about our dealings?”

“No, it is not about our dealings but something more important. I am going to need you to do a task for me… Tonight. You can do it with or without that retard you know. You will get paid five grand for this and after this you can reside here in Utopia. To make this quick, I have David Akech in my presence, and I need photos of his wife to threaten him. I also need you to…”

Loro’s face turned sour as he heard what Adisa continued to say for this deal.

Automatically, Loro silently spoke out, “Are you kidding me? Five Gs for that? With this war raging on, their home’s gotta be crowded with men.”

Adisa waited and then responded, “How about ten?”

The dealmaker awaited a response and was met with the number, “Twenty.”

He scoffed after what the negotiator had said and then Adisa responded, “Fine.”

-Chapter XXXXV-

With just himself, Samir droned in his car as its wheel’s turned onward towards David’s house where he would have to become the bearer of bad news to his general’s wife. His mind was empty on the top but through it was a mix of rage and dejection. He questioned if this war was meant to be

pushed on any further as the man who he could depend on the most was now as good as dead in Adisa's captivity.

Near the front of the city, citizens and soldiers armed themselves and all waited for the storm of Utopians to flood around Ibis, but Samir knew that David's wife would be home.

Only one light was on in the lone house he approached. Throughout the years, Samir remembered the times he and his wife would spend at David's house along with Breonna, David's spouse.

He thought about the difference between the lively house where Christopher would play outside of and now the desolate one that stood not proud with family but alone with only one person to keep it standing.

Samir's big hands grasped around the doorknob and without knocking he entered David's home. He took one foot into the house and said, "Breonna? It is Samir."

His other foot went inside of the house, and he shut the door behind him. The house was silent, and Samir couldn't even hear Breonna when she began to walk to the front door. She turned the corner and both of them locked eyes with David's wife being halfway hidden. With her fingers on the corner of the wall she asked, "What are you doing here?"

Samir took his vision to the left where Christophers room was and caught a glimpse of the boy's childish room. He knew that Breonna was not ecstatic to see him as her son had just died and she did not want to have anything to do with David or Samir.

After David left the house, she acted as if she couldn't care less if he was dead or alive but still, she had a bit of remorse left over for the man she loved dearly.

Samir politely asked, "May I come in?"

He waited for a response from Breonna who only had a robe on. She responded, "Sure…"

He followed her into the living room where she tried to get on the couch and Samir stopped her saying, "Don't sit please."

As the man extended his hand, David's wife glanced at Samir, and that's when it hit her. He hadn't come to apologize for Christopher. Whatever he was here to say, it was something else. Deep in her gut, she didn't believe David was dead, but she knew that he had been in battle and in Samir's eyes, showing a rare sliver of remorse, she saw that something was terribly wrong.

Samir got it over with and spoke, “David has been captured, Breonna. *But* we will–”

“*No!”*

Breonna cut off Samir's glimpse of hope through words and walked towards him and shouted, “How? How could this happen!”

She hit his tall stomach, and he tried to back up and said, “I wasn’t there, So I don’t know!”

Breonna wailed back, “Why weren’t you there?”

The two let off of each other and created some distance. While waiting for an answer, the eyes of Breanna skipped along Samir’s stance and focused in on the small pistol in a black holster on his hip. As soon as he noticed her staring at the piece, He knew what was to happen and took his right arm and reached for it. By the time Samir’s hand was below his breast, The woman’s full hand rested on the pistol. Her skinny fingers let up the button on the holster and then she ripped the pistol out, not before Samir had his hand wrapped on her wrist.

Breonna jammed the revolver into Samir’s side, then their eyes locked in desperation. Their hands tangled in a frantic struggle, clawing and grabbing, yet neither took a single step back. Finally, afraid the standoff would stretch too far, or that Breonna might actually pull the trigger, Samir relented. He released her arm, slowly raising his hands toward the ceiling, fingers spread in surrender.

Both of them breathed heavily and Breonna kept the pistol pointed at Samir but now from a distance.

Samir shouted out, “You want to kill me Breonna? After all these years of Friendship?”

The fighting spirit of David’s wife that was shown in her eyes was dimmed down and turned into ruefulness. Samir saw this and his shaken state was calmed as well. He tried his best to comfort her by putting down his hands and saying, “We can get him back.”

Right when he said that, in a flash Breonna pointed the gun from his stomach to the side of her head and shouted, “No you can’t, He is dead in the hands of Adisa!”

The leader of Ibis began to shake again, and he tried to think of something to say but he couldn’t, so he acted on a limb and lunged towards her with his hands out. His fingers wrapped around the pistol, and it fired,

with him feeling the fire emitting from the barrel and not knowing if it had shot into anyone.

A yelp was shouted by Breonna then she fell to the floor.

Samir followed her to the floor and felt her still breathing as he held his smoking pistol in the air with her in his arms. While dust from the roof fell on both of them, Samir got off of her and got up to his feet as he looked down at the woman he had always known to be happy, as she lost her sense of sanity. Even if she didn't have a gun, Samir felt sadness and fear towards the woman. Samir didn't know what to do and took a few backwards steps away from the woman. Breonna cried in a ball on the ground and felt nothing good.

"I-I will go get my wife. You stay here Breonna, okay? Everything is going to be okay…"

Samir spoke, then rushed into the kitchen and picked up the small knife block as he was rushing out of the house and even checked the sink to make sure there was nothing, she could harm herself with. He ran to his car and got in quickly and spun his wheels around in the dirt as he sped off towards his home.

In the field to the left of David's home, two inexperienced young men did horribly at running as low as they could and as staying as silent as possible as branches and brush made as much noise as they could right under them. David's home had narrowed into their vision and before they could get any closer, Loro put his hand up to the drooling Humph and said, "Stop."

A shadowy figure ran out of the house they were being paid to spy on and got into their car as if they had seen a ghost inside. The two watched as the man sped off backwards in his car as quickly as he could, and they questioned who it could be.

Before getting closer to the home, Loro looked at Humph and said, "There could be other men inside, this needs to be quick."

Peeking behind the closest rock to the house, the two men looked at the house and tried their best to figure out what window they would get this picture from.

The smartest of the two led the way, running right over Samir's wheel marks in the dirt and then approached the home's walls tightly.

To his right, the front window of the house stood, and before looking into it, Loro looked around his peripheral to make sure he didn't see any

soldiers. Once his eyes peeked just over the bottom of the window, inside he saw the covered face of Breonna, with her fingers digging into her face's skin. It was obvious she was bawling her eyes out and Loro knew at some point she would have to uncover her face to breath.

Loro whispered to Humph, "Pass it!"

Then the minion passed the camera quickly. With the old black boxy camera in his hands, he pressed it against the glass of the window as he waited for her to catch a breather from her weeping.

Slowly each finger was dragged down her skin revealing an open mouth and wet skin as her tears had squashed under her hands and spread everywhere on her face. Loro closed his eyes and took the photo, then he retreated the camera down from the window and began to breathe heavily as he knew this scared feeling was not over because there was still much to do.

While taking the last turn to David's home, Samir focused on his wife who had an elbow against her open window. She was sad and displeased at the news of David's capture and his wife's despair.

Hiba had never supported the war and ever since Adisa rose to power and tore a rift through her marriage, she had grown to despise it even more.

She could hardly believe her husband when he burst into their home, breathless and urgent, recounting what happened with their close friend. Even now, she struggled to accept it, because Hiba only trusted what she saw with her own eyes.

She and Samir drove in silence, the car rolling steadily toward the house. No words were needed between them.

As they neared, an inch of movement in the only lit window caught Samir's eye. He glanced over at the living room and froze.

A silhouette was hung in the pale glow, pitch black and eerily still, its legs appearing limp, swaying slightly… as if suspended from the ceiling.

A chill surged down Samir's arm, raising goosebumps beneath his sleeve. He blinked hard and looked again to see the window was empty.

He let out a slow breath as it was just a trick of light.

After parking, both stepped out of the car. Samir ached to run inside, to make sure everything was okay, but he held back as he didn't want to startle her.

Just as he did before, he opened the door slightly and put his foot into the home. His wife followed right behind him with her hand on his giant back.

"Breonna… It is Samir again. I am here with Hiba, let us talk."

For some reason the house felt even more silent than before, and Samir felt as if he had just walked into cursed grounds. He gulped and put his second foot onto the floor which sent a large creak throughout the house from the old light-colored wood. Once the creak settled, and silence returned it was broken by the sound of wood splitting, and something heavy falling to the floor. Samir's eyes opened as his wife put her hand on her mouth, and he ran to the corner to see what he knew he would see.

On the floor in front of the low couch, Breonna lay still, a rope around her neck and a shattered pot near her head. Samir froze, a wave of nausea rising to his throat. He couldn't even bring himself to look at the broken ceiling above her.

Behind him, Hiba leaned over his shoulder, trying to see. Though short, she caught just enough, a glimpse of the collapsed ceiling and the lifeless purple hue of her friend's skin.

Her heart sank. Before she could react, Samir noticed her staring and aggressively pushed her back into the hallway.

"Don't look!" he barked at her as he stepped her way.

Hiba stumbled back, now trembling as fear of her husband's sudden intensity overtook her body. Tears welled in her eyes as she sniveled, the reality sinking in.

Her friend was gone.

Samir leaned his forehead against the wall, hand covering his face, struggling to keep his own sorrow at bay. This war had taken too much from him, more than any battlefield ever could and now, staring down the latest cost, he knew, if the war with his son didn't stop now, it would strip him of whatever remained.

Paulo who was sweating in a hospital bed and had been tortured with the pain of a bullet wound didn't catch a break even in his bed as David's screams underground were so loud that they sounded like they were right outside of the door. It kept the boy awake and sent chills down his spine.

He was pretty sure Adisa had the basement door wide open for anyone to hear David's screams.

A faint sound of ringing overcame the noise of screaming in Paulo's ears. It was very fuzzy sounding as the drugs he had been taking affected his senses.

It seemed as if it was in another room and on the second ring of the phone, Paulo pushed himself off of the bed and grabbed his I.V. stand.

Being compelled to grab the phone, Paulo found himself in Adisa's room and he picked up the phone. When the phone touched his ear, he felt like himself again.

The person calling listened in and heard the faint screams in the background. He then asked Paulo a simple question and the boy almost dropped his jaw.

The man who called, who Paulo had never met but heard much about, sounded distressed to Paulo and the boy felt the same way once he heard the man. He looked at the phone he held and wondered if what was happening was real, then he put the phone back up to his face and said,

"I'm grabbing him now."

Paulo rested the phone right next to its core on the table and then waddled to the top of the entrance of the basement.

"Adisa!"

The shouts coming from the disabled boy were futile against the sound of screams from David.

Paulo brought his I.V. stand down each step until he reached the basement where Adisa was hunched over a hanging David. Paulo shouted his friend's name again and then Adisa turned around with a still flaming blow torch in his hands. The screams coming from David soothed but Adisa still had a sanguineous look in his eyes. With anger in his heart Adisa said loudly, "Why did you interrupt me?"

David swung behind Adisa with his white pants turned red and after Adisa shouted, Paulo got a good look at the man who was half naked and bleeding from head to toe. Open wounds and burn marks covered David's body and Paulo examined them thoroughly.

Adisa interrupted his train of thought and shouted again, "What is it?"

"It's Samir. He's on the phone."

Adisa's anger simmered down then he began to laugh, putting his hands on his knees.

"You really interrupted this interrogation for a joke?"

Paulo shook his head and said, "No! He's upstairs on the phone."

The boy said it in a serious matter and Adisa could tell he was telling the truth. He put down his blowtorch and pushed past Paulo to run up the stairs. Adisa slowed down when he got to the table and picked up the phone like he couldn't believe it. All he then said was, "Hello?"

Samir met him back with, "Hello."

His father's voice was recognized by Adisa and that is when he knew that this was not a joke. The two waited for someone to talk again, then Samir exhaled and said, "This must end Adisa. This war will kill the both of us."

On Ibis's airstrip hundreds of injured men received mediocre medical care from a handful of nurses that had no way of helping every man. Right next to them more soldiers prepared for more bloodshed. Samir watched this from his home's window while his phone was pressed to his ear.

He understood that his men could endure no further battles. On the other hand, Adisa did not care how many more battles his people could take.

No response was given from Adisa, and Samir even thought that the boy hung up. He decided to speak again saying, "It will be as simple as you giving over David, then these battles will stop… His wife has now hung herself over the grieving of both her son and her husband in the war. This must *Stop!"*

Adisa smirked and then broke his inappropriate face and said, "I am sorry to hear that Samir. It is funny… You were the one who started this whole ordeal and now that your son has overtaken the luck in this battle you want to call it off."

"It is a simple request, Adisa! Just let David free wherever you want and then call off your soldiers from ever coming near Ibis again. After that you won't have to worry about your people being killed."

"I don't have to worry now. Your fighting is pitiful."

Samir was taken back at this comment and recalled his first thoughts of ending this war came as soon as he heard about the bombing. He then responded to his son, "I know you don't Adisa, because you have never cared about a single one of your people, just yourself!"

The child began to chuckle while staring at his hostage and then he said, "I will give back David. And I will pull back my soldiers. This war is

over Samir. But for a little bit longer let me have some fun with your general. Just as you did with me."

David, who was hanging by his ankles down the stairs, heard Adisa and tried his best to scream out so Samir could hear.

This long-range scream was heard by the President on the phone and the son hung up on Samir leaving him on a cliffhanger.

Now only Samir's imagination could guide him to what was to happen to David.

When the call ended, Samir felt like throwing the phone out of the window, but he calmed himself. Now he was in Adisa's malicious will for if David would return safely or not but at least the war was officially over.

Paulo was now at the door, feeling hurt and ready to leave to rest back in his hospital bed. A small soldier shoved past the injured Paulo into Adisa's room where he caught the attention of Adisa and Paulo. The boy then spoke and said, "You have two visitors, a man named Loro… and a man named Humph. Can they be let in?"

Adisa locked eyes with the boy and realized it was the same one he had stricken in the stomach just before the bombing. He took his chance to intimidate the boy for no reason again and took slow steps towards him. His hand swung up towards the boy's nose as he spoke, "Of course, let them in now."

Seconds later, Dumb and Dumber strolled down Adisa's hallway, wide-eyed as they took in the luxury of the nicest house they'd ever stepped foot in.

Adisa and Paulo met them halfway down the corridor. Paulo shifted uncomfortably, slightly embarrassed for his cousin to see him like this, wounded and weary.

Loro glanced between them, his brow raised. "What happened to my cousin?"

Paulo shot back without hesitation. "What do you think? I took a damn bullet."

Loro smirked at the bite in his cousin's tone.

"Ah, I figured, jackass," he then said, punching Paulo lightly on the arm.

Then he turned to Adisa, extending a hand. "This is a beautiful home, Adisa. Maybe my friend Humph can be your butler."

Laughter echoed through the hall, even from the clueless Humph, who smiled without knowing why.

Adisa chuckled and said, “I’ll think about it. Now, show me the photos.”

Loro snapped back to business, pulling an envelope from his back pocket. He held it up and Adisa took it gently, his fingers careful as he cracked open the seal. Inside, nestled in the shadows of the envelope, were two Polaroids. The first gave him no reaction but the second made him wince.

He quickly closed the envelope and looked around, making sure no one had seen what was inside.

Loro leaned in, casually asking, “Everything look good?”

Still absorbing what he’d seen, Adisa nodded slightly.

“Yeah.”

Then, without another word, he turned and walked alone back into his bedroom.

When the child made it to David, even if the hostage looked bloody and broken down, he had a small smile on his face like he had some sort of leverage on Adisa.

In a snarky way, David said to Adisa, “You giving me up?”

Adisa looked down at the envelope and laughed a tad and then responded with, “Who said that?”

David looked from side to side, upside down and then said, “Samir! You have no option but to let me go!”

“That’s what he thinks, but really he just made it easier for me to use you.”

The general hanging from the ceiling shook his body and watched as his captor took a photo out of the envelope he held. It reminded him of when he murdered Afia and pulled out a similar Polaroid to show the child.

Adisa did the same thing David did not too long ago and knelt down and shoved a photo picture right in front of him. The boy kept the photo in front of his enemy to torture him as he put the envelope in his back pocket.

“No,” David muttered in a defeated tone. As he shook around, he continued with his voice raised, “Don’t you dare do anything to her, motherfucker!”

He knew his wife’s crying face was mourning from the news of his capture and he could tell the pain she felt was immeasurable even if it was

just a photo. Adisa smirked and said, “She won’t be hurt David, I don’t want to do that. But, if you do not listen to what I have to say, I have commandos in Ibis right under your noses that could kill her in mere minutes after a call.”

David clenched his teeth and shook around like he was trying to get water off of him.

The boy stood up tall away from David’s low head and then said, “I will set you free, but you must do me a favor. You must go to the very gas station where we met and call Samir to tell him your location. You will wait for him to arrive and that is all you need to do.”

David began profusely laughing and this provoked Adisa to kick him right in his teeth. When Adisa put his foot back down, with a mouth full of blood David said, “You think I'm gonna let you set up an ambush against me and Samir? You're out of your damn mind!”

Above him, the child exhaled and said, “I know you have lost a lot David, and that is why I’m still giving you this option through your betrayal and misdeeds. I don’t even want to kill my father; I just want to capture him so this can be a more peaceful transition of power. You won’t be touched David, and neither will your wife if you listen to me. After this you can run off with your wife and never see me again.”

David coughed in response and then said, “You devil, I know you. You’ll just kill me, Samir and then my wife! You're a sick child!”

Instead of a polite comforting attempt at negotiating, Adisa did what he did best and made his face stone straight and gave a cold and truthful remark.

“No matter what you think of me, make your choice David. The clock is ticking.”

Memories and thoughts teemed David’s mind, with him thinking that even if Adisa was a trickster, he would be smarter to at least try and save his wife.

Even if Samir was his closest friend, saving his wife and starting over after their loss would be the healthiest thing for him and Breonna.

Adisa swayed his hand towards the cold floor where a pile of sharp handheld torture devices laid, and he sifted his fingers through the devices before landing on an ivory straight razor. It was old and the razor blade on it was half rusted and the ivory on its grip was cracked. David couldn’t take one more bit of torture and muttered, “Adisa.”

He expected the child to stop but Adisa lightly grazed the blade on his bare stomach at a tilt so as to not cut him.

“Adisa! Listen to me!”

The child stopped in place and scuffed his blade off the chest hairs of his victim. Through his tunnel vision of slicing his enemy to near death, Adisa didn’t even hear the first calling of his name.

He gave a disgusted look down to David and then said, “What was that?”

David cried out, “Cut me down! I will be at your bidding just let me down.”

Adisa knew it was only a matter of time before David caved, before the offer too dangerous to decline would sink into his bones. Without a word, he raised the very razor he once intended to slice him with and began cutting the rope above him, thread by thread.

David heard the fibers snapping, sharp and thin. He knew the drop wasn’t far, but without his hands to break the fall, he’d land hard and headfirst.

Adisa stopped once only two threads held the man’s full weight then he stepped back and watched.

The final strands gave way, and David crashed onto the floor. His head and neck struck the ground with a thud that sent pain shooting down his spine. He writhed like a wounded animal, helpless, squirming on the concrete floor.

Adisa knelt beside him, lowering himself to one knee, watching him with calmness.

David slowly opened his eyes and saw the glint of the 1911 in Adisa’s hand. Reflexively, he shut them tight and tilted his head back, bracing for the end.

The cold barrel pressed against his forehead.

“You make one wrong fucking move,” Adisa growled, voice low and cutting, “And you’ll be put down. You're lucky I'm even giving you a chance, after the shit you've done.”

He pressed the gun harder into David’s skull, just for a moment and then pulled away abruptly.

Adisa moved behind him and, with none of the ceremony he gave the first rope, quickly sliced through the bindings around David’s arms.

Six Soldiers now surrounded David as everyone besides Paulo from the house was outside and ready to put into action another trick up Adisa's sleeve.

David shoved Adisa's soldiers every time they tried to put hands on him which led to them drawing guns.

The leader of Utopia noticed this and was disappointed. He shouted, "Put your damn guns down! David get in the car."

His soldiers poked David around into the car where Adisa drove and only one of the soldiers accompanied the two in the backseat with the hostage.

Adisa drove his sedan and lit up a cigarette on the way out of Utopia as three vans followed him.

His eyes lingered to his rearview mirror that was set on David. Adisa then adjusted it to actually see out of the back of his window and when he saw the cavalry behind him it made him smile.

He now wore the broken Ray-Bans that belonged to David and was dressed in a button up top.

-Chapter XXXXVI-

The gas station was now in view and Adisa looked in the forests and fields surrounding it and couldn't see a single soldier. He planned that if he was to see one that he was surely to reprimand them.

With his car still running and now in the front of the gas station, Adisa shouted out of his window to the rest of the vans, “Drive into the forest with the vehicles and keep them out of sight!”

Adisa looked in his backseat as the vans drove past his car and told the lone soldier in his car, “Get David outside this car then take my car into the forest.”

The child felt like this was the culmination of many events that he had put into place and that this would be the final day of the Ibis–Utopia war.

He adjusted his shirt and walked towards David who now didn’t have a soldier at his side. Adisa walked past him and then opened his unlocked trunk where he grabbed his AK-47 that he missed so much.

He looked at David leaning against his car and shouted, “Walk!”

David stood for a second, trying to be defiant and Adisa quickly raised his rifle and then the man slowly walked towards the gas station.

The boy poked his enemy with the rifle and David threw his hands up in fear of the boy's recklessness.

The gun barrel of the rifle stuck into David’s back as he scooted towards the entrance of the gas station where he and Adisa had first met. He was walking quite slow for Adisa’s preference, so the boy decided to let the rifle off of his back and blow a shot into the ground right next to David’s right leg.

“Hurry up!”

Every soldier in the proximity of the gas station watched and readied their rifles once they heard the gunshot but realized it was just Adisa. As the echo of the gunshot faded into silence, David rose to his feet with his legs stiff, standing motionless by the door. His chest rose and fell with each tense breath, his heart pounding as Adisa slowly twisted the doorknob to the petrol station’s entrance.

The door creaked open.

David’s eyes widened as his eyes adjusted to the dark inside. In the shadows of the room stood a crowd of Utopians, shoulder to shoulder, their gazes locked on him and their leader. Not one of them smiled, not even at Adisa. They knew better than to show joy in front of David.

Adisa shoved David forward. The general stumbled and was pushed deeper into the station until they reached the cleared-out armory. Every eye tracked his movements.

Then he locked eyes with the old rotary phone resting like an artifact atop the dusty countertop.

"You know what to do," Adisa rolled off his tongue carelessly at his pawn.

David's left hand lifted slowly his index and thumb shaking as they picked up the receiver. From the shadows, his right hand emerged, fingers hesitating before dialing.

He glanced down and noticed the blood on the floor, dried and crusted beneath his shoes. It sent a cold shiver up his back.

He looked back to the phone and began to dial Samir.

Two.

Spin.

Four.

Spin.

Nine.

Spin.

David hesitated, hitting his finger against the small piece of metal as his decision of betrayal became more concrete.

Seven.

Spin.

Six.

Spin.

Eight.

Spin.

One.

Spin.

One.

Spin.

Four.

Spin.

Zero.

Spin.

Not only did David's phone spin, but his head did as well as the inextricable feeling of regret completely overtook his body. A pain in his stomach made him want to curl into a ball and die yet he had to stand there as a bunch of children watched him make a call to his best friend where he would be ambushed. What a disgraceful thing to do, but just the thought of leaving this disturbed world in the past with his wife kept him going.

The phone buzzed for what seemed like three too many times, then the sound of the phone popping out of place was heard in the top of the phone that ejected Audio.

Samir was not the first to talk, with the brutalized David speaking just as worrisome as he felt.

Worriedly, David spoke, "Samir? This is David, Adisa let me free! I am at the gas station. You need to hurry now!"

On the other end of the phone, Samir looked around his house dumbfounded and said, "David. Stay right where you are. Do you know of any soldiers in the area?"

The captive soul in the gas station looked to his newfound master and the child leader whispered, "Adisa already retreated his men. I saw them come into Utopia when Adisa kicked me out."

While David absorbed information from the boy, on the phone, Samir asked, "David?"

The hostage acted as if nothing had happened and frantically repeated what Adisa said, "Adisa already retreated his men! I saw them come into Utopia when he kicked me out!"

"Alright David we are on the way now!"

Samir slammed the phone down into its place and sprinted to the airstrip to gather his men. A good group of men were standing around the injured ones and Samir shouted to them, "I know where David is! We must get him now he is at the petrol station!"

Every soldier, wounded or whole, looked up in disbelief. If they'd been asked moments earlier, they would've bet every last dollar that David was dead.

Now, soldiers were excited and anything felt possible. Men reached for rifles they had hoped to lay down for good, but this time, they carried them for something they believed in.

Word spread like wildfire.

At the center of it all, the leader of Ibis climbed into his car. Engines roared to life behind him as four 6x6 military trucks, each trailing black smoke like banners of war moved slowly.

Packed tight, every truck held thirty soldiers. Over a hundred men rode out in force. Samir turned in disbelief.

In his mind it was way too much.

He stepped out from the car, boots hitting the dirt with a crunch, then shouted to the two closest trucks, “I only need one! Just for insurance. Adisa pulled his men back!”

There was hesitation.

Samir’s voice cut sharper, “We’re not walking into a trap. David wouldn’t lie.”

With that, the other trucks pulled back.

Samir rolled out of Ibis with just thirty-two soldiers as he knew his friend would always tell the truth but felt it was necessary to have men guarding the Capital.

Only two cars approached the desolate looking gas station and the Utopians in the trees and shadowy land around the gas station laughed as they knew this would be an unfair massacre.

From inside the gas station, Adisa looked through a crack in the wood covering the once glass windows and noticed the enemy cars driving slowly but close. As he watched the cars drive under the dark sky, he raised his radio to his lips and said to his men, “They are approaching, no one comes out until I say so!”

The child leader of Utopia pushed through the crowd of his soldiers in the station; their ranks parted in silence as Adisa walked toward the back of the armory.

There, slumped in a dirt-caked corner, sat David.

His head was buried in his hands, knees drawn close, body shrunken like a prisoner forgotten by time. A few sharp taps of metal echoed off his skull.

David flinched. Slowly, he peeled his fingers from his face, looking up through the cracks of fear.

There stood Adisa, watching him in cold triumph. The horror in David’s eyes said everything.

Adisa quickly shouted, “Get up now!”

David was quick to his feet as he didn't want to get blown down by Adisa just as someone had before in the exact spot he sat in. He got in front of Adisa and started to walk with Adisa having his gun on his hostages back just like before. The two stood in front of the rusted metal door and both of them heard the vehicles stop in front of the gas station.

Both of their hearts thumped, with David fearing what Adisa would do and what Samir would say. Adisa's heart thumped because of his anxiety to see his father again, not from a fear of dying. The sound of engines outside of the gas station stopped and everyone in the gas station heard Samir's door open.

With his free hand, Adisa inched his walkie up to whisper one word, "Now."

The door burst open with a crash, kicked wide by Adisa's boot. Adisa then pressed the barrel of his rifle into David's back.

Then, like phantoms pulled from the earth, Utopian soldiers revealed themselves.

From the rooftop of the gas station and from the shadows of the tree line, they emerged from every imaginable angle, guns raised in a silent unison.

Even from behind Adisa, soldiers piled out of the gas station.

A thousand rifles and a thousand eyes all aimed at the Ibisians.

The trap had swallowed them whole.

Of course, Adisa was the first to talk and with his voice he shouted, "Nobody shoot!"

The father and son stared at each other, with one of them looking confused and already defeated, and the other looking spry and confident to what this would become. Samir began to shake like an old man and quiver his lip like he had just watched everything be stripped away from him.

The Ibisian soldiers waved their guns around and hopped out of their truck but realized if any one of them fired, they would be all stricken down with the fury of a power a hundred times more than theirs. Without anyone telling them to surrender, the Ibisians didn't even have the urge to try and fight, so they laid their black rifles into the dirt below them.

Samir's attention turned from one enemy to another, with him looking right into David's guilty eyes.

"David… *Why*?"

Adisa let his rifle off of David's back as the defeated general of a soon to be dead land, put his eyes to the ground in pure ashamement. Samir's first sentence was said with almost tears in his eyes, but his second was just filled with hatred, with him stepping towards David and shouting, "You think he'll keep you alive? You stupid son of a bitch you have killed South Sudan!"

Just before Samir could grip his unforgiving fingers into his once ally's skin, Adisa put his rifle on his father and shouted, "Get on the ground Samir."

Ibisians stood frozen, forced to watch as a child slammed the end of his rifle into their leader's skull. The blow echoed like a warning shot, and the sight of their President crumpling to the ground under a boy's hand sent a ripple of disbelief through their ranks.

Samir hit the ground, because he couldn't bring himself to go down on his own.

As Samir dropped to his knees, Adisa put his rifle barrel on his father's head and shouted, "Look at Utopia now!"

Samir with blood rushing down his face looked around at the hundreds of soldiers around his handful and felt as if his world had been etched down to dust. Any hope for Ibis or South Sudan had been crushed.

Samir's revolver was taken from his hips, then behind Adisa, David shouted, "You said you wouldn't kill him!"

With his finger pointed high in the air at the back of the child's head, David once again got the barrel of Adisa's gun to his body and the child shouted, "You get on your knees as well!"

David looked dumbfounded with his hands in the air and his dream of seeing his wife had been locked away as Adisa's true plan was revealed. His knees hit the dirt, and he watched as Adisa stepped away from himself and his leader.

The boy with both men looking at him walked in the middle of them and said, "Give your soldiers one last look before I have them shot to pieces."

Samir started to shake his head and David had a petrified look in his eye as he knew what was to come.

The soldiers knelt in silence with their rifles laid neatly before them. Drenched in sweat beneath their heavy black suits, they all knew what was coming.

One soldier flinched toward survival, his fingers curling around the grip of his rifle. He never picked it up fully as multiple shots dropped him.

Gunfire tore through the still air, cutting down every man beside and around him. Blood spattered the side of the truck, painting it with the price of defiance. Their bodies collapsed face-first into the dirt with their mouths open, silenced mid-breath.

As Samir watched, the first tear he had in a while came to him as he knew he had failed. With a slightly wet face he shouted, "Your Satan's child! You will rot in hell!"

Adisa walked to his father slowly like he took pleasure in making this ordeal as long and treacherous as possible. He leaned down to Samir and whispered for only him to hear.

"If I am the devil's child, what does that make you?"

Samir exhaled sharply, his hands itching to grab his son by the ears and rip them clean off, but he knew the moment he moved, he'd be gunned down without hesitation. He shook his head as Adisa redirected his attention to David, then the man who betrayed Samir began to cry just as his leader did as soon as Adisa looked at him as he knew this is precisely when he would be put down. He expected it to be with Adisa's gun that had seen so much, but that was shown to be wrong when the child threw it to the side.

That is when he realized his death would be worse than any gunshot.

With his eyes still locked on his enemy, Adisa ordered to any one of his men, "Bring me my car!"

A couple boys raced to get the car to please Adisa.

The victor of this war kneeled down towards David to get personal with him.

"You know, one of the things that hurts the most about this ordeal is that I thought just maybe you could have been my friend. Imagine a day where we actually went out to that mall and had a good time. So many lives could have been saved. Even if my father is evil, you are just as bad because without you, this would have never happened!"

Adisa smiled at David one last time as his car reversed right next to the three. The smile on the boy's face faded quickly as he stood up and walked over to his trunk.

David and Samir both gave each other a sad look, and both reflected on the long friendship they shared that now was gone in the dust. After

looking at each other, they looked around at the hundreds of guns pointed at them with angry faces behind them.

David was shocked back into reality when the sound of metal hitting the dirt, and then dust flying was softly brought into his ear. He turned his head to see Adisa using the tow chain that was halfway on the ground to put in his trunk. Once the noise of the chain settling came to David, fear filled his body more than ever and he had an awful idea of what was to come.

In front of the closest Utopian soldier, A bundle of ropes was thrown onto his feet by Adisa.

The leader of Utopia propped himself against his trunk with his legs crossed and a casual lean in his stature. He looked at the soldier and pointed at David and said, "Tie his arms and legs up."

The finger of judgement moved to Samir and then Adisa finished, "Just tie his arms up."

Any fear in Samir's eyes was subdued, yet David saw the weight of his inevitable fate and froze, as the child behind him pressed his wide eyes to the ground and bound his wrists tightly.

The eerily calm child slid off the back of the vehicle and, without a word, pulled the envelope from his back pocket just as David's ankle knot was secured. Every slow, deliberate step he took toward David scraped along the dirt, sending dust and pebbles scattering, some landing in David's face and eyes.

He then stopped his legs and planted himself firmly in front of his enemy, kneeling down with the envelope in hand.

David noticed his enemy breathing down his back and started to wiggle around, pushing his chest off the ground vigorously and exhaling through his teeth. The boy pushed the man over onto his back and from the feeble white envelope he pulled the photo out.

On the ground, David awaited his enemy to remind him of his wife's suffering one last time, but when the polaroid flipped over close in his view, it was something much worse. At first, he couldn't make it out, but it clicked, and tears ran down his eyes without a noise.

Breonna was front and center in the photo hanging from the ceiling with a familiar pot of vegetation next to her head. The planter that was held up in the same place she died was a centerpiece of their home that carried a unique fern. A glimpse of his wife waking up and watering the plant with a brown clay watering pot evoked more tears.

Adisa stood like the child he was with the photo in his face that he would retreat. With no shame, in complete silence the boy said, “I did it.”

Samir raised his head at Adisa as his knot was finalized and felt a surge of anger. He knew Adisa was evil, but he would have never thought that he would have such a personal and heinous act committed.

The teeth of David clenched harder, and he threw his body towards Adisa who stood up and kicked the man in the stomach as he was tied up and defenseless.

“I got her killed and I made it look like a suicide. Your wife was already dead when you made your *shitty* deal David.”

David screamed on the ground wishing that he could put his rage out on the child but knew that it was useless to scream as his fate was already cemented.

The eyes of Adisa went onto his father and then he said, “You really forfeited the war over a woman killing herself Samir? You really are weaker than I thought you were.”

Samir tried to stand up in anger but was kept down by a hand on his shoulder from the closest Utopian to him. The child who had his chin high and back straight continued on, saying, “You created a fake allyship with me to destroy Utopia. You failed. You then wage war on me. You surrender. A worse pain than a death should overcome both of you.”

Adisa’s eyes ran between both of the only surviving enemies around, then he picked up the hooked chain and said, “And that I will give you.”

His feet slowly walked along the dirt, and he nudged the heavy metal hook in between the two tight pieces of rope around David’s feet. The man who was about to face a fate worse than death stopped screaming and began to close his eyes, forfeiting living before he died. Samir screamed and in the same vocal loudness he said, “You don’t have to do this!”

Even Adisa’s own soldiers, unaware of the plan, glanced at what was about to happen with at least a hint of unease.

No one wanted to watch a man be dragged to death besides Adisa. The Utopian soldiers’ remorse was put to rest when Adisa looked around and shouted, “Everyone get into our vans and take Ibis’s truck and lead the way to the Capital! Then we shall ride into Ibis with no mercy!”

David and Samir hadn’t expected the end to come so quickly. All around them rose war cries loud enough to carry for miles. They offered silent prayers for their people, soon to be overtaken by berserkers.

Adisa pointed at the soldier next to the President and said, “You, take Samir into the back of my car.”

Samir rolled his eyes after Adisa ordered the closest soldier, and he was picked up by the same person that just pushed him down.

Adisa and his father entered the car at the same time and the child started his car with the utmost excitement for what he was to do next. The father in the car sat in the right backseat with a rifle pointed into the side of his chest by a soldier in the backseat. He wished he could argue with his son, but he knew it was too late. Through this war, Samir realized even though he was never in his son’s life, he had raised a monster. The horrors and brutality that war merely permits were embraced without hesitation by the savage child.

Soldiers flooded the vans and trucks to their limits, but most of the people went on foot. Without Adisa’s orders the Utopians began to march through the forests and streets slowly to Ibis which wasn’t far.

The three men in Adisa’s car, and the one hanging off of it, sat confused as Adisa watched his men leave and get out of sight. It took so long that David had a fighting spirit and tried his best to wiggle out of the hook that he couldn’t undo. In the most uncomfortable of positions, David bent his body and tried his best to unhook the chain that was going to drag him skinless. He started to get the thicker part of the hook to be pressed against the ground and he had genuine faith that he could escape for just another moment. When he got the closest to undoing the homemade apparatus, Adisa kicked the car into drive and shot forward, filling David’s nose with dirt and exhaust as the wheels spun.

Instead of driving fast towards Ibis, Adisa took a fast straight towards Utopia, drifting around the corner through the dirt as his soldiers watched his reckless act of cruelty.

Some of his soldiers questioned why Adisa was moving towards Utopia, but as the men watched David be dragged from behind the car like an object, they knew Adisa was trying to get more speed.

A pothole sat in the dirt road, launching the car into the air and David jumping even higher. He slammed back against the ground, and for a heartbeat, his screams vanished as the impact punched the air from his lungs. Breathless or not, the pain didn’t wait as the flaming friction tore his skin and shredded his clothes. The road burnt through him like fire dragged across flesh.

Adisa watched the agony screaming out from his enemy as he drove dangerously fast. As wind came in from the four open windows, he whipped his head around at Samir, who sat with his eyes shut and his face drenched in sweat. Adisa opened his mouth to shout as he wanted Samir to watch but stopped.

In the rearview, His soldier's face was wide-eyed, still in horror as he felt like throwing up as he looked at David's torment.

The driver snapped his eyes back to the road, just in time to see a small, two-seater truck hauling cows, barely feet away from hitting him head on. Horns blared and Adisa swerved hard, the other driver doing the same at the last second. Behind them, David's body whipped violently, first to the left, then to the right. His skull cracked against the dirt, and darkness flooded his vision.

Adisa realized it was time to turn around as everyone in the car seemed more shaken up because they had almost just died.

The cattle truck had veered off the road and crashed into the forest, flipping both the driver and his livestock. Adisa, reckless as ever, didn't spare a thought. Instead, he jerked the wheel, dragging David in a brutal circle behind the car before accelerating again, pushing harder toward Ibis.

He looked behind himself just as he did before but this time, he used his mirror and not his body. Samir sat looking defeated and Adisa wanted to make his day even harder.

"You should look at your friend Samir… Or else my soldier will shoot you."

The soldier in the vehicle looked at Adisa and then at Samir and shook his head up and down, acting like he knew what his leader was talking about. Samir shook his head as well but instead side to side and with his eyes closed, he exclaimed, "I will not watch. You can kill me before I do that."

Adisa swerved around another rancher's truck and shouted to his soldier, "Hit him!"

Without question, the boy clubbed Samir in the side of his stomach and then seated his rifle's barrel deep in his cheek.

The soldier craving validation looked at Adisa and then looked at Samir and let his gun off of the President's face.

A sound of gunfire entered Adisa's ear from behind as the soldier shot a round out of the open window right next to Samir's head. He then shouted, "Watch!"

Samir now looked careful as he didn't know what this nameless soldier would do next, so he turned his head to his left and began to watch his friend as he was hauled through the dirt.

At this point Adisa was surprised his victim was still attached and wondered if he was still alive as the shrieking had stopped. David was still very much breathing, but the agony of torn skin had faded. His nerves had been scraped raw, dulled by relentless friction. What pain remained was deeper as most of his bones were shattered or shoved out of place, and it was from those jagged fragments that the worst pain pulsed.

With the sedan's speed, Adisa caught up to his army of soldiers rapidly as they slowly approached the gates of the Capital. The child driver of course wanted to be in the front of the stampede, so he sped up past his legion of soldiers with no regard for them. Adisa's own soldiers were almost hit repeatedly so they jumped out of the road to make way for their crazed leader. Anyone who saw the car roar past would be swallowed by a storm of dust. Before the haze stole their sight, they'd catch a glimpse of a raw, red body, all muscle and blood, dragged mercilessly behind the car.

There was barely enough room on the narrow road for Adisa's car. As Adisa squeezed past massive trucks overloaded with men, the soldier in the back stiffened, watching in silent panic as the car was only inches of between hitting the trucks. The maneuver was so reckless, so tight, that even Adisa had to tear his eyes from David's mutilated form in the rearview mirror and focus on the road ahead.

-Chapter XXXXVII-

Through the black iron bars of the Capital's front gate, many Ibisian's stood proudly ready for what they knew was their city's last battle in this war– If you could even call it that.

Utopia had now brought itself straight to Ibis's doorstep and no one knew what brutality was to come. Only their imaginations told them what could happen, and no one could guess right.

On the open road with little shrubs and uncrowded trees at its side, a brigade of Utopians walking fast with rifles in their hands with the support of vehicles marched past Ibis's city sign. A towering cloud of dust trailed the Utopian army, staying heavy in the air like a lingering curse. To the Ibisians watching from behind the security of their walls, it was more than just dirt. It was a mark of how Adisa and his men had scarred the land itself. The dust became a dark omen, sealing off the world behind the Utopians and making one thing clear. The Ibisians would have to stand their ground as there was nowhere left to run.

The soldiers knew they couldn't leave, but that didn't stop them from gathering people and trying to evacuate them with ladders over their walls so they could run away from Adisa's travesties. Women and little girls were told to leave the walls, but the patriarchs and sons of the families were forced to stay and fight, which made the women want to stay in Ibis. A small portion of the youngest of the children and women escaped, but the rest stayed hidden in their homes, expecting their men to come back after the Utopians were pushed away. Even if they were assured Ibis would win this battle, they stayed in their homes with the lights off and kept small sharp items to defend themselves tight in their hands.

Soldiers had their rifles shoved through the gates and pointed directly at the enormous body of the army.

Little boys in the Utopian militia weren't noticed against the tall men to their sides as everybody in the army didn't look like individuals, but instead a big, vexed conglomerate.

Ibisian's scrambled closely behind the gates, wiping sweat off their foreheads and licking their dry lips. Men screamed in preparation for the battle, and it went without saying that every Ibisian soldier felt as if they would win through their confidence. In the end, it didn't matter what they felt, instead what mattered was what they knew, and their true understanding was that they were outnumbered and broken down.

Half of the Ibisian soldiers had been injured or killed in the battle that had taken place earlier in the day and now in nightfall, the injured men were moved into homes with women to be hidden. The soldiers knew of Adisa's viciousness and kept the injured hidden with the women as they knew if they were out in the open on the airfield, that the child dictator would order for them to be killed.

Knowing deep down that they would be gunned down at the front of their gates, they hoped that the Utopians would turn around after killing every soldier they could see and go home. That is all they could hope for.

After putting ten toes on his brakes, Adisa skirted back and forth in the road as Ibisians and Utopians alike watched dumbstruck at the child's awful driving skills. With the amount of dirt in the air, no one behind Ibis's walls could see David's maimed body sliding around in the dirt.

Once the car came to a halt, a large bump was heard on the back of the car and David was not in view anymore. Samir shook his head and had a stark look in his eye towards the back of Adisa's head. It was now very evident throughout the car that David was dead as the large bang was his body, and more than likely his neck hitting the back of the car. The impact was so sudden and so brash that it stole his life in an instant.

Adisa's line of cars stopped behind their leader and men leaned off trucks with their guns pointed straight for Ibis's gates.

From the Ibisian's view, they watched as a soldier left the four-door car in front of the army and ran behind it with the rest of the heathens. Not a soul fired their guns as the Ibisian's hoped that maybe this battle could be avoided if they didn't shoot first.

At only thirty yards from the gate, the young tyrant put his boots on the ground and adjusted his button that was barely tucked into his pants.

As soon as the boy made his stature evident to his enemies, a second bigger silhouette made it out of the car that was clearly a man and not a child soldier.

Adisa let out a sigh and pulled his pistol out and kept it towards the ground as he circled around the man that stood behind him. When Adisa stepped aside, it became unmistakably clear that the darkened man before them was none other than their very own leader. Ibisians were fed up with this display of disrespect towards the President and their city and it was clear that the man was bound up behind his back. The child leader put his

pistol against his father's back and Ibisians watching clutched their rifles hard in reaction just as their leader did with his teeth.

"Walk at least in front of the car," Adisa said quietly to Samir. His father didn't give a reaction with words, instead following his orders by taking seven heavy steps till both of them were in front of the car. Adisa took to the right side of Samir and extended his pistol into the man's side. He sat and stared at the black barrels that were pointed right at him as he had no way of defending himself if they wanted to fire. Adisa watched as Ibisian's readjusted their rifles and behind the crowd stood three giant trucks full of fighters.

Above the Capital, three helicopters rose in unison from the right side of the community. At once, the Utopians froze, every mind flashing back to the chaos of the earlier battle, when a single helicopter had blown through many men.

Adisa almost ordered them to fire, but then the seemingly opposing choppers that were facing them turned around and bolted off away from Ibis. He put his hand up in an order to stop his soldiers from firing, as he realized these helicopters were more than likely members of parliament or other parts of the government close to Ibis. They would spread off away from the Capital and the violence that was to ensue.

Adisa adjusted his posture and shouted, "Ibis!"

After the boy shouted this word and planted his pistol a little deeper into his father's side, Ibisians tensed up and moved their fingers on their guns in discontent. His word echoed for a couple seconds and when it disappeared through the African fields he shouted again.

"At my side is Samir, the President of these great lands. I ask, would you like him to return to Ibis?"

Adisa asked this question knowing that the answer would be unfavorable as he knew that the answer would hurt Samir.

An Ibisian who looked to be around his late twenties in the middle of the gate shouted and said, "If you want to give him over then that is fine. But if that means you will come into our walls then you can keep him. What we need is for you to turn around with all of your men and to never come back again!"

The boy at the broken leader's side looked up at the side of his father's face and saw the man close his eyes and put his chin down. Adisa now had

broken his father a bit more and now it was time to do what he had truly come for.

"Fine. Then I will give you that and leave Ibis," Adisa said smirkingly.

On Samir's side, Adisa pressed his gun harder as he shifted his feet away from Ibis. They both began to walk towards the backseat and Samir felt a bit of relief as he as well turned away from his homeland. He hoped that Adisa was being serious, and Ibis would be spared.

Samir made it to the door and Adisa put his hand on his father's tall shoulder signaling him to stop. Both of them stood as a cold wind blew onto them. The soldiers of Utopia with their rifles still pointed at Ibis looked at their leader who didn't look at all like he was giving up. Adisa smirked behind Samir and raised his chin up and shouted, "*Fire*!"

This unexpected exclamation caught the Utopians off guard but in an instant, they knew what to do and began to launch a hail of bullets at Ibis. Utopia had fired the first shots right over their leader's head and through the gates of Ibis more bullets came.

When the first rounds fired off, Adisa pushed his father down on the side of the car and followed him onto the ground. With no hands to stop himself, Samir's chin went right onto the hard ground and made him grunt. Adisa, while on the ground, crawled right over his father as bullets hit his car and every spot around him. The child leader was now behind the car, sharing the ground with David's torn body as shards of glass rained down on both of them. His father thrashed with wild eyes, bullets snapping past him around in the dirt.

Adisa didn't want Samir dead, at least not yet, so he yanked the man by the arm, dragged him behind cover and laid him beside his closest friend's mangled corpse.

Gunfire erupted from all sides, a storm of sound that stole their hearing. Both men were deafened, ears ringing with the static roar of war. Adisa shouted, but neither of them could make out the words. All Samir could do was stare at David's body, unable to tear his eyes away.

David was staring at the sky with his mouth open with no discernible lips around it. His eyes were surprisingly closed shut unlike any other body Samir had witnessed. Samir realized this was more than likely because he closed his eyes in pain as his face was dragged against the dirt until he died. As Samir's eyes went down his friend's red and stricken body between visible patches of the only skin left on his body, he made it down to his legs

where no covering was left. All that was worn on the body was a half-torn pair of underwear that had now turned brown from dirt.

He was horrified at what he saw and only was taken out of his trance when faint, but large shadows passed over his face and Adisa hit his collarbone with an open palm to wake him. They both locked eyes and the child screamed at his father again. Adisa now held his pistol and waved it right next to Samir who could barely get up off of the ground with no hands to use. Noticing his father's dazed fixation, Adisa slid his hands beneath Samir's armpits and lifted him just enough to keep his head below the car's edge. Behind them, one of the 6x6s rumbled into motion. As its rear swung into view, Adisa seized Samir by the shirt and yanked him closer, pulling him up toward his chest. He waddled along with Samir as they made it to the back of the truck for protection through the thick crowd of his own soldiers. They both walked slowly behind the truck with Adisa blowing off the occasional round towards Ibis.

The leader of Ibis who was once so eager for war looked around at his enemy soldiers who he was so close to, and he was reminded of why he was a politician and not a soldier. People, old and young were shot all around Samir and sprayed their life on him and Adisa. While he cringed and tensed his neck at any sort of liquid that was thrown on him, Adisa looked to get power from the blood, almost licking his lips when it made contact with his flesh.

Any Utopian who was shot in the back of the truck was quickly thrown off and another soldier would jump and replace him after his body was thrown down to the side. Samir realized this as out of nowhere he and Adisa began to trot right next to dead and injured bodies that went over the side of the military trucks. Adisa didn't spare a glance for whatever he stepped on, his focus fixed ahead. The man beside him kept his eyes locked on the ground with every step. Scattered across the earth, multiple soldiers still clung to life, arms trembling as they reached up for help. Their pleas were silenced as their own comrades marched over them without stopping.

The gates of Ibis had been shot to hell with small holes and clips taken out of its metal, making it weakened and easier access for enemy fire.

Ibisian's behind the crumbling gate had shallow hopes as they looked down to see piles of their fellow soldiers dead right in front of it.

The Utopians were only a few meters from the gates now and Adisa took his chance to scream to his men even if they barely could hear.

"Drive right through the gates and show no mercy to the Ibisian scum! Drive right over their stinking bodies!"

One of the closest soldiers to Adisa heard this from the top of the truck and felt a surge of motivation and bloodthirst. He looked down at his hip where he recognized a grenade then he put his rifle behind his back to take the green ball off of his belt. Without even giving it any thought, the soldier looked back at his leader, then he took the silver pin off of the bomb and got up from cover and aimed it right for Ibis's gates.

A soldier inside of Ibis noticed the only man from the rear of the truck standing and thought it was peculiar, so he fixed his rifle towards his enemy and fired. The grenade was already thrown by the time the round was fired off and the boy had time to get down before he got clipped.

Flying through the air and in between two bars of Ibis's gate, the grenade sat for only a second placed right in the middle of a dead body's arm and another body's leg.

"Everyone take cover!" The Ibisian soldier shouted to his comrades.

By the time the words ran off his tongue the bomb had gone off, sending a cloud of smoke and dirt all over the place. The explosion sent the two nearby bodies jolting into the air before slamming them back down, now with missing limbs and riddled with shallow craters. Bursting open, the gates had swung violently, the grenade shattering whatever had held it together, exposing Ibis to the enemy beyond.

From inside the walls, the Ibisians let out long, desperate screams, not of rage, but of fear, as if shouting could drive back the doom now rushing toward them.

Adisa and the Utopian's smiled while they marched over their compatriot's bodies with haste as the gates of Ibis were now wide open for Utopia to penetrate. Even when bodies fell, the trance of Utopian soldiers covered in their brother's blood made them feel numb to the fear of being shot.

The first five-ton truck plowed through the initial heap of bodies waiting at Ibis's edge. Clinging to the front doors were young soldiers, doing the shooting for the defenseless drivers crouched low in their seats, hoping to avoid having their faces blown off. The boys on the doors were gunned down almost instantly, falling in flashes of blood but the truck never

stopped. As soon as one soldier dropped, another obedient Utopian swung up onto the mirror and took their place.

Ibisian's fired as much as they could from behind the three trucks they had and did as good of a job as they could for the beast that they were fighting.

No Ibisian thought this battle would be won as there was no regard for remorse on the enemy side, as Utopians dropped like flies and no attention was given to it. Utopians weren't looked at like Soldiers or comrades in a brotherhood but instead as resources and pawns for Adisa's greater plan.

The Ibisian's were being bombarded by their enemies and men realized that they needed to retreat their trucks farther back if they wanted to survive for any longer. Soldiers started their giant sources of protection back up and reversed them as soldiers walked backwards while firing. At first this seemed smart but in reality, this gave more room for the Utopians to pile in which is exactly what happened.

The first Utopian truck that made it in completely, did not drive and was stuck in place after too much gunfire to the engine. Even though this barrier was in the way, the second truck that followed closely behind it revved its engine and pushed it through the small opening of the gate.

Adisa and his hostage trailed the second truck as it rolled fully into Ibis. Samir caught a glimpse of his community's streets that were eerily empty. Everyone had to be in hiding and he hoped his men could mount a strong defense and bring Adisa down, but deep down, he knew Adisa's relentless will could tear through anything in his path.

Adisa barely fought in this shootout, instead he watched from protection as his soldiers laid fire onto the Ibisians quickly. Even if already a hundred and more Utopian's had been shot down, it was nothing in Adisa's eyes as he didn't care how many of his people were put down until this war was ended.

As both lines of trucks ground to a halt, the bodies piled up fast. They were no longer just stepped over but instead, they rose in morbid stacks. Eventually, the dead formed such high mounds that the Utopians began using them as sandbags, crouching behind them for cover.

After a while, only a couple hundred Ibisian men were left, and Samir could tell as the gunfire from the enemy side had quieted down. At a certain point the soldiers protecting their land felt as if there was no reason to shoot anymore and started to hide behind their shot-up trucks for cover

as they prayed and hoped for the best that was not to come. Only a few soldiers with a fighting spirit continued shooting and they were quickly gunned down as for every one Ibisian soldier shooting there were a hundred Utopians shooting back at them. The last of the Ibisian's that still breathed ran off into the night only to be caught up by savage Utopians and shot in their backs.

It was clear now that no Ibisian soldiers remained, and the war was over. Utopian soldiers climbed atop the trucks, firing rounds into the air in celebration. There were no more enemies, and no more battles left to fight.

Part IV: Loop ye dhukciëën
(The Loop That Resets)

-Chapter XXXXVIII-

Samir looked around at the happy soldiers who had truly nothing to be happy about as so many of their comrades laid wasted on the ground. It didn't matter if they killed every soldier as about the same amount of their own died. No one seemed to care.

As Samir's head spun from the gunfire and laughing and screaming of his enemies, he looked towards the ground again to see a mix of shot up

bodies, Utopian and Ibisian. The bodies of every dead man on the ground were shot multiple times and even if he looked at his own enemy's bodies, he felt disturbed and the need to weep. This loss of life in South Sudan was a big one, and Samir knew that it wouldn't stop now.

Adisa watched proudly at his men and lit up a cigarette in celebration.

"You want one?"

Adisa had a pack of cigarettes reached out towards his father with a smile and Samir knew exactly what the boy was doing. He put his head away from Adisa and decided not to answer as the boy picked a cigarette out for him and threw it in the dirt and smashed it with his heel. Adisa laughed by himself at the same childish joke that his father threw at him in his cell.

All around boys started to gather around Adisa and push for him to speak. While his men slapped around the scared Samir and pointed their rifles at him, Adisa climbed to the top of one of Ibis's giant trucks.

He could still see the thirst for blood in the way his men moved, in the fire behind their eyes. So, the moment his feet hit solid ground, he seized his chance to speak.

"Look around you!"

Men relocated their views around from side to side as Adisa's words bounced off of the Capital's walls.

"See the bodies! Comrades and Enemies alike. This was *us*! Our enemies fought to keep us from this putrid land with all of their wit, and we now have won the war. Now we have free reign to complete this and destroy any remnant of Ibis, living or not! Slash the throats of any men hiding away from battle in these walls! Take their women as your own and end their bloodlines with no mercy! Shoot their cattle and rake up their crops! Break down the foundations of their homes and break the stone off their buildings! No remnant of Ibis shall be left as this is now our land!"

The soldiers foaming at the mouth watched as their leader pointed his pistol towards the moon and fired off each of the seven rounds in his pistol magazine.

After each of the shells settled on top of the cab, Adisa hopped down and grabbed his father, who was more than disturbed at what Adisa was doing.

Samir looked at Adisa and pleaded, "Turn around Adisa… You have gone far enough!"

Adisa didn't respond and worriedly the now defunct President turned around frantically to the hundreds of soldiers led by Adisa that started to flood the small city streets.

"The war has ended! Give my people a break," Samir shouted again.

A soldier behind Samir pierced his gun barrel into the back of the man's suit and exclaimed, "Shut your mouth!"

Soldiers made it into the main city straight filled with short buildings and stores and began to break windows and not loot products but destroy them. The only thing that Samir saw leave any of the buildings were liquor bottles and half of them would be put for drinking and the other half would be used as Molotovs. Men tore their shirts off and made rags to put into the liquid that they would then light and throw through the windows of buildings. From the sides of men, grenades and Molotov cocktails were lit and primed then chucked onto the bottoms of multiple story buildings. When the explosives let off, boys chuckled as flames went high and the weak structures of the buildings gave in and crushed in on themselves. Even after the buildings collapsed, just for fun the violent Utopians would throw fire on top of the rubble for entertainment.

Samir stood in shock as the Capital was slowly reduced to dust. He felt numb through the first three demolitions, buildings he knew well, including a general store he'd visited more times than he could count, crumbled to the ground. Red and orange flooded his face from the surrounding fires, and he couldn't even react to the destruction as it just kept coming. After watching a fourth building collapse in on itself, he tried to break free from Adisa's grip, but he didn't get far. Adisa pistol-whipped him hard, sending a tooth flying from his bloodied mouth.

The ruthless child looked around like he was watching art or a play as fire lit up the night sky and his goons howled like wolves at the moon. He took such joy in watching his enemy territory be defiled but after a couple of buildings it became repetitive and boring. Adisa knew that the true fun would be when they reached the homes of the citizens of Ibis.

After setting every building in sight ablaze, the Utopian horde turned right, leaving the scorched strip behind. On the strip a dirt road stretched ahead, leading to Samir's dark residence where no lights and seemingly no life came from.

Adisa stopped in his tracks, and his army followed suit. As he faced the home of his enemy, Samir felt a hollow ache form in his stomach as he hoped that Hiba had run away.

While staring at the large house with no lights, Adisa shouted to his men behind, “Flood their homes and turn them to rubble!”

From behind blinds, the people of Ibis watched in terror as their enemies poured down the hill, unleashing gunfire and explosions blindly into homes. Flames consumed the insides of houses, forcing residents to flee, only to be executed the moment they stepped outside. Wounded soldiers, too weak to move, were either burned alive or crushed beneath collapsing roofs.

If the women weren’t caught in the fire and managed to escape, they were shot or stabbed without hesitation, unless they were considered attractive enough to be spared. The mercy was no mercy at all as after the young were slaughtered, the women who remained were violated like animals, their suffering laid bare for anyone to see.

After these women were used, they would be shot in the back of the head, and they would be disposed of by throwing them into the burning homes they had just ran out of.

House to house, even if doors were barricaded with thick dressers, the violently entranced soldiers would break windows and climb into homes to murder injured soldiers who lay in beds, already on their way to death.

Adisa did not join this animalistic party of terror and flames, but instead watched the smoke rise from the crumbled homes and heard the screams travel all the way in front of Samir’s home where he stood. There was still a small berm to climb in front of him and his father, so the boy decided to stop before he went up it. He listened in as Samir breathed quick and heavy through his nostrils as he scanned his home to see if anyone made themselves apparent in the windows. For all he knew, Adisa didn’t know he had a wife or anyone else in his life so this could just be him going inside or destroying the home. Samir also hoped that his wife would be hiding anywhere other than the evident Capital home.

From the bedroom window on the left of the home, the blinds moved a bit from its very right corner and Samir caught the eye of his wife. Not only did Samir catch it, but Adisa did as well, and he raised his pistol and

fired right at the window. The bullet went right over Hiba's head, and she screamed and dropped to the floor with her hands on top of her head.

"Hiba!"

Samir screamed and then shook himself off Adisa's grip and then threw his body on the child with no hands to use.

Adisa's gun slipped from his hands as he and his father crashed to the ground, writhing and cursing each other. Samir, wild-eyed, loomed over him, shouting in his face with such ferocity that it almost looked like he was trying to bite him. Adisa struggled beneath the weight, focused not on the man pinning him down, but on the pistol just out of reach, glowing faintly with the reflection of nearby flames.

He stretched his fingers to try and latch onto it then, Samir's yelling stopped and was replaced by the brutal thuds of his forehead slamming into Adisa's. Pain burst behind the boy's eyes, his vision blurring with each blow. Still, he clawed toward the pistol, catching it by the tip of his middle finger.

Turning back toward his father, who kept moving up and down, Adisa raised the weapon. Though the barrel was now pressed into Samir's side, the man didn't stop. Blood from Samir's forehead dripped down onto Adisa's face and he knew his father wouldn't quit.

Finger by finger, Adisa shifted his grip and began to slam the pistol's butt into Samir's ribs, again and again.

Samir groaned, his rage faltering just enough for Adisa to thrust his hips to one side and scramble to his feet. He stood over the blood-stained ground where they'd fought, breathing hard. With the back of his hand, he wiped the blood from his bruised forehead.

Below him, Samir twisted, trying to loosen the bindings on his wrists. Without hesitation, Adisa stepped to the side and stomped down in the middle of his father's back. Samir let out a choked wheeze as the air left his lungs.

Fury surged in Adisa. He turned, aimed, and unleashed bullets left and right through the house, ripping through the walls and spraying dust and pieces of polished stone toward the shadowed space where Samir's doomed wife hid.

Samir screamed out, "Don't you shoot another round!"

Adisa reloaded his pistol while watching his father helpless on the ground and then grunted and grabbed him by his collar and began to drag

him up the small berm. Samir pleaded the entire short walk and was met with no response from his ruthless son.

The hands of Adisa wiggled on the front door, and it was clearly locked so with his enemy in his hand he used his other one to blow a hole through the knob with his pistol. With his foot he tried pushing the door and that was also unsuccessful as it was clearly barricaded as the door only opened an inch. Samir was dragged to his left where the window his wife peeked through was entered by Adisa with the boy's hands still on Samir's suit coat as he put his feet through the opening.

Adisa used both of his hands to pick the bloody and bruised Samir up who leaned his head off to his side.

"Get through!"

Samir, like a zombie without reason, put his first foot through the window and as Adisa still had a grip on him, he pulled the rest of his body through, with his left leg being sliced by glass through his pant leg from start to finish. In an unmerciful act, Adisa slammed his father to the ground as he tensed up from the pain just as he did before.

Adisa looked at Samir for a second then he decided that searching for his stepmother in the small home would be of more excitement. With his pistol extended out, he opened the office door and was greeted with another door right in front of him. Before entering it, he looked down the small hallway to his right at the kitchen.

The boy thought he noticed something odd in the glass in the kitchen, so he took a step forward to get a more informed look. In the faint glint of moonlight caught in the kitchen glass, through a house shrouded in darkness, Adisa saw what appeared to be the woman. She looked to be on her knees, just beyond the large island she covered behind.

He didn't smile as this was too easy. He had hoped for something with a little more challenge.

Stepping out from the hallway, his voice was calm, almost bored. "I see you. Come out, and nothing bad will happen… I promise."

On the other side of the island the woman knew this was a lie and gripped her knife with even more pressure than she did before.

She didn't give the proper reaction to Adisa, so he shook his head and entered the room he had just come out of and grasped Samir who was still laying on the ground. A trail of Samir's blood streaked out of the room, leading to where his body had been dumped in the living room.

Hiba heard the sound of dragging, then dropping and her legs went weak. With his gun now pointed at the back of Samir's grounded head, Adisa said loudly, "I have your husband now, and if you do not show yourself, I will blow his brains onto this floor!"

There being no other option, the woman put down her knife silently and then popped up over the island with her hands held high.

She frightfully looked at Adisa with his pistol pointed right for her and then she met eyes with her husband who looked worse than she had ever seen him. Hiba covered her mouth, tears spilling as she stared at her battered partner.

Then Adisa's voice cracked through the room like a whip.
"Look at me!"

The woman looked right at him disturbed, then from the ground Samir said painfully, "Hiba… Don't listen to anything he says. Just run!"

Adisa quickly pointed his pistol down at Samir and then back at Hiba, and said, "Don't listen to him, he is out of his mind. Why don't you come over here? I will let you see your husband one last time before I kill him."

Hiba then wept and took one slow step away from the island. She took two more steps then Samir whimpered, "Hiba no!"

She glanced once more at Adisa, then broke into a run toward Samir, who lay motionless on the floor as Adisa stepped back a few paces.

The two collapsed into each other, sobbing. Hiba gently cradled her husband's face; his cheek pressed against the cold floor.

She cried out, "I love you–"

A crack split the air. Blood misted over Samir's hair as Hiba dropped forward, a ringing engulfing his ears.

His eyes shot open, frozen in disbelief, as her face fell apart mid-fall, folding grotesquely off of itself. A sound ripped from him, one of sheer, soul-wracking horror.

Adisa stood above them, pistol still hot in his grip, watching.

A smirk tugged at his lips, brief and bitter.

He'd never met this woman. She had never even seen his face before that night. Yet, in her final moment, Adisa made it as terrible as he could for the woman as she touched the one thing she loved most.

It hit him that he had never needed the Devil at his side.

The evil he'd done had always been him. The Devil didn't guide his hand; he just walked with it.

“How could you?” Samir screamed out as tears mixed with his blood on the floor and snot began to run down his nose. He began to tussle around and scream as his face vibrated against the ground. The eyes of Samir looked at his defaced wife and he wished death upon himself.

On the body of Hiba, Adisa noticed her purple nails that were being turned bloody and an idea popped into his head. He guessed that the room he almost entered across from the office was a bathroom and he entered it as Samir was grieving. From beneath the sink, Adisa grabbed a clear plastic bottle of nail polish remover. He crouched beside Samir, tucking his shoes under the man’s side, and began pouring the liquid over what was left of Hiba.

Samir started to writhe, letting out guttural, animal-like screams.

The bottle emptied with a soft glug, and Adisa let it fall next to her body. Then he got up and seized Samir by the arms and dragged him across the floor away from his wife, his screams trailing with him.

Adisa got to the other side of the room with Samir and struck a match. its hiss snapping in the silence. He then held it just above Samir’s head.

The boy stared at the tiny flame, flickering in his fingers.

Without a word, Adisa flicked it across the room. It spun through the air and landed in front of Hiba’s body, igniting the alcohol around her instantly.

Flames swallowed her in the snap of a finger.

Samir shrieked again, one final, helpless cry, as he watched his wife disappear behind a wall of fire.

Adisa quickly dragged Samir off and then pushed the barricade of the door off to the side. Once outside he took in the fresh air and the beautiful shrubs in front of the house, knowing everything would be turned to ash soon. The boy threw Samir down his own small hill and let him flip until he crashed down on his fence. The sadistic kid laughed and looked out as his soldiers began to walk towards the President’s home that had a growing flame inside. He sprinted down the grassy berm and reached Samir’s side and began to drag him further away from his home.

Samir wanted to insult and try Adisa’s patience, but he didn’t as the child had won the war that he started and made a fool of what was left of the Capital.

As boys kicked down crops and smashed saplings, other boy’s slit the throats of cornered sheep and cattle. The housing area of Ibis was now

destroyed and every square inch of land inside of the walls was torn apart and flipped on its head.

All of the soldiers regrouped at their leader who stood in front of the completely burnt and consumed home of Samir. The big man on the ground's cries still filled the air and Adisa basked in the pain of the man he could not call his father. Wishes of pain towards Samir had been overly exceeded by his son.

Bottles of liquor began to pass between the large group of victorious soldiers who had big smiles on their faces. Adisa partook in his own bottle as everyone watched their enemies' homes burn like it was the New Year's ceremony.

The laughter of the tired soldiers was stopped by Adisa shouting, "The Capital is now ours! This day will be remembered in history!"

Men cheered with their guns and bottles in the sky.

He then continued, "But, the Capital has always been ours as I now declare the Capital of South Sudan to be Utopia!"

Soldiers cheered even louder as they knew that this meant that Adisa would now be the President of South Sudan and in their eyes the child couldn't do anything wrong.

"This war is over, and it couldn't have been done without you all! We are Utopia! Utopia is not a place it is the people! *Long! Love! Utopia*!"

-Chapter XXXXIX-

Resources piled out of the broken city as Utopians made their quick escape from the hell that they created. Adisa assured his soldiers that Ibis would be rebuilt as a second part of Utopia and his men believed him through their drunken stupor. In reality, Adisa was not good at building but instead he was talented at destroying.

The sun had begun to show, and the liquor had worn off of Adisa. The crushed father of Ibis sat in the back of one of the many newly acquired trucks along with Adisa, staring into nothing as he wished to not think anymore. There was nothing he could say to his violent son to fix him or change his mind. He wondered if he was one of the last surviving Ibisian's as from what he saw, there was a holocaust among his people.

Samir recognized that his actions to push this war were what partially caused this. Even if he knew he could be possibly slain along with all of his soldiers, he didn't expect Adisa's savagery to go to such lengths as to cause a genocide.

As his eyes flashed in horrible recent memories of the slaughter and desecration of his people, the victorious Utopians entered the gates of their home in a euphoric state. The women and children who did not partake in the unknown destruction of Ibis waved their hands in the air as military trucks rolled by and threw bunches of dry flowers at the Soldiers.

Laughter of the citizens was all that overtook Samir's head as their joy could be heard everywhere inside of the walls. With his butt on the floor of the truck, a tear rolled down the man's face as he listened to the jubilation of his enemies and in the back of his head, he was reminded of the opposite screams of his people. All the man wanted now was for it to end.

Death wasn't something he feared now, it was something he longed for. The final piece in this long and brutal war.

When he was to be finally put down, he knew that only then this would truly be over.

People below the trucks reached for the famed child who now had expanded Utopia beyond what citizens thought was achievable. Clearly realizing his people were looking at him, Adisa knew he had to make an example of his remaining enemy. The child looked down at his father who was curled into a ball at his wits' end. His small hand wrapped on the back of Samir's neck then he gripped into his skin and did his best to pull upwards so the man could stand up. Samir couldn't care less at what happened to him next, so he got up for Adisa where the boy kept his hand on the back of his father's neck like he was his dog. Utopians looked at this and laughed at the numb man with wetness under his eyes and Adisa joined them.

In the mix of mostly women, three familiar boys caught Adisa's eye as they waved their leader down. The familiar looking boy in the middle of the three stopped waving when Adisa locked eyes with him. Each of the boys climbed up the back of the big truck by Adisa's orders.

Even though Paulo was just injured not long ago, he had been recovering smoothly just in time to run up to his leader and shake his hand. Samir was thrown back to his curled-up state and the two boys stood and smiled at each other as the crowd cheered.

Paulo tried his best to speak over the ecstatic crowd, shouting, "I wish I could have fought!"

His leader smiled and passively said, "It wasn't much of a fight!"

Adisa put his hand on the back of Paulo's bicep and leaned into his comrade and whispered into his ear, "It was more of a slaughter."

Paulo let out one laughing breath of air in an awkward response towards his leader. He knew that what Adisa really did was probably much worse than his words.

Soldiers on trucks hopped down to see their partners who kissed on their dirtied cheeks in excitement of them surviving. The men who had done the most sickening of actions in Ibis felt a hint of guilt as their lovers acted as if they were saints while they serenaded them with love.

Citizens and soldiers trailed the trucks all the way to the city center where everybody knew what was bound to happen next. Men who partook in the ravaging of Ibis barely could stand up as they piled into the standing area of Adisa's speaking locale. The trucks of Utopia were parked behind the speaking stand and Adisa got ready to speak. He prepared what he would say as this was a meaningful speech as it was the first after the bombing against his people.

While the excited citizens of Utopia waited for their leader to show himself like he was the star of a concert, at the very back of the monstrous crowd stood the A.U.C. who all had a worried look in their eyes. Whispers were passed around even if the crowd was booming just in case someone was listening. It was known that the President Samir was just behind the speaking stand, leading people to prepare themselves for another public execution.

From the stairs behind the stage, two boys emerged, each gripping one side of a brand-new podium. It was green, gleaming, and emblazoned with a seal instantly recognized by everyone in the crowd. It was the Presidential Seal. A wave of noise rippled through the gathering and some erupted in frenzied excitement; others felt their stomachs drop. Utopia would now be the Capital, taking their land to a new level which meant a lot of risk. The eyes of the world would now turn to Adisa, and most would likely recoil at what they saw.

Abel was nowhere to be found and when the new podium was set, everyone in the A.U.C. had their hearts beating as if something terrible was about to happen.

The air between the members was so timid that if a gust of a wind were to hit them, they would tense up. Jal turned around to see a short silhouette walking with his head down towards them. He turned around to his comrades and said, “It’s Abel!”

Everyone turned their heads towards their friend with worried faces as he walked towards them with an angry face. Bilal spoke to his leader, “Adisa is assuming the presidency of South Sudan! What is next?”

Abel stopped in his tracks when he reached them and gave his people a look and said, “I know they have Samir… I have to stop this all!”

This exclamation with anger behind it caught the attention of a civilian who turned around to see everyone in the back of the crowd staring at him.

When the man turned his head around, Jal put his finger up to his mouth in order for Abel to know that he needed to settle down.

“What the hell are you thinking Abel? I know he has tried to help us but thinking you can stop this is stupid,” Jal said, silent as a grave.

With all eyes on him Abel shook his head and whispered, “Samir has to live. If I can save him, he can be given to what is left of the government and then Adisa can be stopped quickly before things spiral out of hand… They will let me on stage and if I point my pistol at Adisa and tell the citizens the truth, even if there are a hundred guns on me, they won’t shoot because I will have Adisa in my sights. Then I can run off with Samir and Adisa and relocate to fight this battle with whoever we can. We need him… he is the key to killing Adisa.”

Palms were put into faces and heads were shaken.

“Do you realize how stupid this is Abel? We need you and with this you are asking to be killed!”

After Jal’s remark, Abel shook his head and said, “This must be done. This is our only chance to take a step towards ending this before Adisa spirals even more!”

With his back to the group, Abel was just about to take off when Jal reached out, grabbing his shoulder in a final attempt to speak. The pleading touch landed on his right side, but Abel spun around and shoved his friend away before a single word could be said. Without looking back, he turned again and bolted along the edge of the crowd. His friends watched in stunned silence, their faces showing fear, as Abel vanished toward what felt like certain death.

Trailing the side of the crowd, Abel got closer to his mission as people in the crowd looked at him confused. About halfway through the side of the crowd, people began to jump and boomed their voices high as Adisa showed himself with Samir in his hands. The suited man was put on his knees right to the left of Adisa's podium and without anyone touching him, Samir stayed on his knees with his eyes closed as Adisa raised his hands and began to yell into the microphone.

"This war is over, and our people are victorious!"

Abel came into the sight of a soldier right before the side steps of the speaking stand as his brother made his unquestioning people get excited over a victory that was taken without honor. Now every eye was trapped on Adisa, and Abel was barely noticed by anyone besides the single soldier.

The new President continued, "The Capital was taken over hours ago and now it is not the center of South Sudan anymore… Now we are the Capital as Utopia is the heart of South Sudan, leading it to a brighter future!"

Again, the crowd cheered, and Abel wondered if they were cheering at what his brother was saying or just because he was their leader. The boy speed walking with his brother's pistol unseen in his pants made eye contact with the soldier who was already looking at him. He kept walking, hoping he could slip past the young soldier without a word.

His hope died as the soldier stepped into his path, arm outstretched and eyes narrowing at the boy who looked strangely familiar. Abel had his gaze fixed on the ground, his expression unreadable, almost defiant in its indifference.

"What is your business walking here? This is for soldiers and Adisa himself only!"

Adisa joyfully boomed out again, "And if Utopia is now the Capital and I am the leader of Utopia, then that should make me the new President!"

Abel looked up at his brother who just spoke again, and the soldier recognized him and untensed his own arm with it still on Abel.

The soldier then said kindly, "I know you, your Adisa's brother… You can walk closer for a better look."

Abel exhaled sharply through his nose, a faint smile tugging at his lips as he nodded.

Without a word, the soldier released him.

Then, as if Abel no longer mattered, the soldier turned back to face the crowd, already forgetting the boy who now slipped past, pressing onward up the wooden steps.

Adisa continued, “But there is still one thing in the way of my throne, and he is right—”

Cheering settled down as Abel made himself clear on the stage. The sound of new wood settling was heard by Adisa who stopped speaking and turned his head towards his left to see his brother now on the same level as him.

Without a moment of contemplation, Abel untucked his shirt and pulled out the fated silver revolver and pointed it right at his brother who looked unfazed.

Gasps and cries rippled through the crowd as they watched their leader come under threat. In an instant, every Utopian rifle swung toward Abel. His body trembled, seized by raw anxiety.

Samir, wounded and weary, turned his head toward the boy with the pistol. He let out a breath, then faced the crowd once more, his mouth slightly open, as if searching for words that wouldn’t come.

On the stage, the two brothers locked eyes. Abel held the gun, but it was clear who was afraid. His hands shook and his eyes were wide but Adisa, by contrast, wore a smug, almost welcoming expression, as if he'd been waiting for this.

Abel stared down his sights at his brother, who stood still and unblinking, his eyes narrowing while Abel’s remained frozen open.

From the other staircase, Paulo shouted, “Put the gun down!”

The loyal soldier’s pistol was pointed at Abel, but the child didn’t pay attention to Paulo as he was no different than the rest. Abel took his chance and shouted over the silent crowd, “If anybody shoots, I will blow a hole right through Adisa’s head!”

Civilian’s gasped and held their mouths as they expected their leader to be shot right in front of them at any moment.

With a smug look still stuck on his face, Adisa slowly put his hands up without weight in his hands. When Adisa did this, his brother gripped his pistol even harder and expected something bad to come of this.

Casually running off his tongue, the leader of Utopia said, “My jealous brother, never being able to amount to anything so he tries to ruin me!”

Abel put his bottom teeth on his lip in anger and then he shouted, “The rumors are true! This man you people have been following is a drug dealer! Surprisingly as soon as that is brought to the table, a bombing occurs while Adisa is addressing it. Does that not strike anyone as odd!”

People in the crowd gasped more and looked at each other, at this point not knowing what to believe.

He continued, “Why would Afia tell such a lie when he clearly knew he was to be killed! Why would this man on his knees bomb Utopia as he knew that he was clearly outnumbered and was set to lose this war!”

The unbothered face Adisa sported now looked tight and angered and he took a step towards his brother and burst out, “Lies!”

His shout echoed throughout the crowd and even though Abel was the one with the pistol he was slightly intimidated by his brother’s angered being.

Adisa then sporadically continued, “All of my men put your arms down!”

Every soldier turned their head towards their leader in confusion and truly didn’t know whether to listen to him or not. Abel was confused as well but kept his gun right on Adisa.

“Did you not hear me? Put your guns down!”

After Adisa spoke, the soldiers reluctantly got the message and rested their rifles onto the ground and crossed their arms in protest.

Adisa stepped towards his brother with a crazed gaze and Abel shouted, “Don’t take another step! You and Samir are to come with me! And if anyone objects, I will kill my brother!”

The soldiers realized something was off about this interaction and kept their rifles untouched as Adisa seemed angry but careless. It was as if the boy had a secret card up his sleeve.

Adisa took another step which was supposed to kill him, but then nothing happened.

“Why don't you shoot me Abel? Shoot me now!”

No one knew what was to happen besides Adisa who couldn’t care less about his brother who cared for him so much. Abel cared for his real brother who he hadn’t seen in too long as Adisa had been gripped by power and bloodthirst. He never truly wanted to kill his brother. No matter how it looked, no matter how tightly he gripped the gun, it simply wasn’t in his heart.

Abel gulped and then gripped the pistol and lunged it towards Adisa. He then ordered, “Samir doesn’t deserve to die! Now listen and no one has to get hurt!”

Adisa, who was as red as ever, lunged closer to him disturbingly and said, “What? Has he tricked you into working with him? Do you think he is your daddy? Well, he’s not! Your father was a junkie and now he is dead! You're not saving Samir! Now shoot me you scoundrel! Come on!”

Civilians had never seen Adisa this mad and were distressed as to what was to come next.

In a final move, Adisa lunged at the gun and put his fingers around the barrel of his own pistol.

With his eyes shut tight, Abel pulled the trigger. The crack of gunfire tore through the air, echoing across the stunned silence.

Soldiers and civilians alike flinched, many squeezing their eyes shut. When they opened them again, the crowd erupted with screams from the civilians. Rifles snapped back into position and every eye darted toward the stage.

Adisa stood tall, untouched. Not a drop of blood on him but his face was still carved with rage.

The pistol was now in his left hand, held high above his head, his fingers wrapped tightly around the barrel.

Abel blinked through the chaos, his gaze searching his brother’s chest for a bullet hole that wasn’t there. There was not even a scratch.

In one swift motion, Adisa’s revolver came crashing down on Abel’s forehead then he staggered back, hands flying up to cradle the wound.

Abel was now a wide-open target. Adisa lunged at his little brother and knocked him flat. He climbed on top, striking him across the face with the pistol’s grip repeatedly.

By the fourth wooden blow, Abel’s vision blurred, and his consciousness began to run from him.

The plan had seemed so clear, so righteous, but after the very first strike, he knew that he’d pushed his luck too far.

Citizens watched as their leader smiled while hitting his brother over and over again until Paulo’s face was completely bloodied. The soldiers lowered their guns as they realized Adisa knew this whole time that his own pistol was loaded with blanks, it being the same trick that he used on Cyril.

Once Adisa was satisfied with the beating of his brother, he stood up and wiped his own red and bloodied face. He raised the undeadly pistol in the air and his people screamed in victory once again as he breathed heavily through his mouth and examined his brother who looked close to death.

The boy's skin and face that hadn't been seen in so long by Adisa was completely covered in blood and had bumps all over it. Not realizing or caring how deranged he looked, Adisa knelt down to his brother, with his shadow casting over him and then he spoke, "I knew you'd do this after Abraham died. That junkie chose his way out… But I am the one who killed your father."

Adisa began to laugh and then quietly continued, "There was always a reason why you and I were so different. Look at us right now. You're on the floor just like Abraham. Maybe next you can start hitting the pipe like him."

Abel had absolutely no fight left in him and barely could keep his eyes open at his brother. He had always guessed that Abraham was really his father, but he thought so because he had always wished for it.

Family now meant nothing to Adisa, but Abel knew this for the longest time as he knew Adisa didn't really care about their mother either as she was just collateral damage. Abel was deeply hurt.

Adisa stared blankly down on his brother and then realized this looked odd to his people. He then shouted to his soldiers, "Don't kill him, put him in the back of one of the cars and keep an eye on him."

The boy put his fierce face back on as his brother was dragged down the stairs by his arms, and Adisa directed his attention back to Samir.

His lips almost touched the microphone, and he said, "I am sorry for any inconvenience of my brother. He is a liar and is jealous… Just as he has been for all of our lives! Now where was I…"

Samir rolled his eyes then Adisa continued, "*Oh.* I know this inauguration may look informal, but in Utopia we do things differently. No parliament accompanies me, and no other government does either. South Sudan will be rebuilt with me leading a new empire that shall change all of Africa! Down with the old ways and death to corruption. Soon all of South Sudan will be *Utopia*! Soon all of Africa will be *Utopia*!"

Woos and roars overcame the crowd as any thought of Adisa's guilt was forgotten as their animal urges overcame them.

Adisa knew the crowd needed a sacrifice. It had become almost a tradition of blood spilling on the stage; The liquid life offered up to the collective monster that was Utopia.

The man on his knees gave no reaction. He refused to meet the eyes of the mob that surrounded him, drunk on the anticipation of death. Samir knew the truth that the more he screamed and the more he suffered, the more pleasure they would take. These people, drenched in their own delusions, were no longer human. They were spectators to slaughter, hungry for pain.

After Adisa scuffled his feet far apart behind Samir, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small red folding knife. The crowd saw it and shouted even louder in pure thirst and excitement.

Samir breathed heavily as his final seconds loomed on him, and he felt the warmth of his son's body right behind him. The small blade in the knife that was going to be set into Samir's neck was effortlessly clicked open by only the child's thumb and index finger. In total the small knife's blade was two inches and would be hell to kill Samir with. It was the same cheap red plastic handled knife that the armless man attacked him, and Adisa thought it would be poetic to use even if the two had no relation. The night that Adisa was stabbed was the night that the war turned around and he got the idea to win it. Also, it was the smallest knife Adisa could find, and it would be the most painful to be killed with.

No time was wasted as Adisa was craving blood and rested the blade on the side of Samir's neck. When the metal touched the micro hairs on Samir's neck, he sharply inhaled and squinted his closed eyes.

The hand of Adisa tensed up and began to saw quicker than Samir expected as his neck went tight, and he tried his best not to scream. Without restraints, Samir kneeled still as a blade went slashing across his neck and the crowd was curious as to how he wasn't in visible anguish. Even Adisa while committing the act would look at the crowd and realize they weren't amped up enough. Only a quarter into the cutting, Samir was still breathing even if blood was overtaking his airways, and this is when Adisa dropped the knife onto the wood below them. He placed both of his hands on the sides of Samir's head and began to pull up and twist as the sounds of his spinal cord breaking reached only Adisa. Citizens cheered him on as he struggled to tear Samir's head through the pressure of his people. Little creaks of his most important bone rocked back and forth as Samir's life was

slowly but painfully taken from him. Every time his head reached one side or the other the cracks of his spine would send a surge of pain over his head and half gone neck. After multiple tries on the side Adisa started to cut on, his spine finally snapped, making a foreign noise that sent an unsuspending chill down Adisa's back. The father's eyes shot open when the crack settled and his connection from his brain to his body was cut off. Adisa pushed his victims head back to the other side and finally pulled up, letting a flow of blood be pushed from under the head that was now gone and removed from its body. The kneeling body of the leader of Ibis fell headless onto the wood and began to spit out blood towards the crowd as they screamed. Samir was bald and Adisa couldn't grab it to hold his head in the air, so he flipped the head upside down in his palm and then grabbed his father's beard and lifted his face into the sky. With him pulling on his beard, his mouth was wide open and so were his eyes that were in their sockets unmoved.

People in the crowd were pushing through each other to get closer to Samir and to see the blood that was being spilled from the body and the head that were now apart from each other.

Adisa brought down the head as his fingers wrapped around its wispy beard hairs and then swung it forward and let go of it for blood to spray around as the head flew over the civilians who tried to grab it like a prize.

The head was caught by someone, then by another civilian who ripped it out of their hands and then by another. People were so thirsty for the life that bled off of Samir's head that the last person who caught it grabbed it and put it into his chest as he curled up in a ball in the ground.

The boy watched the last man grab it and turned his back away from his people as soldiers tried their best to get them away from the stage that still held Samir's bleeding body.

-Chapter XXXXX-

Earthy water soaked into the old wood that two boys sat in as they progressed across a large lake. One of the boys had his cheek against the unbalanced floor and when he woke, he lifted off of it and examined the familiar looking boy who held a wet oar that had just breached out of the water. The smell of lake water and cigarette smoke filled Abel's nose as he woke up from his long slumber and tried to figure out what soldier was taking him out as it clearly wasn't Adisa. Looking around outside of the small canoe, the mainland was barely visible, with the only land being able to be seen was a small one that was seemingly approached.

Abel cleared his dry throat and asked the boy, "Where are we?"

The captain of this small, decked boat turned around and gave a surprising look at Abel who was sitting on the canoe's floor.

It was clear this boy was Paulo when he made eye contact with Abel, and he did his best to speak over the cigarette in his mouth, saying, “You're up… I expected you to still be asleep until I threw you on the island.”

With sweat covering all of his skin, Paulo laughed smoke out while staring at Abel.

The hostage then asked, “What is this about? Why didn’t you just shoot me.”

Paulo began to paddle again and then said, “Well, Adisa said he didn’t want to just shoot you for trying to humiliate him in front of all of Utopia. He said he wanted you out of the walls but still tortured.”

Abel’s mouth went stern as Paulo continued, “Crucifixion was an option, but Adisa ruled that out. We almost hung you upside down from a tree for the buzzards to get you but that is when I brought up this great idea. Trapping you on this damned isle I have heard of ever since I was a boy. Off of the waters of Kampala… *Imimoya Isle.* A feared place where spirits reside and once you step foot on its ground, you will never take your feet off of it again. By the time I am rowing back, you will already be possessed!”

Paulo laughed more and then took his short and used up cigarette off his lips and threw it straight down into the lake water. It floated by the boat as Abel watched, then the boy uttered, “I know you like my brother, but what if you didn’t listen to him for a change?”

The captain stopped rowing and snickered and then raised one half of his mouth while looking at Abel in disgust and said, “You clearly don’t know Adisa too well. I was shot only last morning, and I am still rowing you in our neighboring country to show I am still good enough to fight with Adisa!

I feel energy from him I have never felt in my life. He is a special person, meant to lead Africa to a brighter future.”

Paulo was clearly too gone in Adisa’s deceptive ways, but Abel still continued to poke the bear, speaking, “What is the end goal of this Paulo? What brighter future? We had hard times before Utopia, but what Adisa is doing makes that all look like it was nothing. It is only time before you have to fight the rest of South Sudan until they accept Adisa’s new rule and how many of our people will that cost!”

Paulo was now faced away from Abel and speaking towards the only land in sight, then he said, “Our people are willing to die, because they know there is only one truth in this world, and it is Adisa.”

From right to left, Abel shook his head and then the boat's underside started to push against the isle's sloped sand.

With his arms behind his head, Paulo threw the oar he held on to shore just before the boat and then he glanced back at Abel with a petrified look in his eye.

"Get up now! Let's make this quick."

Abel pushed himself up and when he got up, Paulo was on shore with a pistol pointed from his hip at the boy. The boy was disoriented and had a tough time even walking at first as he had clearly been put to sleep with more than just a punch. It took a lot for him to even step over the canoes seats without wanting to fall over and Paulo did not approve of this slowness and shouted from the shore, "Hurry the fuck up! I could shoot you right now and dump your body in this lake and Adisa would never know!"

The soldier with the pistol in his hand kept turning around and looking into the luscious green but unknown, sinister forest like he was expecting someone to jump out. Abel took a long, slow step out of the boat, his head hanging low and him barely able to keep his eyes open. His captor circled him with hurried, restless movements, eager to return to the boat, as if every second spent away from it was a threat.

When Abel reached the ground, Paulo grunted and pushed the boat as he gripped his hand on the inside of it and threw his feet over.

He was now rowing away back to Kampala and Abel stared at Paulo who looked like he was escaping a prison with how fast he was rowing. The two locked eyes. Paulo froze, his hands still gripping the oars. In a dark silhouette against the fading light, his voice rang out across the water, "Goodbye forever!"

Abel stood completely still and unmoved, not wanting to enter this supposedly cursed forest as he watched his only escape disappear into darkness. He was not as scared as Paulo of the island, but he still was a bit squeamish as he was a believer in ghosts as he had heard stories of them all of his life from his family.

Abraham would tell stories about human souls that couldn't move on to heaven and were damned to remain on this earthly plain in a purgatory and this belief always made Abel think that it would happen to him.

After a long silence, the boy turned his head toward the forest. The moment he did, a chill ran from his neck down to the base of his spine, despite the warmness of the night. Every rustling blade of grass, every

creak of a tree limb, seemed to hide a face, watching him. He could almost feel their eyes, cold and intent. The thought struck him that if he stepped a foot into that forest, he would be doomed. He put his eyes on the ground and looked around for anything useful that could have washed on the small shore of this uncontacted island. The boy imagined a cell phone washing up but still being usable or maybe seeing a docked boat.

Unlike his brother, Abel was not one for outside play and didn't swim as much as his brother did, which left him to be able to swim to save his life but not able to swim great distances or back to the mainland. Children would drown or go missing near the White Nile constantly and his mother would stress not swimming as children drowned constantly but that didn't stop his brother.

He thought back to a time when Adisa went out to play with friends during an especially hot day. Dara's intuition told her that Adisa would go swimming so before he left the house, Abel watched his brother get urged to not swim in the Nile. Adisa seemingly obliged but when he returned to the apartment, his shirt was just barely wet enough to warrant a beating.

After reminiscing, Abel looked back up at the forest and squinted his eyes as he threw away any thought of this place being filled with spirits as it could have been just a story. The boy really had no other choice but to get into the forest as his survival was not going to be handed to him.

Abel pushed over a couple of long untamed leaves to the side to venture into the forest and when he got under the cover of the trees the sound of birds and wind made themselves at home within his ears. His eyes were peeled to hopefully any sort of lizard or small animal that he could sneak up on and cook. Even if the sounds of a couple birds caught his ears, his eyes looked around into the trees and saw no life, making him wonder if he was even hearing birds.

Abel knew the fight for food would be rough and judging that he and Paulo just had a ten-hour drive through Uganda, he was hungry and ready to eat anything. His hands would only take him so far in hunting so he turned his attention to the closest tree and scanned it for any branches that he could tear off and make a spear. The foreign swamp trees that looked like they had green cotton balls at the top of them didn't look promising as the limbs were high and long and that was the opposite of what the boy needed. Knowing what he had to do, Abel looked towards the ground and exhaled, then he put his neck back up and hopped to put both of his hands

around the thin branch right above his head. As soon as his hands passed over each other, the birds stopped chirping, and the wind stopped beating on him.

A distinct noise came from right behind him. The sound of a branch cracking, clearly not a sound from an accident, made Abel's heart skip a beat as his feet swung in the air. He was completely blind to whatever was behind him and with his eyes wide open he dropped his feet back to the ground and he turned around quickly towards the sound. His view flew around the forest, everywhere besides where the sound actually came from until his eyes stopped on a peculiar looking rock.

Only the top of the rock was visible as the rest was covered by shrubbery, but it looked as if it had been carved to be ten small headstone shapes and the rest of it was blind to Abel. With his back pressed against the tree, the child scraped himself against the bark of it as he put all of his weight on his toes and tried to lift up to see the weird rock.

As Abel lifted his gaze, so did the rock, except it wasn't a rock at all. It was a tribal mask, worn by a tall, emaciated figure. The man or creature rose slowly from the shrubs, his limbs long and unnaturally thin. Abel's heart hammered in his chest, and he planted his heels firmly on the ground, trying to steady himself as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

The figure's limbs were like shadows, dark and moving with fluidity, and in its hand, it gripped a massive spear. The mask it wore was as dark as the rest of its body, blending so seamlessly that it seemed to be a part of him like a shadow that had come to life.

The figure raised the spear, and in that moment, the night itself seemed to shift. From the shadows, eleven other figures emerged, rising from the dark undergrowth and the twisted branches around Abel. What had once seemed like mere movement in the trees now took form as tall, gaunt figures, blending into the foliage.

Abel's horror deepened as he saw two men in the trees, holding what appeared to be carved horns. They blew into them, mimicking the calls of birds, creating eerie, unnatural sounds that echoed in the night air.

With his back still against the tree he reached his arms out and scooted around it and began to run towards the opening of the forest behind him that would take him to shore. Men jumped down from their trees while making animal sounds from their tongues and using their long legs to chase the child they had never seen before.

Abel had never run this fast in his life and once his feet hit the sand, he started to run left up the thin and rocky shore all while dodging small trees. He had made the distinction that these were men and not spirits but he still was petrified at what they would do to him if they caught up to him. It was a small, narrow isle, barely a sliver of land and now Abel was trapped on it, surrounded by people who, by all appearances, wanted him dead.

The boy was frightened at the amount of feet he heard behind him hitting the sand, so he turned around to see the tribe of dark and skinny beings all with masks chasing him while almost being able to touch him with their spears. By the time he turned back around, right in front of him stood another group of tribal men all wearing masks as well and all having their spears locked behind their head ready to throw.

Abel stopped in his tracks and his head did a circle as he looked at both sides of the beach and saw two groups of the same tribe howling and throwing their legs up as they called for his death. He frantically looked around on the shore for a good-sized rock or anything that he could use for protection but that turned out to be useless. His view turned to his right at the water, and he contemplated running in but knew that he couldn't swim and the islanders probably could.

Short steps were taken at Abel as the tall men got closer to him, and he put his hands up like they knew what that meant.

The boy shouted, "Don't stab me… I'll swim away, just don't kill me!"

All the men around him couldn't understand a word from him and continued to close in on him in a circle until their spears reached his neck from every direction. Abel breathed heavily and every time he took a puff of air; he felt the pressure of multiple spears touching into his skin but not penetrating through it.

In leaving Ibis and rehoming in Utopia, Loro adjusted to his new but accustomed life and spent most of his time with Humph at Rakeem's drug house. They would do what the rest of the boys would do and cook up drugs and package them up to be shipped off to some neighboring town. He would teach the beginners how to work with the drugs and would give his wisdom on how to gain success in the trade. Loro was already a connection for Utopia to other dealers all across South Sudan and his once kingpin status had cooled down since he had already given up all of his usefulness to Utopia. The oldest of anyone in the house felt out of place

sometimes as these kids were unlike any he had seen, and he didn't relate to a lot of their savage ways. He wished for something exciting to happen to his life to switch it even if that meant violence or a fight.

Wanting to patrol the streets, looking for trouble, he took an Ibisian M4 and left Rakeem's house to walk under the moonlight.

Loro made it to the main street and while kicking his feet, about to turn a corner, he overheard a conversation just on the other side.

"I don't get why Abel did that. He fucked up a lot of things. I know we would all love to put a gun to Adisa but that was too noisy!"

The rifle that was held in Loro's palms was put to rest up against the side of a wall and he turned his head around the corner to see who was talking.

Of course, he didn't recognize the boys, but he knew something was fishy about this conversation. He turned his head back around the corner softly and continued to listen.

The other unknown young man said, "I know it was stupid what he did! I think everybody with or against him knows that, Bilal. But that doesn't mean he is stupid he just made the wrong move."

"Clearly, you're not seeing straight friend, what Abel did put us all in jeopardy and what he did could have sealed our fate. The A.U.C. needs to be led in a new direction my friend."

A scoff was let off then Loro listened as the two seemingly walked off. This was his chance to spark some excitement, so he lifted his rifle in one hand and then lifted his radio with the other. He walked off a good bit down the road and looked around and whispered aggressively, "Adisa, there is a conspiracy! Men in cohorts with your brother… This could be a big issue!"

On the TV in front of the new President, showed an American news station speaking on the tensions in South Sudan. Pictures of a destroyed Ibis were flashed and then the male news reporter began to speak of Samir's public execution, calling it a "Attack on democracy for the entire world."

Adisa watched with his nostrils expanding as he was angered at what they were saying. On the TV a woman dressed in a cream suit was shown on a live video call with her name under her saying: "Awien Deng– Former Chief Justice."

She began to speak with a worried face, “Africa is under attack and now Adisa has informally assumed the presidency. South Sudan needs help and the entire world needs to step up to help our people or else the genocide will continue!”

Adisa chuckled a bit, then angrily shut the TV off. After the box clicked off frequency, on the side of his bed with blurred vision Adisa looked over at his nightstand where the radio was speaking but the noise sounded like it came from a tube. He stumbled over to his dresser and nearly knocked the half empty bottle of Jack Daniels onto the floor as he reached for the walkie next to it. His lips met the walkie as he kissed it and drowsily said, “What? What has happened?”

Loro assured, “Your brother whatever he did today there could be more attacks coming soon Adisa! He has people working with him! Meet me next to this shitty outdoor bar on main street!”

Instantly responding, Adisa longly said with his eyes barely open, “All-*righty*.”

All Adisa had truly heard was, “Brother,” and “working with,” but it was enough for him to be concerned even through his numbed state.

Adisa tossed the radio onto the bed and stood still for a moment in the darkness of his room with no lights and no sound. Just the weight of his own breath and the heavy haze of alcohol in his blood. He was drunk and alone, with nothing but his thoughts echoing back at him.

He stood there, trying to remember what he was doing, or why.

Then, without much thought, he reached under his pillow, pulled out his 1911, and slid it into the waistband of the same pants he’d been wearing for five too many days.

Outside, the air hit him like a slow slap. He could barely walk in a straight line, stumbling over his own feet, but convinced himself he was fine to drive. He climbed into the driver’s seat, humming a tune that didn’t exist, just something to drown out the louder noise humming in his mind.

Loro saw Adisa’s headlights race all the way down from his hill and towards the city center where the lights casting off the car couldn’t stay still as Adisa rocked the car back and forth. Even if his driving was impaired Adisa had successfully told himself his driving was smooth.

The patroller held his hand on his forehead as he watched Adisa drive towards him, hoping that the boy knew how to break still. He was a few

blocks away from the bar that they were set to approach and as the car got closer, Loro waved Adisa down and Loro began to worry if he was going to get hit. He took a step to the side and watched as Adisa slowly stopped, hitting the breaks way too hard.

When he got out of the car, that is when the real show of drunkenness was shown as he walked worse than he drove, swinging side to side like a street girl. Loro wanted to laugh as he had never seen someone this drunk but when Adisa pulled his pistol out and started to wave it around that is when his chuckling turned to concerned silence. Adisa was in no shape or form, mentally available to hold a gun and he swung it around like it was a piece of food when he was talking at a dinner.

"Where is he? Who is my brother with!"

The gun was now pointed at Loro as Adisa rocked back and forth.

One of Loro's hands went up in fear then he said, "His name is Bilal, he's right around the corner, stay quiet."

Adisa's vision blurred, but he forced himself to focus, trailing behind Loro as they slipped through the shadows. They crept around the corner just as the two men crossed the street, heading toward the bar—but walked just out of its line of sight.

Hidden in the dark, Loro leaned in close and whispered with his voice low, "That's Bilal. The one on the right."

Bilal froze halfway across the street. The whispered words hadn't been quiet enough. He turned sharply, his eyes narrowing as he spotted a man his age stepping out from the shadows with a rifle in hand, approaching him. Beside him stood the last person Bilal ever wanted or expected to see.

His eyes opened up and he patted his friend to his left who he was just arguing with and the friend noticed Adisa as well and was mortified. The friend beside Bilal began to run towards the bar as he would rather be killed by Adisa than captured, but Bilal was not as quick to move and watched as his friend was shot in the back.

Everybody at the bar tensed up and got down at the unseen gunshot as their ally's barely visible body violently entered their view in the street. The hands of Bilal were thrown in the air, and he got down on his knees as Adisa walked towards him with his pistol aimed right at his head.

"You think you can go against me huh?"

After Adisa yelled this down the street, Jal and Atem got up to see what was happening as they thought that this was a soldier who had killed their friend. Everyone else at the bar stayed behind and the two glanced around a corner at their dead friend and then watched as a boy stood in front of Bilal with his pistol aimed right in between his victim's eyes. When Atem realized this boy was Adisa, he reached for his pistol, but Jal tried to keep his cool.

Jal quickly noticed his friend breathing hard and looked down at his friend's side. In Atem's hand he cocked back the hammer of his revolver slowly and Jal swiftly grabbed his hand and whispered, "You're going to get us all killed, put it back."

Atem threw a disgruntled, childish look at Jal and then uneasily watched as Adisa dragged Bilal through the dirt around the neighboring building's corner.

Bilal disappeared and everyone at the bar began to scramble once Adisa was out of view. People were distressed and horrified as two of their closest members had been taken or killed within only a couple of hours. The A.U.C. seemed to be at the end of its life in its members' minds and it felt as if there was no fight left.

Banging and screaming, a still living Bilal was contorted to fit into the back of the sedan's truck. Adisa was now in the driver's seat ready to take his newfound victim for questioning. Loro leaned against the passenger window, thinking he would get a ride home.

"Adisa, since I gave you that, could you give me a ride home?"

The boy who shouldn't be driving blinked longly, raised one side of his lip then shook his head as he rolled up the window and backed away from Loro.

Bilal endured a jarring, relentless ride with his body jolting violently every few seconds, each bounce causing a tormenting slam that left his ribs aching and bruised by the time his captor finally wrenched open the trunk of the car. When the trunk was jolted open, Bilal covered in sweat looked up at Adisa who already had his pistol drawn on him. The pistol in Adisa's hands swiftly banged down on the side of Bilal's head, and then with his free hand Adisa grabbed the young man and pulled him onto the ground. His back hit the dirt, and Adisa kicked him and then began to drag him towards the front door of his home.

After crying and squirming around on the dirt, Bilal was dragged up Adisa's steps with every step he was dragged over sending a stinging back up his back. Adisa swung the door open and pushed Bilal inside and then let go of him to close the door. The hostage got on his knees after picking himself up a tad with his shaking hands and pleaded with Adisa, "Let me go, I'll tell you anything please!"

The still moving mouth of Bilal was kicked by Adisa's heel which made his front teeth ache in pain, then he fell to the ground again while holding his bloody mouth. He continued to plead as Adisa dragged his body through his house and into his bedroom which was used more to torture people than to sleep.

It was clear to Adisa once he threw him in the room with the way that the guy talked that he was weak, and he would break under the lightest bit of pressure. Bilal returned to his knees crying like a baby and looking around the depraved and bloody room with a rope in the middle of it. He could only imagine what Adisa could do to him and what had already happened in this room so he shouted out, "I can tell you whatever you want!"

Again, Adisa kicked him while he was on his knees but this time his shoe went right into his breadbasket. The bruised Bilal wheezed out more and Adisa shouted over him, "You break this quickly Bilal? I thought you would have been more fun!"

In rage Adisa kicked him on the ass as he tried to crawl away, and more tears flowed from Bilal's eyes.

Adisa watched as his victim regained his breath as he kneeled down and held his collar. Spitting in his face while he talked, Adisa, only an inch away, spoke, "Now I want to know who you are working for. Is it another Ibisian politician, *huh*? Do I have to go to war again?"

"No, no. It's your brother Abel."

Adisa was now literally face to face touching Bilal and he screamed, "Explain! I don't care; I have already taken care of my brother!"

"You don't get it, He's trying to kill you, using other people. The Anti-Utopia Coalition, he started it!"

Adisa shook his head around with an open mouth and then longly said, "The what?"

He was truly surprised. A group with such a name started by his brother within the walls of his own city disgusted him. Before Bilal could

speak again, Adisa gripped onto his shirt tighter and yelled, “You people want to kill me! You people want to kill Utopia!”

“I don’t! I don’t! I haven’t done anything, okay, just let me go now,” Bilal pleaded.

With drool running down his mouth, Adisa shouted, “Where are you located! Where are you traitors located!”

Bilal opened his eyes after the screaming stopped and looked right into Adisa’s evil eyes. He could swear he was staring into the devil's eyes, and he whined, “Are you going to let me live?”

Adisa shoved Bilal off of his grip and then stood up and pointed his pistol down in the face of the rebel.

It looked as if Adisa was about to weep and he spoke, “Where are you betrayers located.”

Bilal put his hands up with his chin in his neck and then he said, “At that bar you were right next to.”

The child tyrant didn’t want to waste any more time with his weak victim and he pulled the trigger of his pistol and sent a bullet through the boy's teeth and out of the back of his skull.

Still at the top of the bar, members of the A.U.C. were disparaged at the sight of their dead member and the thought of another one being tortured. Everybody was standing around the body of their friend and talking all while trying their best to not look like they were holding any sort of meeting. People were pissed off and some members even wanted to thrust themselves into battle against Adisa with their arms that they had collected. Jal was the dominant one in this conversation, but he was in the minority of the people who thought that they shouldn’t fight at this moment. Across from him Abuk, a feisty woman in the group spoke saying, “Abel’s problem was going by himself. If we ambush Adisa tonight, we could kill him and the rest of his men without a thought then this could end.”

Even Atem agreed with this woman who stood right next to Jal as most of the group agreed with her.

Jal responded, “We are no match for Adisa’s soldiers. Where we have emotion, they do not, and they will stop at nothing to kill one soldier even if it means two of their own die!”

Jal was getting worked up then he calmed down and continued, “As a group we have never been in a gunfight… These soldiers have been in many. We will be killed and gone in the wind by tomorrow if we do that.”

Abuk responded, “Sounds like you like Adisa more than us thinking about how many of them will die.”

She smirked and Jal gave a disgusted look at her and said, “You and anyone who agrees with you is not thinking straight. All of you are thinking with your emotions and not your head!”

Silence overcame the group as Abuk pursed her lips and Jal looked towards the ground. A thought was thrown into his mind and then he said, “We must not rush in now, we have to play this long whether we like it or not. We should keep some arms for ourselves but bury the rest where the people stand before Adisa’s speeches.”

The circle widely disagreed with this and gave denouncing looks at Jal who felt like he could not win this argument.

Jal burst out, “They have Bilal, he could be dead by now but who knows what sort of information they could get out of him if he was alive. I am not calling him a snitch, but I can’t be alone in the fact that it feels as if Adisa is breathing right down our necks. We must hide our guns in case we are found out. It is not just for hiding but for if Adisa tries anything during his speeches and we need to use them as a final strike. Anyone who is loyal to our cause shall know of this.”

Atem was still angry at Jal for stopping him from shooting Adisa, but he ended up agreeing and said, “He is right. Let us do this now!”

Wrapped in blankets, groups of five of the Ibis gifted guns were bunched together and put into shallow pits by scurrying rebels. Twenty holes were dug in line with each of the supports for Adisa’s stand.

-Chapter XXXXXI-

With his feet leaving the sand behind, Abel stepped slowly into the dense dirt of the forest, four sharpened spears pressed so close to his neck they trembled with the threat of piercing it.

The islanders surrounded him, their eyes locked on him with a mix of suspicion and awe as if he were some foreign creature, though his features mirrored their own, with his skin and his frame, even the shape of his face

could have made him one of them. Still, they held their weapons firm, treating him not like kin, but like a danger that could pounce on them.

Abel didn't try to speak. He knew it would be useless. Instead, he kept his head down and his mouth shut, following wherever they led him.

Under his breath he spoke, *"Don't put me on a pole. Don't roast me like a pig."*

They veered right, deeper into a narrow strip of forest, the path tightening with each step. Through the trees ahead, Abel caught the flicker of warm flamelight dancing in the distance. For a moment, it reminded him of the soft glow of candlelight from his old home, the one he once shared with his mother, before Adisa shattered everything.

Cracked huts made of mud that looked more like big ant hills without roofs were scattered all throughout the middle of the island. Covered by trees and large shrubs, little children and women peeked out from their domes and gave Abel disgusted and scared looks as if he had done something wrong. The boy was completely in another world and had no way out of the island and no path into their way of life. Every hut was seemingly directed in a circle around a large fire where two rows of sticks floated above it where food was roasted. It clearly wasn't strong enough for the boy to be put on, so he put that thought aside but still was frightened, awaiting his death by jabbing.

He was purposefully faced towards the biggest of the huts, that still wasn't that big, but it looked as if it could fit more than three people laying side by side. From the glow of the firelight emerged a man who looked much like the other islanders, but there was no mistaking his authority. The cloth around his waist was painted in bold patterns, his face streaked with pigments that gave him a ceremonial, almost mythic air.

Unlike the others, whose ribs pressed against their skin, this man was solid, scarred, and muscular.

His eyes were wide, unblinking, locked on Abel with a gaze that cut straight through the fire between them. With his chest puffed, he stood tall, exuding dominance.

He wore no mask like the others. Instead, a wooden cap rested on his head, covered in carvings and raised symbols that caught the fire's glow. To Abel, it looked like a crown.

The man held no weapon, but the way his fists were clenched made Abel know if he wanted to kill him, he wouldn't need a spear.

Behind the large man inside of the hut, the leader's partner sat in the shadows looking at Abel with her eyes peeled wide. As the boy stared at the hiding woman, his attention was directed to the small child who ducked his head down and then made it outside of the hut.

All of the natives around Abel looked as if they were trying to show respect to the leader and his son by loosening their tensed-up states as he emerged.

The boy had his eyes at the ground and looked scared and like he had just gotten reprimanded as he scuttled by his father's side. Abel noticed something in the child's right hand that was pointed to the ground, and he recognized it as a stone shiv that would be used to presumably stab him. Even if the child didn't look excited to kill Abel, his potential victim knew that even if the young boy didn't want to do it, he really didn't have a choice as his father would force him to kill to prove himself.

Abel scanned everywhere for any sort of way out of his certain death as his heart beat through his skin, but he knew even if there was a rifle in front of him if he tried to reach for it, he would be pierced through his neck in the blink of an eye.

The child looked up at his father with a submissive gaze and eyes low. His shoulders were slightly caved, as if asking for approval or forgiveness without a word.

His father met him with the opposite gaze, cold and unmoved. His eyes bore down on the boy with quiet pressure.

He swiftly grabbed the child's arm that held the knife as hard as he could and while staring intensely at his son, he wiped a bit of soot paint off of his face and used his thumb to wipe it back in a horizontal line on his son's forehead. When his thumb pulled back from his son's forehead, he shrieked a loud but quick holler that made Abel flinch as he had never heard something like that before. The spears on Abels neck were taken off and the men around him started to howl just like their leader as they lifted their feet up and down causing vibrations in the dirt. When the leader repeatedly yelled, he looked in his son's direction while doing it and gripped him hard as if he was going to eat his son. As soon as the leader stopped howling, all the other men did as well, and they returned their spears to their Abel's neck which caused him to return to his heavy breathing. The son was let go of his father's grip and he put his head up and looked at Abel as he slowly scooted across the dirt towards the man that he

was destined to kill to prove his worth in the tribe. He passed the left side of the fire and as he got closer Abel began to shake and so did the rest of the men around him as they started to move their feet and fingers in excitement. While he was still walking, the child slowly lifted his knife up towards Abel and the rest of the tribe began to go crazy, again putting their spears to their sides and exclaiming their excitement through pants and hoots.

Now Abel had a good view of the knife seeing its intricate engravings of waves and skulls from its base to its point. The boy looked around at his excited tribe members and felt his stomach drop as he put pressure from weapon's point on Abel's stomach. Somehow when the point touched Abel the tribe members went even more crazy which Abel thought was impossible.

Abel and the small child locked eyes with them both looking equally distressed, then a womanly shriek grew louder than the other tribe members and made them shut their voices down. All eyes shifted toward the woman who resided in the humble hut beside the leader's dwelling. She was an older woman with squinted eyes and saggy skin with her bare breasts being barely covered up by multiple long necklaces. The leader yelled a deep gasp of air towards her and then grabbed her which shook the handmade jewelry on her ears. She looked unfazed by the leader's shouts and kept her eyes right on Abel who was deeply confused. The woman took a few slow steps toward Abel, and the leader released her arm without resistance. To Abel, that simple gesture said a lot as the leader wouldn't have let just anyone go so gently. Maybe this was the man's mother or perhaps his grandmother. Either way, she had a power over him that no one else seemed to. The rest of the women were hidden in their huts as the men danced around like animals, so Abel knew this woman had some sort of respect especially in the way that the tribe members stared at her.

Even if he was set to sacrifice Abel, the child ran back to his angered father as his elder approached his lamb.

Every gentle step she took her jewelry danced around and made noises throughout the dead silent hamlet and Abel blinked as his heart raced and it seemed the woman was now right in front of him. She stared into his worried eyes with her half-squinted view then her graceful hand raised towards Abels face. As she did so, he looked down at her gleaming necklaces and noticed a special one over them all. It was a small pendant,

carved from wood, but it pulled him straight back to the night he searched for his father, who, of course, was already on the edge of death.

The boy wanted to recoil as she touched him but for some reason he felt as if this woman was not going to harm him. Her hand was surprisingly cold when it touched his left cheek, and her boney fingers made contact with his skin. She shut her eyes and so did Abel as he tried to fit into whatever custom this was. The tribal woman began to whisper but for some reason it sounded very loud in Abel's ears like her lips were touching against his ear hole. As Abel's feeling of being uncomfortable peaked they both opened their eyes at the same time as the woman placed her hand down. For a few seconds she stared into his eyes with a smirk, then she softly said, "*Yeetaaga okuddayo mu nsi ye*."

Abel had no idea what the woman said but guessed it to be in Ugandan tongue. From behind the old woman, the leader stomped his feet and furiously shouted, "*Tya!*"

The spears of the savages were taken down from over their heads and put on the dirt in clear pacifism as the woman spoke again, "*Ekigendererwa Ekinene. Yeetaaga eryato lyaffe."*

All around the faces of the men looked bewildered at what the woman had said, then the Leader breathed out of his nose hard and said nothing back as he threw his son in his hut and then followed him.

Before Abel knew it, the men who were just about to kill him swiftly grabbed him and started to walk as quick as they towards the leader's hut. Abel turned around again to give one last look to the old woman who had seemingly saved him without him knowing how she did it.

The two men who had lifted him the child in their hands ran past the hut and began to run out of the village and back into the deep forest. Without stopping they kept running as Abel was completely lost as to what was happening while trees and brush flew past him. Light at the end of the tunnel showed to Abel as a clearing the forest made itself evident, showing the clear beach and two long shadows. As they made it out of the forest, the shadows revealed themselves to be boats and Abel's interest peaked as he thought of a way to get out of their grips and take one of the fishing boats for himself. He didn't have to, as in a heartbeat the tribe members threw him in the boat and then dispersed to its sides. Abel now was dumbstruck while his escape was made easy and the two men pushed the boat down the sand and into the water.

When he was off in the water, the two members threw up their spears and started to yell again as the boy clutched his newfound oar and did his best to get away from the island.

The closest landmass he could see was in the direction that Paulo dropped him off in, so he trailed the island as he did his best to scoot from side to side of the long wooden fishing boat to keep it straight. He was still in view of the isle, and he watched as the tribe members stood on the shore and raised their spears and shouted at him and he took that as a clear message to never come back. Luck had saved his life as an elder had spared him for an unknown reason. The boy knew this reason was because he had a bigger purpose and more to do in life then to be killed right there and then.

As Abel approached the mainland, he realized the formations he was approaching were nothing but giant islands, so he decided to travel around them to get closer to the actual mainland. After passing around almost all of the Ssese islands, the mainland was clearly made out to him. It was still nighttime and small lights glimmered on the shore that he approached. His arms were on fire from the hour of rowing that he had done as he started to dock in a shore of mud that he was closest to. A small wooden house was right at the top of the shore and Abel had decided he could get directions from them. The boat stopped and he gladly exited it and left it for good but before he left it, he put his hands on his hips and inspected the beautiful islands he had just sailed by. He wasn't a big fan of the stinky wooden boat he had just used that was filled with bones and the blood of fish, but he was grateful that he was able to escape.

Now it was time for him to get a way back to Utopia and end Adisa's tyrannical reign as that was all there was left to do. He had a lot to prove to the A.U.C. after what he had so brashly done in their last interaction.

Abel blinked and exhaled then turned around to see at the head of the shore. It was an old man pointing a rifle at him. The boy scoffed and thought how he just couldn't catch a break. His hands were pointed at the sky, and he put his head down as the older man shouted, "What is your business here! Where are you from?"

"It is a long story, just put your gun down and I can explain."

Speaking between his teeth, the man asked, "Why are you on my shore and why do you have an islanders' boat."

Abel looked back at the clear engravings on the boat that you could see even in the dirt, then he looked back up at the gun and said, “I am from Utopia…”

Barking in an instant the man shouted, “From where?”

He jumped his gun towards Abel in a show of disapproval, then Abel watched as the blinds behind the man had a girl peeking through them. Then when the boy locked eyes with her frightened eyes she shut them to hide away.

“I am from Utopia… Okay? My brother is Adisa the leader–”

A bullet whizzed by the side of Abel and he fell to the ground in reaction to it. He picked himself back up as the old man pulled the bolt of his rifle back and prepared to line Abel up in his sights and actually kill him.

“Just listen, I don’t like him! He banished me on one of those islands and I am returning to Utopia to take revenge!”

The man loosened up his grip and shook his head at Abel.

“You want to kill that child… Your brother?”

After the man asked the question, his gun was put down a bit and Abel felt no need to lie now and responded, “Once I enter the gates of Utopia, I am going to find him and kill him to end the travesties that he has caused. Now I would appreciate it if you could tell me how to get to Utopia from here because I am completely lost.”

The old man choked on his words and then said, “My daughter, she is inside… She is from Ibis. Her home and family are gone and that savage child had something done to her that I do not know. She won’t tell me. But I do know that something has to be done about him.”

From the man’s pocket, his hand pulled out a set of keys that he threw to the child without thinking. His gun's butt was now in the dirt, and he watched as Abel fiddled around with the keys and realized they weren't keys to a house but instead a car.

The older man then said, “That’s for me shooting at you…”

Abel stumbled on his words, saying, “Thank you– Are you sure?”

“No problem child. You need it more than I do.”

Abel walked up the shore and the two shook hands, then when they separated, the man picked his rifle up and said, “You’ll be needing this too.”

As Abel grabbed the rifle and by the time it left the man’s grip, he reached into another pocket and pulled out a handful of rifle cartridges and then pulled the boy’s left arm up and stuffed the brass in his hand.

"Take A104 and it'll lead you to Ibis, then you go up the Nile and you can kill that bastard."

Abel was amazed at the fact a man he had just met in another country hated Adisa so much he gave him his only car and a rifle to go along with it. He shook the man's hand again and started the car, hoping he could drive fine as this was his first time driving a car.

-Chapter XXXXXII-

Through the barrel of a hundred-dollar bill, Adisa traced a line of white powder through the dirty money straight into his nose off of a white dinner plate he had taken from Rakeem's kitchen. It was the first time he had tried such a thing and as soon as the bill left his nostril, blood started to drip down on the white plate.

"*Aghh.*"

His little fingers wiped the blood and coca off the rim of his nose and instantly he felt the need to scream out the pain he felt out of his mouth.

The rolled-up Benjamin was dropped from Adisa's hand and unraveled itself into the drops of blood on the plate as the child closed his eyes and stumbled his feet backwards. The boy opened his eyes up wide and began to do circles in the area between the kitchen and living room as he felt a lightning bolt of energy go down his body. Adisa's fingers and eyes twiddled around, and his jaw went tense as Loro rerolled the bill and took the second line off of the plate.

Loro's reaction wasn't as severe as Adisa's as he had been a veteran at snorting lines and was accustomed to getting high off his own supply. It was his idea for Adisa to try cocaine as the boy was extremely wasted, and he told him that if he just did it once he would be fine and that it would sober him up. The one line did sober the child up, but it made his heartbeat faster and his urge for violence peak.

Five other soldiers were at the first story of Rakeem's house with their leader and Loro, worriedly watching Adisa lose his mind as he tweaked around the room like he was looking for something that wasn't there. One

of the boys looked down at Adisa's large stomach in the white covered house and realized his leader looked more like Rakeem each day.

Adisa did a loop around the island of the kitchen and then kneeled in front of the sink and shouted, "Loro! I need another line!"

Loro chuckled and then pulled the baggie of cocaine out again. As Adisa threw out dusty cleaning bottles from under the sink, Loro wiped the blood off of the plate to prepare another line of blow, this time not with meth in it, which Adisa was oblivious to. The boy under the sink finally stopped scrabbling the bottles around and retrieved a hidden Micro-Uzi that had been folded up and untouched since it was Rakeem's. Adisa got up with the Uzi next to his head and raised it to the roof and speed walked over to the plate that Loro had just got done preparing. With the green tube in his hands, he took another straight off the plate and opened his eyes up wide at the five glancing soldiers. When the boys locked eyes with their leader, he did not look like himself and looked possessed with his bloody nose and large stomach.

Adisa pointed at them with his gun and shouted, "All five of you grab your guns and we are going to these scumbags who have infiltrated our land!"

The soldiers looked at their leader who had the eyes of a bull, then Adisa pointed the Uzi to the ceiling and shot a burst of three rounds into the white overhead.

The high child with a red face then shouted, "Hurry!"

They all scurried like bugs near a boot and even Loro grabbed his rifle from the couch in fear of where Adisa would shoot next. Adisa aggressively laughed at Loro who regretted suggesting giving the boy his powder. Once the boys had their rifles in hand and were standing with their backs straightened out near the door, the rest of the soldiers in the house came from upstairs and downstairs to see what the commotion was.

Adisa threw his neck from right to left as another thirty boys that were in the confines of the house made themselves seen and then he shouted, "We shall make an example of these backstabbers and show them to our people!"

The glancing soldiers were ready to ride with their leader as he motivated them, but then he turned their excitement around when he finished what he was saying.

“I don't want to bother with all of you so I will only be taking these men right here!”

Adisa’s finger was pointed at the five measly men who he wanted for a seemingly dangerous operation that involved capturing enemies of Utopia. Even the soldiers who were tasked with doing this looked scared, but they realized they could use this operation to be in Adisa’s good favor.

For once Adisa decided it was not a good idea to drive and let Loro take over the driving of the van as he knew how to control his high. Adisa began to itch himself and then without his seatbelt on he turned around at the soldiers in the dark back of the van and said, “You, on the left. Is there a bottle behind you?”

The boy in the back left corner of the van knew Adisa was talking to him. With a daunted look, he turned and reached into the trash-stuffed pocket by the door, pulling out a small glass bottle of warm tequila.

Wordlessly, the bottle made its way from boy to boy, passed forward, until Adisa snatched it from the last hand without so much as a thank you. He tilted it back and downed the remaining half in heavy gulps.

Loro, still focused on the road, glanced over, watching Adisa drink with a mix of concern and quiet judgment. The kid was obviously an alcoholic, but Loro knew no one would speak up.

When Adisa finally tossed the empty bottle to the floor and exhaled hard through his nose, satisfied, Loro slammed on the brakes in front of the bar. The van stopped, and everyone inside braced themselves, ready to spill out into whatever fire fight came next.

Adisa took his machine pistol out of his lap and peeked it out of the door as he opened it. He hopped down from the tall passenger seat and felt the hot morning’s sun beat down on his skin as he looked at the small truck that laid right in front of the bar with an open car door.

From behind the bar’s counter, the old man who ran the establishment noticed Adisa and his soldiers and got down and hid behind the wall. While on his knees he scooted the crate of bottles open and began to knock softly on the trap door to let anyone below know something was wrong. He then used his arms again to move the crate back over as he grunted from his elderly back pain. The bartender’s hands pushed himself up off of the floor and when he peeked his head back over the counter,

Adisa and his men were standing right in front of it with their rifles pointed at the man with bad luck.

From below, the sound of hurried, uneven footsteps echoed down from the surface. Then came a single gunshot.

The running stopped.

Jal, Atem, and the remaining rebels froze. Eyes shut tight. No one spoke as they didn't need to as everyone knew the bar keeper was dead.

Their luck with the A.U.C. was over and now, so were their moments.

No more Ibisian supplied guns were in the basement and everyone was left completely defenseless as the light from outside reached below where they stood. The loud and rusty trap door slammed against its neighboring wood and then Jal turned back and whispered, "Don't show them fear."

A set of footsteps were shown to the devastated members, and it made their stomach drop as the silhouette continued to reveal itself to be Adisa, who greeted them with a childish smile but dead eyes. They had never been so close to Adisa, but they had never been this far from killing him. Adisa's men behind him flooded the room and then Adisa shouted, "Look at this!"

Jal out of the corner of his eye noticed Atem's angered stare and closed his eyes and prayed that he would not lash out and get the rest of the members reprimanded.

Adisa spoke, "All of this for what? For it to fail? God… My brother really was not as smart as I thought he was."

Adisa chuckled as he walked to the wall where it was carved: "ANTI UTOPIA COALITIN."

The members in the gloomy and faceless basement clenched their fists in anger as they wanted to attack the armed cowards so badly, but they knew it would be useless. Abel's carving was the only thing left on the walls as the rest of the anti-Adisa propaganda had been taken down and put in the back of the truck as that is why the members were there in the first place. This was supposed to be a last visit to the headquarters as they cleaned it out from any incriminating evidence.

Adisa ran his fingers against the letters in the stone and read to himself out loud what it said until he got to the part where it should have said. "Coalition."

The foolish child laughed hard and then said, “What stupid one of you wrote this?”

He expected no answer, but his head turned as one of the members to his side said, “Your mother.”

Adisa turned his head, and his soldiers clutched their rifles and aimed them at Atem, who was clearly asking for death. The leader of Utopia’s face went from gleeful to sour and barely aiming. He swung his Uzi up and shot ten rounds into Atem from his feet to his face. Atem sprayed a bloody mess as his feet went limp and his shoulders untightened while he quickly dropped to the ground with his heart instantly stopping.

From the mouth of Jal, he screamed, “No!” and lunged over to Atem’s mangled body.

Even Abuk, who was a hardened woman, began to wail out.

Then, Adisa angrily stepped to the crying man who was kneeling over Atem and grabbed him by the shirt collar and turned him around. The barrel of his Uzi pressed against Jal’s head, and he screamed, “Do you want to be next to be shot to death? How about you grow a pair and shut your weeping mouth!”

Jal was shaking and could not control the tears coming out of his eyes after witnessing one of his best friends die. The rest of the members in the basement were on the ground now in fear of making the wrong move and they watched as Adisa took his gun off from Jal’s head and stood up. Again, Adisa swung back to laughing as he stared at the crying man, then he screamed, “You see this is the difference between you and me!”

With his fingers now in his chest he continued, “You all fight and fight, but one death and you are destroyed!”

Jal flinched as the gun returned to his low head and then Adisa shouted again, “That is the difference between me and you! You will all fight but you will be forgotten after you die… When I die, I will live on until time ends as a legend who had saved Africa!”

Adisa grunted and pushed his gun barrel on Jal’s head and then backed away from him as his head pounded from screaming. His head turned and everyone in the room looked at him like the frightful being he was.

The subdued tears of the eight rebelling hostages returned as they entered under Adisa's bed to witness Bilal shot dead with his face staring blankly at the roof.

Adisa asked, "Why are you crying? How do you think I found out where you were?"

After asking the question, Adisa looked around at the broken-down insurgents who now had their hands tied behind their backs. He couldn't seem to realize that even if Bilal betrayed them, they still felt sad and uncomfortable looking at his body.

No one responded and Adisa scoffed in disapproval, then he looked at Loro and said, "Beat them down as you must, I'll be back…"

Adisa climbed out of the basement in silence, then without a word, Loro flipped his rifle in his hands and marched toward Jal, the man who looked like he might've been in charge. He drove the wooden stock of his AK into Jal's jaw with a crack, then moved down the line, unleashing his fury one rebel at a time. The basement became his outlet, each blow a release of his rage.

Footsteps came from upstairs, and Adisa made his way into the dingy torture room with his small group of soldiers after an hour of letting Loro watch the hostages. Adisa was pleased with the fact that every hostage was laying on the floor with their faces distressed and their mouths taking in air heavily even if he had no clue what Loro had done. He patted Loro on the back with both of his hands and when Adisa did so, Loro smelt the putrid liquor on the child's breath that was clearly not the tequila in the van but something else that he had drank after.

The child leader then spoke, "It is time for us to bring these snakes upon our people! Throw them in the van!"

Soldiers paced around the room and got the drained captives off of the ground and heaved their limp bodies upstairs with them giving not a shred of opposition. The resilience of the rebels had been thrown onto the ground and shattered, with both their body and mind being unable to fight as they were all thrown face down into the back of the van, arm to arm like fish in a can.

Guns were pointed into their backs by the soldiers who sat to the sides of the van with their feet tucked under the hostage's stomachs.

As Adisa now drove, Loro wished he was back behind the wheel as the child with squinted eyes tried his best to make his turbulent driving look sober. At the base of the hill, Adisa began to laugh when he saw all of his people already ready in front of his speaking stand and waving to the barely visible car. It was just before midday and the people were happy to get a break from whatever grueling work they were doing to see their leader.

Loro, who was in the passenger seat, looked at Adisa and then looked near the crowd and noticed there were no soldiers in front of the people, and even though he had only been to one of Adisa's speeches this concerned him.

"Should we radio in for more men? Like last time?"

The already present silence rang on, then Adisa completely took his eyes off of the road and looked at Loro and blinked.

"No," Adisa then sloppily said

Loro shook his head yes and then Adisa quickly said again, "No, no, no. Do you not think the men in the van are good enough? We don't need any more men."

The obedient newfound friend of Adisa shook his head some more and then Adisa returned his eyes to the road even though it didn't matter as he was going to drive like he was blind anyway.

Adisa's stomach began to church as he parked the van, and his men began to drag the hostages out towards the stage. Through the bottom wood of the stand, he looked at his people who were visible in between the supports of his large podium. While alone, sitting in the driver's seat looking out of his window, Adisa's vision slowed as the faces of his people were now completely blank with no eyes to see and no mouth to feed. A ringing became in his ears, and not only did his vision slow, but his brain did as well. Beating like a drum, his own heart was all he could hear through the ringing as his vision panned from right to left. The weight of a hundred pounds entered Adisa's stomach and the light hairs on his back stood up, then he heard whispered, "**Bask in your final moments.**"

Adisa breathed in heavily and whipped his neck around to the back of the van that was behind him, and he saw nothing. Nothing came into his moving and startled view and now all he heard were his heavy breaths. The child did not expect what he heard, but he knew exactly what it was. He brushed off the horrific warning and quickly hopped out of the van to the

dirt ground. Adisa quickly brushed the dust from his clothes as he looked at the warped reflection of himself in the dented metal side of the van.

His reflection was twisted, almost unrecognizable. He stared for a moment, then turned away without a word and made his way toward the stand.

His people noticed him instantly as he began to walk up his stairs towards the hostages who were now all lined up side by side right next to the edge of the end of the wooden floor. Many people in the crowd recognized the afflicted faces of the hostages who had just settled on their knees, with some of the people being parents and family.

Nobody in the crowd had any idea why these people were on their knees in front of them, but they knew that it would end in their deaths.

Jal's father instantly recognized his young son and shouted out, "Jal!"

Both of them locked eyes and when they did, they both shed small tears without control. The father's cries were overshadowed by the cheers of the citizens who were excited to see Adisa and cared for nothing else besides violence. Any surviving members of the A.U.C. stayed in their positions and tried their best to not show any emotions.

The soldiers behind the hostages jumped down the stage for crowd control when Adisa showed himself to everybody as the people went wild.

Adisa's fist was in the air as his teeth clenched his lip and walked towards the microphone. As he walked, for some reason he thought about each step he took and felt a bit uneasy.

Once his walking stopped and the crowd went silent, he realized he had drank a little too much and that his vision was now moving and impaired. He looked at both of his sides to see four hostages on one side of him and three on the other. Adisa pushed a deep breath into the microphone and shouted, "Who is ready to see these traitors die!"

The crowd was ecstatic and cheered on for Adisa like he had just said something positive. Anyone who knew the hostages began to weep and curse at Adisa, but it was unheard as the people's piercing acclaim stood taller than their miniscule emotions of grief. With a good bit of slurring, Adisa longly shouted, "These people," and then stopped and unevenly continued, "Have been snakes right next to Utopia's feet for the longest time… selling drugs– and now it is time to exterminate them!"

From behind the crowd that was silent for only a second, came a loud command that flew right over the people and struck Adisa.

"Stop this!"

Everyone took in the air and then stopped breathing as they gasped and turned around to see a small silhouette on top of the two-story building facing right towards the speaking stand. People covered the almost midday's sun as they tried to get a look at the still person who stood confidently against Adisa. Six rifles were now pointed at the figure, even with him looking unarmed.

Then he shouted, "Adisa, this is between me and you, my brother! This mess has to end, and the power must be given to the people!"

Abel's childish high-pitched voice echoed throughout the entire city, with the wind picking it up and leading it into every alley way and open window or door in the entire city to know that this was the beginning of the end.

Smiles came from the hopeful captured A.U.C. members as they prepared themselves for their last move against Adisa. The cursed brother couldn't have arrived at any better time.

The scowling Adisa clenched his teeth, opened his eyes wide and then got even closer to the mic and shouted, "This is unacceptable Abel! This means your death as well!"

Adisa turned to his men and planned to tell them to fire but then Abel shouted, "The people of Utopia, where does your future lay? If you decide to stay with Adisa, then it lies in endless war and torment. This liar is a murderer and a drug dealer and even he can't deny that!"

All of Utopia went silent for a good five seconds as Adisa's body swayed from side to side and he looked at his crowd. From his throat that had so much to say, Adisa let an uncontrollable and drunken burst of honesty out and said, "I did sell drugs!"

The people gasped once again and turned their view back onto Adisa who was now speaking.

"I sold drugs, but it was only to feed my people!"

After Adisa said this sentence, his head began to throb and he let out a small, "Egh," outside of the hearing of the microphone. It felt as if someone had put their fingers on his vocal cords and played them like a harp to make him say the wrong thing. Adisa opened his mouth and tried to approach the mic, but he didn't know what to say at this point. He was frozen and even his men who were pointing guns at their greatest enemy looked over at their leader and wondered why he said what he had just said.

No bit of understanding or appeasement was given to Adisa with every citizen standing silent but looking at him as if they wanted his head. The illusion had started to wear off as the Devil's magic fully deteriorated and swung the pendulum not in Adisa's favor, but straight away from him.

As the crowd began to curse and shake their fists as Adisa, Abel put himself on one knee and grabbed the well-worn rifle he was gifted that was leaning against the edge of the roof. The rifle was then held on top of the short wall of the roof as Abel held his breath and aimed down the sights right for Adisa's unmoving head. As citizens were starting to push out of the small fence keeping them in place, Soldiers aimed at their own citizens and screamed for Adisa to snap out of his uncaring haze.

Abel squeezed the trigger, and a bullet flew over the people's heads and went right past Adisa and instead traveled into Loro's shoulder who was on the corner of the stage. The shot soldier fell to the wood floor and Adisa snapped out of his trance and shook his head around trying to figure out what was going on. As his soldiers screamed and began to fire towards Abel, within the crowd the members of the A.U.C. that weren't found out had already begun to start pulling guns out to the ground when the first round was fired.

By the time the building Abel stood on was being lit up and cracked, to the soldiers' surprise, citizens were now holding rifles and firing on the small group of boys and their once leader.

In the blink of an eye as hundreds of bullets were being set off their way, Adisa jumped down from the stage and got in the van. He put his chin down and laid low and started the vehicle as his soldiers piled in.

Loro was dragged off the stage by the only soldier who thought about saving him as he dodged bullets and walked backwards until both of them made it into the van.

Through the bottom of the speaking stand, the people's brass ripped through the supports and sent bullets and wood chips at the van.

For the first time in Utopia's history, citizens made it on top of the speaking stage and untied the grievously tired hostages. Their family members surrounded them and even if the hostages were now freed, they remained on their knees for a moment as they tried to recuperate their minds and body. No guns were handed to them as they had already had enough.

Glass covered Adisa as he drifted in a large circle as the scared soldiers in the back were grazed by hot metal. Light came into the shot up and dark van as bullets went from one side through the other. Everyone's hearing in the small box was fractured but still they could hear Loro's cries as he laid with a burst open shoulder.

Making more holes, the soldiers blindly shot through the van into the giant mob while lying down. Even if they killed a person for each bullet they had, there was no stopping this crowd from ripping them limb from limb.

Adisa hit a straight and put both of his feet on the gas and as he did so, he felt the right side of the van get closer to the ground and then his side descended as well. This of course was from the mass amount of bullets that had ripped into the tires of the van.

Adisa's eyes opened wide but still blinked as bullets ripped through the back and missed him by inches. Even if he was drunk, this fight for survival sobered him up and he did his best to try and make it to the compound, but he didn't have high hopes with his popped tires getting up the hill.

Loro's cries of anguish reached into Adisa's ear as the bullets stopped for a moment and Adisa shouted, "Shut him the fuck up or else I will!"

Another cry was let out and Adisa tensed up his bottom cheeks and then shook as he grabbed his pistol from the back of his pants. He quickly looked into the backseat with his pistol pointed right at Loro who was lying in a pool of dark blood on the floor, and he blew a round right into the top of his head.

The other soldiers wanted to shriek from Adisa's ruthless ways and each of them wondered if they were next. Gunsmoke filled the inside of the van and the pistol's slide returned into its unfired place only after making an odd metallic sound. Adisa turned back to the road and stuffed the cursed pistol back in his pants like nothing had happened.

The wheels spun against the dirt for a few seconds, all the way to the bottom of Adisa's hill, until the wheel closest to Adisa dipped down into a human sized pothole filled with mud and made the van stop in its place and spin its wheels in a circle. Everyone in the van jolted forward and hit their faces against each other as the van sank into its graveyard that it could not leave. Honks came from the van as Adisa hit the steering wheel in anger while he spun out of control.

Gunfire halted from the rebelling cluster of people, and they laughed with their guns up as the escape had clearly turned against Adisa's favor. The citizens began approaching the van as it came to a clear stop as Adisa knew this was the end of the line. Inside of the van Adisa looked at his sweating soldiers who peeked through the tinted windows of the car at the approaching malevolent horde and shouted, "Shoot them! We might have a chance at escaping if we fucking kill them all!"

The soldiers looked over at Adisa who was behind them and all five of them didn't wish one bit to fight this crowd as it would be completely useless. In the middle of the group, a soldier put his rifle down and then after him the rest did as well as they all stared at Adisa who had never had someone blatantly disobey him like this before.

With the way that Adisa killed Loro just for making sounds of pain after being shot, the other soldiers knew that Adisa didn't have a plan to get away from this crowd and that if they shot at the citizens, it would make their fates end quicker.

Adisa's eyes didn't blink as he looked at his soldiers and listened to the marching crowd close in. He reached and grabbed his pistol just as his once soldiers knew he would, and he aimed his pistol at each one of them from left to right. In the dark and morose van, the five boys and Adisa stared at each other with only one of them holding a gun.

The rebellious citizens were now just beyond the window, their figures looming in Adisa's line of sight, their hands ready to pry the van open.

With the utmost anger, Adisa then screamed, "You think just because things look bad you don't have to follow my orders? Fuck You!"

-Chapter XXXXXIII-

Abel finally reached the mob he had riled up and ran past its side with his rifle moving up and down as he rushed towards the van. The young revolutionary made it in front of the crowd and raised his rifle to the van and shouted, “Surround it from all sides!”

In an instant, the mob was in a circle around the van as Abel looked into the back window of the car seeing the silhouettes of a handful of soldiers. Accompanied by a handful of heavy-footed allies, Abel approached the back door, his hand hovering over the handle, ready to grip it and aggressively swing it open.

The handle clicked open, and as the door swung outward, it revealed the backs of five boys standing in a tight formation. Their hands were

raised, but they faced away from the crowd, as if it wasn't the citizens they feared.

Adisa's eyes grew concerned when the back door opened as he saw the crowd in its full form behind the boys, he was pointing the gun at. His potential victims looked unbothered which annoyed Adisa as he wanted to see the fear in their eyes when he shot them.

Adisa grunted and pulled the trigger on his pistol, letting the hammer of the 1911 strike down. A small sound filled up the van and it was not of a bullet, but instead just metal hitting metal. Adisa had fallen for the same ruse that he had put on many others as his pistol had completely run out of bullets, with the last shot being used on Loro who he didn't even have to kill.

As Adisa stared down his sights, The boys disappeared as they were ripped out of the van by the backs of their shirts and thrown onto the ground. Guns were immediately pointed down on them as they held their hands up while lying on the ground, praying that they wouldn't be shot.

The citizens cursed at the unarmed boys and kicked them letting dirt rise into the air.

Now only Adisa was in the van with Loros dead body in front of him, and even though there were more than a hundred guns pointed at him, he kept his unloaded pistol pointed over their heads all while beginning to laugh.

"Put the pistol down Adisa," Abel shouted into the van as his eyes fixated on the desecrated feet of Loro.

Only laughter was heard by Adisa, and he ended up laughing so hard that he let the pistol down to the floor limply and dropped it right next to his victim's head.

Three citizens lunged into the van before Abel could and grabbed Adisa by his skin and threw him out of the van right in front of Abel's feet. The only thing the brother wanted to do as he looked down at his brother in a cloud of dirt was kick his face in, but as his brother laughed, he realized the absurdity of the situation and smiled a bit.

His brother's laughs threw him back to when he and his brother would spend dinners together laughing with their mother but now Adisa seemed like a different person entirely and his laugh was the only thing that remained. Abel's fingers immediately wiped the smile down off his face and he was snapped back into the reality of who Adisa truly was. Anger

covered his feelings of remorse and nostalgia, then he aimed his rifle right at his brother's face and shouted down at him, "You're not funny. Get up."

Citizens hoped Abel would make Adisa stand and then shoot him point blank right there and end this, but when Adisa went silent and stood on his feet, the two stared at each other with no resolve in their eyes. Glances of anger and wistfulness were thrown back and forth between the two, with neither of them being able to decide on which emotion they felt or wanted to show. The stare down ended when Abel untensed his gun down and then said, "We must fight brother. If you win you can keep Utopia. But if I win, the people will reclaim this land and do what they must with it."

People shook their heads as this gave Adisa the option to win and survive when he could have just been killed right then and there. This move by Abel was distressing but in the end the people respected Abels aversion to easily shooting his brother as that is something Adisa would do.

The eldest brother looked Abel up and down and then raised his head and said, "Then I will win this fight and reclaim my throne that was already and is still mine."

Behind Adisa, the small thin piece of crowd dispersed as Adisa raised his hands to his sides and began to walk backwards while staring at his brother. Abel unlooped the rifle off of his body and dropped it right on its bolt onto the dirt where it made a clunking noise.

Both of their footsteps and momentum matched as the people watched baffled at the heavy stares and resentment between the two brothers. Now both of them started to go up the hill as Adisa still walked backwards without looking and they reached a small flat point in the long roadway.

Adisa stopped and put his hands down at his sides and smirked at Abel who also stopped.

"I wish hell upon you, jealous traitor. This fight will be your last."

Abel was the first to ready his fists even though the two were a far distance away from each other where neither of them could reach a punch with their small arms.

"Your confidence is blind Adisa; your defeat was written in stone from the moment I returned!"

The crowd watched as their hero faced off and screamed at his brother. Everyone in the crowd had goosebumps lingering on their skin as

what they were watching looked like something out of a legend an old man would tell.

Adisa's anger overflowed and he began to run down the small uphill he had and then when he reached the swinging distance of Abel, he tackled his brother's lower body. When Adisa wrapped his arms around his brother's waist with his legs pointed straight as an arrow, Abel's arm had been extended out for a punch that he thought he would land.

Abel, who was never great at fighting, plummeted on his back and when the back of his rib cages settled, he exhaled a short breath that he barely had. The brother who was now on top quickly adjusted himself and put his hand over his own head and then swung it down on his sibling's forehead. With his forearms covering his face, Abel did a bad job of keeping himself protected as more fists came down like hammers and more blood made its way down his nose.

Adisa grunted and laughed a bit as he repeatedly punched down on his brother who couldn't defend himself with all of his strength. The arms of Abel flailed around at Adisa's side trying to punch him and he did a few times, but they were infirm. Through Adisa's rage he didn't even notice the small punches landing in his sides and he continued to slowly kill his brother.

As punches were thrown and Abel kept his eyes shut, he heard the laughs of his brother, but it wasn't the laughs of the current moment but instead from the past.

He imagined him and his brother years ago rolling in the dirt tugging at each other's shirts and lightly punching each other while smiling as they had nothing else to do. The punches were light and playful being the complete opposite of what was happening now.

From afar the people watched and hoped that Abel would pull something out of his pocket and reverse the situation, but no matter how much they hoped, seemingly nothing happened.

After seconds of wheezing and crackling air from Adisa, he started to run out of energy, so he stopped punching on his unmoving brother and then took a long breath. He looked down on his brother's face that was completely covered in blood and knots like he had just fought a professional fighter.

Adisa wasn't amused at his brother's seemingly quick death and pressed his hands on his brother's chest and pushed off of him to stand up.

Citizens now had their rifles pointed at Adisa as Abel looked like he could not move again and was possibly dead. Adisa noticed this and raised his hands while smiling and shouted down to them, “Shoot me! Leave me and Abel both dead and then you will have no more heroes and no more enemies! What will you have then?”

With blood lingering off of his knuckles and dragging down his arm, Adisa turned away from Abel and said, “I am the hero of the people, but you still want to kill me! So why don’t you just do it!”

One by one, the citizens looked at each and then rested their arms and put their rifles down, all while Adisa started to laugh at their imbecility.

“That is what I thought. Utopia remains.”

Before he could walk to the crowd, Adisa turned his head to give another look at his victim only to hear the sound of dirt moving. His feet shifted and he was now facing his little brother who was barely standing up as his legs looked folded and weak and one of his eyes was entirely sealed shut.

Adisa did not laugh again as he looked at his resilient brother but instead, he shouted and began to run at his brother yet again.

The boy was a one trick pony and knew if he could get Abel to the ground, he could finally finish him, so he tried to tackle his brother once more. Abel grunted and locked his eyes on his moving and swung his fist right into Adisa’s moving chin. His brother stopped in place and fell to the ground and then began to scoot backwards away from Abel as his brother took menacing steps at him. Now the blood on Abel’s face looked intimidating and not a show of moribund condition.

Tides had shifted and Abel quickly shouted, “Get up!”

The people choked on their air as they watched Abel nettle Adisa who was brash in thinking he won the fight already.

Quickly, Adisa got off of his ass and tried his best to square up and look like he knew what he was doing both to impress his people and to intimidate Abel. Neither of Adisa’s thoughts fleshed out and Abel kept a harsh face at his enemy who he could see was beginning to feel as if he was not going to win this battle.

Abel silently pushed himself towards Adisa and threw a right hook towards his brother’s head who stiffed his left arm up to deflect the punch but failed as Abel’s fist connected again with his face. Adisa mostly ignored

this and used his right arm to upper cut his brother in the side of his ribcage, which injured him even more than the punch to Adisa's face did.

Both of them shuffled away from each other and then Adisa took his chance to rush into Abel who had trouble breathing. He connected his fist into Abel's face on one of his already formed knots on his face which made Abel almost fall over.

People gasped then Adisa tried to throw another punch with his other hand, but Abel moved out of the way quickly. The youngest brother shook his head around and backed up as his brother closed in. Both of them breathed like beasts and were bloodied as they examined each other and tried to regain their breath. Even if he was the most hurt, again Abel pounced at Adisa which made the boy back his feet up in fear. In only three steps, the back of Adisa's Achilles tendon banged against a good-sized rock and sent a jolt up his thigh as he fell backwards straight to the ground. Adisa shut his eyes as he planted his arms out to hopefully lighten his fall but by the time his butt was on the ground and he felt the pain go up his spine, it felt the same as if he didn't have his arms out. Abel didn't approach Adisa who was again on the ground but instead stood panting and looking down on him with his stern hands balled up at his sides.

Right when Adisa's eyes opened up, they alighted on the rock that he tripped over and then his hands were thrown over himself and instantly covered the rock. Adisa folded his arms and brought the rock back into his core before Abel could reach in to stop him. The boy got back up shakingly with the rock pointed at Abel with his right hand like it was some sort of bomb or weapon of mass destruction.

Abel threw his arms up in defense after his brother stood up and then scooted his feet back as Adisa swung for his face with the rock. The swing barely missed and as Adisa had his swinging hand held low, Abel took the opportunity to lock his fingers together and send both of his fists right into his brother's upper back. This halted Adisa's strength and made him let a quick gust of air out and loosen his fingers up which resulted in the rock rolling out of his hand. Abel was attentive to this and snatched the falling rock that was headed for the dirt.

In a fit of rage at the fact that Adisa tried to cheat his way out of this fight with the deadly rock, Abel lifted the rock up over his brother's head as they looked at each other and prepared to clash it against his face.

Adisa looked from below while his back was bent with an open mouth and scared eyes towards his brother whose eyes looked completely devoid of forgiveness.

Citizens gasped as Abel swung the rock down right against the side of Adisa's face which made a sound that echoed to the crowd.

When the rock made contact with Adisa's bone, Abel felt the kinetic energy quickly rush through his arm.

Instead of falling again, Adisa stumbled backwards and then caught his balance and began to try and run away from his brother, who he knew would show no mercy against him.

Abel watched as his brother hobbled up the hill as fast as he could as blood poured down from his mouth. He stood in the same spot he hit his brother at and looked down at the rock he held as he thought about how this would be the rock that would end Adisa's reign.

Adisa fell again and struggled to get up, leading Abel to slowly walk up to his brother, following his brother's blood trail until he made it to Adisa who breathed crunchily as he tried his best to make it to his home. Adisa knew his brother was approaching, but didn't look and continued to try and get up until his escape was halted by Abel's fingers digging into Adisa's shoulder. The oldest brother took a deep breath and while doing so, closed his eyes as he prepared for his brother to do the worst he could do.

Adisa opened his eyes to look at the sky and watched as his brother stood over him and then he grabbed his face with both of his hands.

Abel turned his brother's face towards the overlook of the city where Adisa looked at his empty speaking stand and the people who no longer stood near it. He looked at his soldiers who were on their knees and felt no remorse for them. Then his vision locked on a familiar building against his will, the same building where he grew up and lived. Across from it he saw the other apartment which is where it all started. He thought back to his first murders that he didn't dwell on too much and realized how now he made the boys he murdered look like good people.

His actions were so irresponsible and deadly that the people who tortured him in his younger years, the people who remained in his nightmares almost every day were forgotten about.

Thoughts of Dara came into his mind, and he realized she would hate what her son had become. He acted as if the truth didn't affect him and stopped his thoughts and wondered why Abel hadn't killed him yet. From

behind his side he heard softly, “Look at what you have ruined and now lost.”

Adisa moved his painful jaw around a bit and then sloppily put up a wall of confidence and said, “I haven’t lost anything. You don’t know what's coming for you Abel… I will live on forever.”

His vision was shifted off the city by Abel who flipped him back upright. Abel dug his fingers into Adisa’s chest and said, “You are going to die right here and now Adisa! All of these tragedies, death and murder all because of my own brother… Even our mother, she is gone because of you!”

Tears began to fall from Above Adisa, and he was livid as ever and wished to snap on Abel, but instead he began to laugh as he knew it would break his crying brother down even more.

When Abel noticed Adisa laughing even though he was showing the deepest of emotion, he sucked up his tears and his face went straight. It showed to Abel that his brother was far too gone as he couldn’t even show remorse for his own mothers passing at this point.

Abel truly wished that his last words with his brother could be an apology or even half of one, but that is not what Adisa had in his heart.

In a burst of anger, Abel reached back into the dirt for the rock and then held it above his brother’s smiling face yet again, hoping that his brother would stop. Every chuckle that carried out pushed Abel over the edge bit by bit until he finally stopped trying to excuse his brother and slammed the rock down into Adisa’s nose. The laughing stopped for a second while Adisa took in the pain and was brought back to nights ago when he was the one hitting someone with a rock. He then continued to lock eyes with his brother and laugh again. Abel sat for a moment and then completely lost it as the deranged laughs grew louder, so he threw the rock down again in a brisk motion and hit Adisa right in his teeth.

The laughs didn’t stop this time; they just sounded a bit different as now the top row of Adisa’s teeth was pushed into his mouth. Blood covered his face just like his brother and as he laughed blood erupted from his mouth. The youngest brother in an unseeing flash continued to hit Adisa with nothing in his mind besides shutting him up and ending his life. Finally on the tenth hit that Abel committed, Adisa began to stop laughing and his body limped as the bones in the front of his face broke inwards and collapsed in on themselves. It wasn’t long before Abel was grunting and hitting an unrecognizable hole of blood and meat where Adisa’s face once

was. Abel knew that Adisa was dead but continued to clash down on his brother's face until he had no more energy to do so.

Tears had begun to roll down his face again and one last look was given to Adisa by Abel as he looked at the chunky red mess of his once brother's face and he felt disgusted. He planned to kill his brother but the mess that he made was not just putting him down but instead a complete defilement. Abel turned towards the city and felt a gust of wind hit him, reminding him that there was nothing else to worry about now besides keeping the people alive.

Adisa laid lifeless in the dirt, his body still and his soul now claimed by the Devil's grip.

-Chapter XXXXXIV-

It was a short walk back to the citizens, but a long one in Abel's mind as he tried to ignore his feelings of guilt and the blood leaking all over his body. Abel never wanted to kill someone as long as he lived, and he especially did not want it to be his own brother who even if they had their differences, he held dearly.

Adisa's death was not what Abel pictured as he wished to shoot Adisa non-fatally and then keep him captive while the people rebuilt Utopia without him. That is why his shot was so horrible.

His wishful thinking was idiotic as he knew in the end the only way out of this was with Adisa dead because as long as his brother lived, Utopia would continue to be cursed under his spell.

While thinking, Abel tried his best to not cry as every eye in Utopia was on him as he walked towards the revolutionaries he had riled up. Right in front of Abel's path sat the five soldiers of Adisa who all looked worried with guns pointed right on the back of their heads. Abel moved his hand from his side and swung it up and said, "All of you get up."

The citizens behind them gave Abel a surprised and curious look as they expected Abel to order their killing right there on their knees. As the boys stood up, they kept their shoulders low and looked around paranoidly to not anger Abel. When the boys settled on their feet, a man on the very right of the boys with his gun still pointed up shouted out, "Why don't we kill these fools now?"

Abel shook his head and then pointed at the boys with his bloody fingers.

“We must not kill these boys no matter what they have done. Adisa needed to die, these children do not,” Abel spoke to the crowd.

Some of the citizens agreed with Abel’s pacifist ways but a lot of them were angered and wished to execute them right then. The hostages’ scared faces turned to normal, and they looked at each other with latched faces.

Abel then took a few steps through the dirt towards them and sternly said, “You will run off now and leave Utopia, never to be seen again and if you are ever seen within these walls again, we will remember you… and you will not like what comes after that.”

Fright took over the boys’ faces again and all five of them took a hard left into the forest towards the White Nile. Curses were thrown at the boy’s backs like bullets as they ran into the dry grass in the forest, never to be seen again.

When the boys disappeared, Abel looked at the citizens and shouted, “If we begin to kill for revenge, the cycle will continue, and no one will survive! We would be just as bad as Adisa! Let us go to the speaking stand where we can regroup and figure out as a people what we shall do next!”

Citizens cheered and raised their rifles as everyone turned around back towards the speaking stand and began to chat amongst themselves.

The members of the A.U.C. that were hostages removed themselves from their families and began to thank Abel and congratulate him as they would have died without him. He acted humble and brushed their compliments off with, “No big deal.”

Jal revealed himself behind two other citizens who were thanking Abel, and the boy's happy face turned blank as he looked at his friend who waited to speak with him. Abel’s face ran dry of happiness as he realized he was weeping and not tears of joy, but tears of exhaustion and grief. He went up to Jal and hugged him as he too felt sad as he felt his pain through his own skin. Jal and Abel separated, and they looked at each other and then Abel asked, “Where is Atem and Bilal? I haven’t seen them yet.”

Jal, who was teary eyed, spoke up, “When you left… Bilal threw us under the bus and then of course Adisa killed him. He found out about the basement, then… Adisa shot Atem.”

Abel whispered, “No, no,” and locked to the floor while grabbing his mouth to stop it from sadly exhaling. He recollected himself and then said, “We will knock down the walls of Adisa’s compound. We will remove the

home and set up a beautiful memorial for Atem and the rest of our people who have fallen."

The two smiled through their sadness and Jal was glad Abel had such a nice idea for their friend who they already missed.

With rifles still in their hands, the people looked at Abel who walked on top of the speaking stand and grabbed the microphone. Everyone got a bad sense of déjà vu as they looked at the child on the rickety stage. That was until Abel kicked down the Presidential podium and picked up the microphone and threw it over the side of the stage towards the crowd.

It landed in the area between the shot-up stage and the citizens. The people were curious to what he was doing as he hopped down. Abel went completely level with the citizens of Utopia and now only the front couple rows of people could see him as the stage stood empty, just the way the people wanted it.

Citizens smiled at the child who decided to do things differently and through the microphone Abel spoke, "Utopia was an idea created by Adisa which was not a bad idea… but through his hands the idea became corrupted. We as a people deserve better than poverty and hunger and Adisa took advantage of that by giving us false promises and stripping our souls away in exchange for what we needed. It does not have to be this way! We don't have to have a person walking the stage and screaming and killing! As a people, we can do better. As a people we do not need to be fooled again! We do not need the walls around us as we only needed that when Adisa was here! We can tear them down and make homes for the needy! There shall be no more violence in Utopia, and we will live better than we did before Adisa and better than we did with Adisa!"

The crowd began to genuinely cheer, and Abel smiled as the cheering wasn't as loud as it would get with Adisa, but this meant that the cheers weren't forced.

Abel waited for the people to quiet down and basked in the glory of turning a new leaf for his people. His smile could not collapse.

People began to quiet down, and Abel noticed three people on the very left of the crowd looking over behind themselves at the road on the side of his people.

The crowd went dead silent as the sound of motors driving came into their ears and the people knew that no one would be driving as everyone in

Utopia was standing. Abel began to hear his heartbeats as the people looking behind themselves looked back at him in horror and began to scream his name. He planted his feet and looked around for any sort of weapon as his paranoia took over his body. No weapon or shooter was seen, just a cloud of dirt rising to the crowd's left where a black van emerged.

Citizens began to scream louder as gunshots entered the people in the crowd and Abel was shocked completely still. As gunshots and his heartbeat echoed in Abels ears, he watched as Paulo walked in front of the van and pointed his rifle right for him.

They locked eyes and Paulo's face was red and burning with rage towards his leader's killer. Abel stumbled from his feet as the microphone next to him fell over after it was shot. It then fell to the floor and made a terrible howling loud noise. Another shot from Paulo went right into Abel's moving side and then the boy fell onto the ground. Feet trampled all around Abel as people rushed towards him and then an unfamiliar face tried to grab him to take him to safety.

When the man's hand wrapped on Abel's bleeding back, the boy watched as a bullet zipped through the courageous man and sent him to the ground as well. Another bullet went into the right leg of Abel.

His breath came in labored gasps, and he watched as many other people fell dead around him as well. He was the clear target for the remaining vengeful soldiers who the people thought would back off after their leader's death. Even if shots rang from the citizens side, anyone who surrounded Abel was massacred until the shots of Adisa's last resistance calmed down for a second and Abuk grabbed him. She began to drag him through the torn up and shaded base of the speaking stand as the horde moved with them and shot at Adisa's soldiers.

Abel and Abuk slipped into Adisa's emergency tunnel as chaos consumed everything around them. Abuk weaved through gunfire, narrowly avoiding the bullets that struck down civilians around her. As they descended, blood mixed with dust rained from above, soaking into the earth as the tunnel swallowed them whole.

Paulo had two vans full of soldiers, guns and ammo that he knew he had to use as Adisa's last resort.

The boys that the citizens let free were caught by Paulo on their way out of the city as Paulo and the remaining soldiers were already on their

way to the city center after the gun shots. Paulo beat what had happened out of them and then killed them each after hearing the news of Adisa's death.

As the new leader of Utopia by right, Paulo was the most enraged he had ever been as his best friend was now dead and Utopia was in his hands to rule.

Reprimanding the people was all Paulo could think of, and he took his anger out on the citizens in the crowd by ordering his soldiers to blindly fire into the people and kill as many as they possibly could. The small percentage of people with guns fought as hard as they could as bullets sprayed and made hundreds of people collapse.

This small resistance against Paulo was futile and the little hope the people had was now gone and it felt like Adisa had already returned. For all they knew, Abel was dead, and Paulo was going to kill every single one of them. With bodies all over, at a certain point even people with guns put their arms down and acted as if they were dead in the dirt. The shooting on the citizens side stopped and that is when Paulo raised his hand up next to his soldiers and shouted, "Halt!"

The only things that were heard now were screams and cries as the soldiers looked at the innocent people they butchered.

People scurried around and the screams of people became silent as the citizens of Utopia had done enough screaming for a lifetime.

Grieving people didn't scream or cry over their lost ones anymore and instead they went completely silent and joined the people they knew who had died on the ground.

With silence and grief in the air, Paulo took his opportunity to unravel his plan and shouted from behind the trunk of the tree, "Put your guns down and bring the hostages to the stage and no one else shall die! That is my word and if it is not completed in the next minutes my men will continue to shoot!"

Frightened looks of realization shook through the crowd as the A.U.C. members began to surface, dropping their weapons one by one. Wordlessly, they turned toward the stage, each step carrying them to quietly surrender to the inevitable. There was no other choice for their people's promised survival besides their own death.

Paulo walked towards the stage with his army following him as members of the A.U.C. put their knees back on the wood their blood would

be splashed on. Five members sat with their heads down and their eyes closed as Paulo made it on the stage and the rest of his soldiers joined him. The remaining soldiers aimed their rifles down at the helpless crowd, who stared up at them with wide, terrified eyes, trapped between panic and the silent hope that mercy might still exist.

Paulo smiled as he watched Jal, who was the last hostage not on the stage walk regretfully up its stairs. He now felt what it was truly like to be Adisa and not just a fill in for him. The high he got from it felt like nothing else. As he smiled and looked down on the families in the crowd who were kneeled over their injured or dead family members, an angered father picked up one of the guns that was dropped on the floor and aimed it right for Paulo. He noticed this and ducked, then a bullet went off from one of his soldiers, instantly killing the man who had just seen his child die.

Abel heard another gunshot from the bed he laid in as Abuk took out his second bullet. When the far away shot rang, Abuk flinched as she breathed heavily. The bullet that was taken out of Abel's side was thrown onto a bent-up metal platter and then Abuk hurried to wrap him up. No one was working at the hospital as everyone was at the speaking stand.

Abel laid on the table, his body writhing as a crude surgery was performed without a drop of anesthesia. Every slice and every stitch sent white-hot pain through him, but he bit down and endured.

Abuk had medical experience as a nurse and tried her best to try and save Abel who was in a critical state. He appreciated her work even if the two never looked eye to eye as she was a hard ass.

Even if he was teetering the line between being alive and dying, Abel uttered, "What do we do now?"

Abuk then said, "Hm?"

The boy coughed up some blood that Abuk then wiped and then he raspily spoke louder, "What do we do now?"

Abuk tied the wrapping on Abel and then said, "Do not worry about that now Abel."

A tear began to come from her eye and it splotched on Abels wraps after it rolled down her face. She thought about Jal and the rest of the A.U.C. who were now in Paulo's will. Neither her or Abel had any clue what was happening or if they would be able to stop it. All they knew was that they were hunted and we're going to be next.

Abel watched as she began to cry even more and then she whimpered, “Excuse me,” and ran out of the dark hospital room.

The boy who was supposed to save Utopia was now alone in a hospital room and his friends were now back exactly where they started when he returned. He felt the need to cry and shut his eyes hard as he tried to suppress it and then opened his eyes again where no tears came out. His vision was still watery and a bit blurred, so he wasn’t confused when a silhouette in front of his bed appeared. Abel blinked and expected the silhouette to go away when his vision cleared up, but nothing changed. The child squinted his eyes and tried his best to figure out what he was seeing, and he still could not.

“**Hello Abel.**”

Abel’s eyes widened as he heard the voice, and he looked from side to side trying to figure out where it came from, but his eyes concretely ended on the silhouette. It moved a bit and Abel looked at the door and wanted to try and scream for Abuk, but it felt as if a sock was in his throat.

The boy wheezed, “Who are you? Who are you?”

After Abel wheezed the silhouette then spoke, “**You know me. Your brother knew me quite well. We were friends you could say.**”

Hairs on the cold neck of Abel stood up as he felt the familiar presence of this being. His eyes opened as he realized who he was talking to as clearly this being was not human and Adisa knew him. The boy was suspicious of the rumors about his brother being in contact with the devil, but he always kept it as a possibility in his mind as it was just to explain Adisa’s actions.

Abel blinked and the silhouette was now at the side of the bed right next to his right arm. He wanted to jump out of his bed but the pain he felt in his body would not let him, so Abel instead tensed his neck up.

“**Let me help you friend.**”

Abel then spoke monotonically, “Stay away from me!”

He blinked again while staring into the blank shadowed face of the spirit and when he opened his eyes again to see the being’s hand was on his lying chest.

Abel gasped which hurt and then his eyes were forced close where he saw as clear as day what was happening at the city center.

He watched as Paulo walked along the stage with many bodies lying in the crowd. With his raw voice he shouted for the missing hostage as he said that he heard there was one more. Paulo dragged his rifle along the back of each of the hostage's heads and then ended on Jal and hit him with his barrel in an act of anger.

The vision stopped and Abel mentally returned into the hospital bed where the Devil slowly took his hand off the boy's chest. He looked up at the shadow, with his open mouth and his jaw began to shake. Small mutters of air came out as Abel tried to figure out what to say.

All his struggle, all the rebellion was reduced to dust. Abel sat with the weight of it crushing him, realizing that Adisa had been right. He still lived, just through Paulo. The thought twisted like a blade in his gut. He began to shake his head, slowly at first, then harder, as the truth settled in. Abel could feel the pull of the spirit now.

Again, Abel's vision went to Paulo who was on the stage screaming, "I will continue Adisa's reign and return Utopia to its glory!"

His vision went back to normal as he breathed heavily and the being looked right down on him. The devil emerged his hand towards Abel with his fingers out as he knew the boy had to take him in.

"**I can stop your injuries, and you can run out of this hospital and save your people. If you do not take my offer, A fate on Utopia worse than Adisa will fall over it.**"

Abel and the devil stared at each other in silence as the boy took deep breaths and thought of what to do. He laid frozen, staring at the devil's outstretched hand, its dark fingers curling like tendrils of smoke. His heart pounded in his chest, every instinct screaming to pull away, to run, to refuse. The weight of this moment and his promise to his people, pressed down on him with suffocating force. He didn't want to, he couldn't, but deep down he knew he had no choice.

There was only one option.

With a trembling breath, he reached out, his fingers brushing against the cold and desirable touch of the Devil's hand.