



THE WRECKAGE OF WAR

PART 1

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Kajo and his kin dropped their farm tools as the southern horizon darkened. He shaded his brow with his hand, thumb flicked against his palm, studied the thick smoke that boiled around the treetops and the thatched roofs and the shiny corrugated metal on the horizon. The boisterous smoke, with tongues of flame, towered in the sky. It was a hot afternoon and given the intense midday sun, Kajo doubted it was a wildfire set by hunters.

He patted Akaazua on the back, "I will be back".

"No, let me go, Honorable. I smell danger."

"Gather our children, women, and everyone on the farm," Kajo said. "If I do not return, lead them to our fatherland. Please, be vigilant while taking the forbidden route."

Kajo inhaled and released a deep sigh at the cloud of smoke. He headed towards it, and the tall grasses and the shrubs and the trees along the bush path swallowed him.

The gubernatorial and local government elections had ended a fortnight ago. The Electoral Commission declared Kajo the Councillor-elect of Wadata, but the expected celebration was subdued within the community of farmers. His major opposition party refused to concede defeat, and fear lurked in the community. Senator Onkle had rejected all forms of reconciliation, and the relationship between the three political leaders soured like that of three quarrelsome birds.

Underground sources from the third political party brought scary news that Onkle had allegedly paid mercenaries to eliminate those he considered strangers on the land. Kajo hoped the rumors were mere rumors, but they came from his trusted ally. He hoped the smoke heaving in the sky wasn't a sign or confirmation of what they had feared. Bush rats and squirrels scurried alongside him. Above, a hawk that had been flying low, following him, suddenly swooped down, but the squirrels and rats darted into the bush.

Kajo's key political manifesto centered on engaging government and corporate bodies to assist farmers with incentives, believing that this would boost food production and the growing populations of Donga and Takum and Wukari cities would never suffer malnutrition. The fertile virgin land was massive, producing bumper harvests of yams and cassava, rice and millets. Kajo envisioned well-fed children with gleaming faces sitting by wood-burning fires in their compounds, listening to their parents tell great stories under the moon.

He strode with the eyes and ears of a leopard. The bush ahead of him fluttered with an unusual quiver. Instinctively, Kajo dashed into the bush and hid behind a rosewood tree. Bem, his younger brother, emerged, his mouth trembling and cheeks wet with tears.

Kajo jumped in front of him.

"Shh," he whispered.

Blood oozed from a gash on Bem's left hand.

"Brother, the rumour's true," Bem cried. "The enemies are here. They're everywhere, shouting 'Smoke the strangers!' They've slaughtered children, everyone. I left school when I saw the smoke... everyone's on the ground... everything's dead."

Bem's Adam's apple shifted frequently as he spoke, his voice laced with pain. He told Kajo that the enemies had attacked, slitting their throats like goats in a ritual. All their houses were burned down, leaving nothing standing. Bem cuddled his wounded hand tightly to his chest as he spoke, his left hand supporting it.

Kajo hugged his brother, his shirt absorbed the damp, cold blood that soaked Bem's sleeve. The warm blood trickling from the gash had a bitter, melancholic smell that made Kajo's teeth grind and stomach recoil.

"Who did this to you?"

Bem told him that when he saw Senator Onkle, he thought help had arrived, but Onkle pointed at him, saying "Cleanse the land." The killers chased Bem, cutting his arm as he tried to protect himself. He fell, begging for mercy which did not come. He was left in a puddle of his own blood near the community well.

"Please, don't go home. They'll kill you. They're many; please warn everyone." Bem coughed, spitting blood on the ground, and tried to bury it with his foot, but the ground was too hard. Kajo tore his shirt to wrap the wound and carried Bem to a rosewood tree, resting his back against the trunk.

"Brother, I'm thirsty," Bem whispered uneasily.

Kajo thought of blood transfusion, not water, and was befuddled about how to get Bem to the hospital. "Brother, please... fast, I... thirst." Bem's words were barely audible. Kajo picked him up, draped him over his shoulders, and jogged towards the community hospital.

As Bem's condition worsened, he let out a loud groan and tapped Kajo on the back.

"I'm taking you to the hospital," Kajo said.

Bem's words became inaudible when he spoke. He laid him down and looked Bem into his eyes, which had turned milky-white and were half-open.

"They've burnt... everything... killed... everyone," Bem whispered.

"Be quiet, don't close your eyes," Kajo urged, but Bem lay still. His chest wasn't heaving, and his mouth hung open as if desperate to speak. Kajo closed it, but it reopened as if desperate to reveal a secret. He lowered his ear to Bem's chest. There was no sound. He touched Bem's neck, feeling for a pulse. There was none.

"We've lost everything," Kajo whispered, his voice laced with contempt. Tears welled up in his lungs, forming a bitter retch in his throat. He blew his nose noisily and wiped his fingers on his trousers. Despair, anger, and pain contorted his face as he closed his eyes to steady himself.

In his mind's eye, he saw Senator Onkle laughing at him. Kajo's muscles tensed in fury, and his eyes blazed with anger. He carried Bem's lifeless body to the rosewood tree and laid it between two giant roots.

With or without a weapon, Kajo knew he had to face his home. He needed to retrieve the money he had hidden in the barn for logistics and fulfill his duty as a leader to bury the slain villagers in their fatherland.

As he approached another rosewood tree, a branch shook, and Kajo's instincts kicked in. He squatted behind a shrub, squinting, he saw shadows trapped on the branches. Without doubt, they were men of war, mercenaries - the assailants. Kajo turned and ran, racing to warn his people. Instead, he sprinted towards the swamps, shouting coded messages in his vernacular. He knew the shout would give him away, but he no longer cared about his life. His lungs burned, his throat was parched, and his breathing grew shorter and faster as the assailants chased him, cutlasses and knives clutched in their hands.

To be continued...