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CHUN-LI WINS!

“Kpobo, hold me o. I go kill am o!” Wilhelm screamed.

He had just walloped my Guile with an upside-down helicopter kick from his Chun-Li.

Kpobo said, “Wetin dey do you, Ewaen? Where is your mind? You’re not concentrating.” He came round to my right and took the control pad from my hands. As he sat he continued, “How you go let this mumu win you? Just chill make I finish am for you.”

I watched as he and Wilhelm started a best-of-three between Ken and Chun-Li. We were in the children’s parlor in Kpobo’s home at Marine Quarters. Kpobo’s father had built his mansion just behind the hustle and bustle of Enerhen Junction. What marked out their compound as special was the change in tempo as you crossed from the mud-splattered and very noisy “Center of Warri” into the quiet and tree-shaded Marine Quarters. Their house was just beside the epicenter of all of Warri’s go-slows. But I had never, throughout the time we were in Technical High School, heard Kpobo complain of being late because of a traffic jam. All he had to do was walk across the gridlock to where the traffic flowed better, hop into a taxi, and voilà, he was in school minutes later. He enjoyed all of this while we, his friends, had to run the gauntlet of traffic jams and assault-rifle-armed policemen and their checkpoints. He was lucky.

“I’ve had sex,” I said.

Wilhelm noticed first, his attention not completely in the game since he was getting thoroughly thwacked by Kpobo. As the echo of Chun-Li’s death cry rang out, he turned from the TV screen.

“Wetin you talk?” Wilhelm asked. He took off his glasses and wiped them on his shirt.

Ken wins!

“Wetin he talk?” Kpobo asked as I dragged the pad from Wilhelm’s hands and sat on the stool directly facing the TV.

“Hey, no spoil the controller,” Wilhelm said. He continued, this time speaking to Kpobo, “I think he said he don sex. Talk true, Ewaen. You don nack? You don pop the cherry?”

Wilhelm knew all the terms. I selected a character, Balrog this time, and motioned for Kpobo to do the same.

He ignored me and asked instead, “Is it true? Have you done it?”

“It’s nothing,” I said.

It was fun to see their faces: Wilhelm wide-eyed, his glasses misting up from anticipation, his hair a shade lighter than the wispy beard he had just started growing; Kpobo, darker, pretending not to care if I gave an answer or not. He still had not picked a character. He turned from me, faced the TV, and moved his cursor around the character-choice menu. Kpobo was the shortest of the three of us; he was the hairiest, though, having his first facial hair when we were in class four. He now had a fowl-scratch beard, full sideburns, and no mustache. We always teased him about the no-mustache thing; he said it was genetic, and that it was the reason his father and older brothers were always clean-shaven. Wilhelm’s new beard, which he attributed to generous and regular applications of methylated spirit to his chin, meant that I was the only naked-faced one left.

But I was the first to have had sex. Although, strictly, Kpobo could not be considered a virgin. He had *lost* his at the hands—and I use “hands” decidedly here—of a nanny at the tender age of twelve. Wilhelm and I always insisted that this did not count.

I continued, “Abeg, choose character. Make I beat you.”

He ignored me and threw his pad on the floor. “Talk now. Talk or we won’t play anymore.”

So I told them about Tessa, a girl I had just met, and about the ride to her place in the afternoon two days ago, not sparing any detail. Midway through my narrative, Kpobo and I commenced our bout. The climax of my story coincided with my knocking his avatar out.

The quiet only lasted a few seconds before Kpobo spoke. “Ewaen, you sleep with ashewo.”

“Shut up, Kpobo. She wasn’t a prostitute,” I said.

“Yes, she was. You just told us she has an expatriate boyfriend whose *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines she then used to hook you.”

“So? She got tired of her oyibo man and wanted me.”

“On the day you guys met?” Willy asked.

He gave up any pretense of wanting a reply when I shot him a hard look. He made a show of inspecting his control pad and sniffled, a curious tic he used in readjusting his glasses when they slipped down the bridge of his nose. I was not about to let my friends ruin this for me.

“Wilhelm, na you remain o.” Kpobo only called our friend Wilhelm whenever he wanted to annoy him.

“Shut up. This is the only part that you enjoy, Kpobo. Isn’t it?” Wilhelm only spoke good English when he was irritated or wanted to make a serious point.

“What are you getting upset about? Sex?” I asked, still aglow at being first in this gaggle of geeks.

“I don’t blame you,” Kpobo said. He changed the subject and asked, “So how far with una preparations for school?”

Beneath the abrupt change of subject, I felt it: Kpobo was still uncomfortable talking about university. It was in his eyes—the way they stuck to the screensaver of the video game, the way they stopped moving around the room. He was not entering university this year. This was no fault of his. The center where he had written the national University Matriculation Exams had started an hour and a half late because the question papers were stuck in traffic. The chap who had the highest scores in the certificate exams in our second secondary school was made to write a three-hour exam in just one hour. He did not pass. So while his best friends, Wilhelm and me, would enter the University of Benin to study medicine as soon as the strike was called off, Kpobo would be at home for an entire year. But maybe he was luckier. He had told us that his father was going to send him to England to resume, with the February admissions, a course with combined honors in computer engineering and telecommunications.

“Oboy, we are waiting for the university to open,” I said.

“I hear the head of state has threatened to sack any lecturer who doesn’t resume by the end of November,” Wilhelm added.

“My father says he’s a joker. With the presidential elections slated for June next year, he can’t be seen to be just another heavy-handed military dictator. He predicts that before the start of December, the federal government would have capitulated, and then you guys can resume,” Kpobo said.

BAD BOYS, friends, cultists, fine boys, and jokers. Life in the University of Benin, and in every university in the country, needed its students to straddle lines that were blurred by new definitions of badness, of love, of friendship, and of loyalty. What was the difference between survival and actual living?

How much do children need to know on their first visit to adulthood?

One evening, four months later, Wilhelm and I sat in the University of Benin's hostel car park, resting after the day's lectures. We really were sitting *in* the car park, in the gutters that ran along the entire length of its western wall. Behind us the coed hostel, Hall Two, loomed in the darkness. Shadows like blocks of Lego from a juju-man's nightmare seemed to lean over, threatening to fall on our heads. Small flickering snatches of light from candles and from smoky kerosene lamps appeared in windows, going off, coming on, moving around the facades of each of the blocks like a slow-motion version of the same juju-man's idea of Tetris. Wilhelm and I waited for the rest of our new friends. Two of them were walking back from Six Candles.

Six Candles—that was what we called the small market that woke up in front of Hall Two every evening. Not really lit by candles but by very smoky kerosene lanterns converted from old spray cans, the small illegal stalls were owned and run by nonacademic staff of Uniben and their families. They sold drinks, cigarettes, and snacks like the moin-burger, a contraction made from a bun—really a small, highly compressible, bromate-saturated loaf—and moin-moin. It was just as well that they had something to do to make ends meet. They were not receiving their salaries as their breadwinners were on strike and the authorities were enforcing the government's “no work, no pay” policy.

As soon as the academic staff union, ASUU, had called off its strike and we, the new students, had finished registration and clearance, the Non-academic Staff Union, NASU, went on strike, claiming it deserved a slice of the pie, too. It was a small pie: the government had to redefine the salary structure of the university lecturers—a salary structure that was stuck

in the eighties when the naira was worth twenty times what it was now. The rolling strikes had begun in the mid-eighties and still continued, shifting from sector to sector. As soon as rail workers were taken care of, hospitals went on strike. Once doctors and nurses were taken care of, coal miners and oil workers went on strike. It was part of the reason we sat out in the dark, lit only by cars that came to pick up girls from the female hostel, Hall One. The generators were not working and the National Electric Power Authority, NEPA, had “taken the light.” Before the generator operators downed tools, they took away the keys to the generator houses serving the hostels, the labs, the school health center, and the teaching hospital. But we were in university. We learned to manage; we learned to bear.

Five of our friends were out with us this evening: Ejiro Ogbodo, a nineteen-year-old engineering student from Warri; Tuoyo Ogbe, twenty-three, general all-around laze-about, also from Warri, who had finally decided to seek a degree in engineering; Omogui Idogun, the only Bini boy here apart from me, was twenty and studying history. He was not very bright, though. Coming back from the stands of Six Candles were the last two, the only others who smoked cigarettes apart from Tuoyo: Kayode (Kayoh or Knockout) Erhahon, eighteen but with the body of a forty-year-old, his Lagos-fed tummy already capitulating in its battle with gravity; and Clement (Oliver Tambo) Unegbu, who was in agric econs though he hated the course and had never been on a farm in his eighteen years of life. Sitting, legs dangling into the dark emptiness of the gutter, were Wilhelm and me, the youngest in the group.

We spent these evenings yabbing each other, throwing careless and sometimes very painful insults at ourselves.

Kayoh reached where we sat and said, “Wilhelm, wetin you dey do here? Isn’t the prof supposed to be tucking you into

bed now?" He jumped into the gutter beside Wilhelm, hugged him, and blew a cloud of Benson and Hedges in his face.

Wilhelm lived in the staff quarters with an uncle, a professor of accounting. Kayoh thought he had been first to tell me that the professor wasn't really Wilhelm's uncle. I knew this already; the professor's wife was a member of Niger Wives, a Ukrainian doctor whom Wilhelm's mother had contacted when he got his admission into Uniben. Wilhelm hated the arrangement but could hardly defy his *momsie*; she did not want her son developing any rash on his blemish-free skin in some hostel. Wilhelm took any opportunity he had to stay out late. He had told the professor that he had a zoology seminar with some friends and would not be returning that night. How could he prefer sharing my iron-spring bed in my mosquito-infested room to what he had in the prof's house?

"Yeah," shouted Omogui, "leave here for the men."

Wilhelm ignored Omogui and pulled himself away from Kayoh's embrace. Everybody braced for it: Wilhelm's tongue was barbed. Barbed and poisonous.

"See this jambite o," he said. "See this mumu who took bike from pharmacy to main café. You're talking. You no dey fear?"

Everyone burst into laughter except Tambo. He had not heard the story.

"Wetin happen?" he asked.

I told him, "No mind the big fool o. He was standing in front of the pharmacy department. That was about two weeks after we started school. Instead of looking at signboards, the idiot asked a group of staylites where he could take a bike to the main café. Almost out of control with laughter, I think, they told him to walk about two hundred meters to the library and take a bike to the main café."

Tambo was already laughing, but I could not resist delivering the coup de grâce.

“You can imagine Kayoh’s face after the bike man brought him back to the pharmacy and pointed across the street to the largest building in Uniben, saying that was the main café.”

“I no blame you,” Kayoh said. “Na because I tell una, shebi?”

Everyone had such stories to tell. We had all been fazed at one time or the other by the staylites, quite rabid and extremely mischievous sophomores who lived for the next opportunity to humiliate a freshman, a jambite. Even old men like Tuoyo had been fazed. It was normal. It was expected. The staylites told us, just like the traditional October rush for girls that seemed to be permanently postponed to February because of the scattered school calendar, we would faze others in our second year too.

Kayoh was not finished, “Because I told you, eh? You, Ewaen. You who, just a few weeks ago, begged mommy to fill his clearance and registration forms.” He stopped talking, put his left thumb in his mouth and pretended to suck.

The conference exploded in laughter as they always did each time the story was repeated. My mother, sha. She had really embarrassed me during the two days she spent with me while I settled in. It started during the drive down from Warri. While Michael—the driver—drove, my mom proceeded to give me what she felt was much-needed motherly advice. As I cringed ever further into the car seat’s upholstery, Mom touched on cleanliness, tidiness, reading, girls, sex, condoms, and AIDS. The day did not get better.

But I had developed a hide of steel. It came from having been teased all my life. I could take anything this crowd could throw at me. Wilhelm, my classmate in FGC Warri and friend and classmate now, said that if he was told half of the things I heard to his face, he would be in a fight every evening. Did having a thick skin make me the butt of jokes? I do not think so. I think it was because of an intense shyness I had never

gotten over. The only time I spoke up was when it was time to yab the nicer chaps like Kayoh. Kayoh—now there was a guy. He was the most jovial, most nutty bobo there ever was. After that first day in the queue at the clearance center when he had teased me, a stranger, about my mother filling my forms, we had remained fast friends. Of course, Kayoh, as was typical, had ingratiated himself to Wilhelm because he knew his guardian was a professor of accounting. It was an investment. Who knew the rewards that could be reaped from being close friends with the charge of one of your professors?

The laughter had not yet died down when Tambo whispered, “See them Yibril and him crew.”

We watched one of the bad boys in school cross the car park from Hall One towards where we sat. He was at the head of a line of about five others, all dressed in black. They were members of the Black Axe, or as Wilhelm told us Yibril insisted, the Neo-black Movement. It was one of the banned university confraternities; and it was the most popular, most uncouth, most overpopulated confra in any of the universities in Nigeria. Yibril was Willy’s cousin, a poor relation from Uromi, a second cousin once removed.

As they approached, he nodded at us, at Willy. He was a short guy with a wide toothy maw that always seemed to smile. He stopped, waved his gang away and came over to us. Shifting, our other friends cleared a space for Yibril as he hopped into the gutter beside Tuoyo. They were neighbors from Obahor, a suburb in Warri’s old town.

“Bros! We no dey see you o!” he said. “If I didn’t know better, I go say you were dodging me.”

Tuoyo, who was age-mates with Yibril and not at all afraid of him, said, “See this small rat o. Abeg comot your hand from my shoulder. You no dey fear? I go knock your head o!”

“Knock which head? My own?”

“Because you dey Black Axe? Oya call all those your boys come make I beat all of una.”

A shadow passed over Yibril’s face. For a millisecond only, a wrinkle formed over the middle of his brow. Yibril laughed.

“No play go there o. Those bastards are not very nice dudes. If they reach here them go naked you o.”

It was all good-natured fun. After he and Tuoyo had gone through their fake wrestling match, he turned to Willy. “Cousin, how now?”

“Fine o.”

Yibril smiled and climbed out of the gutter, jogging the short distance to where his troop was waiting. They vanished into the bushes surrounding Dreams, the drinking joint that was beside Hall One.

Tuoyo was the first to speak. “Careful, Willy. You know say Yibril wan’ blend you enter confra?”

“No, no, na my cousin. My mama go beat am die,” Willy said.

“I am afraid of that guy,” I said.

“Who? Yibril?”

“Who? Shorty?”

Tuoyo and Willy spoke at the same time. Tuoyo continued.

“No mind Yibril, Ewaen. Na just big fool. Very fake guy those days for Dom Domigos; he enter university two years ago come dey blow hard guy.”

“Yes, but na fine boy now,” I said.

“Fine wetin?”

“Fine what?”

They had chorused again, one in pidgin, the other, Wilhelm, in English. Tuoyo continued speaking, “Ewaen, this place, this school, the whole environment dey change people. But some people will always be the same. Yibril can never fine.”

“I just feel Willy should be careful around him, cousin or not.”

But I knew my concern for Willy might be misplaced. I noticed that Yibril always took special care to ignore him, to keep him separate. Only Willy's very close friends knew about their relationship. Looking around our small gathering, I knew that some of my friends had already blended *confra*. The night, two weeks ago, when Tambo came back black and blue and all muddied, he had given the excuse that he fell off a motorcycle taxi. We all knew he had just come from an initiation ceremony in the bush. Slowly, our new fellowship was breaking up. Inexorably, the new friendships forged several months before were ending. The possibility that they would turn into implacable enmity would shock those who sat in that gutter that night. Our definitions of badness, of love, of friendship, and of loyalty would change.

ON THE way to Hall One, I asked Wilhelm, "We dey go see Brenda?"

"Yep," he replied.

Cool. I had not seen Brenda in a whole week. She would say that her "boy-bestfriend" had abandoned her. She would laugh and jump all over me, hugging and blowing kisses.

"How you see this *confra* thing?" Wilhelm asked.

We were jumping the gutters closest to Hall One. Weaving in and around parked cars that had come to pick up girls for a lovely night away from the darkness of the NASU strike and NEPA, we walked into the porter's lodge serving the girls' hostel.

"I no know, man. I no know," I murmured.

"Hasn't anyone been to see you? Has no one asked you to blend?" he asked, staring straight ahead.

I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. What was he talking about? Anyone who the *confra* boys thought possessed fineness had been hassled out of his wits with requests and, sometimes, quite fearful pressure to join up, to blend one of the

university gangs. This was not a new topic of discussion. Why was Wilhelm bringing it up again? We had talked about it the last week before leaving Warri and the week after completing registration. We were special targets though: we were Warri boys, fine boys from the rugged city; we were from the town that produced the quintessential confrat boy; we were supposed to possess innate *ruggedity*. But looking at him now in the dark, his face lit up now and then by the passing lights of cars and okadas, and catching my own reflection in his glasses, I laughed at the confraternities and their spokesmen and recruiters. Us, hard men? What a joke. We were just a couple of precocious sixteen-year-olds—going on seventeen—out to have a good time. And if in the process we caught an education, the better for us.

“Has anyone been on your case in particular?” I asked him.

“Na one guy from science department o. He’s been on my neck since January. I threatened to report him to the prof the day before yesterday, and he told me I would see. Can you imagine that idiot with body odor telling me that I will *see*?” Wilhelm’s complexion turned a bright red, and I knew he was serious because he was speaking good English again.

“But confrat, sha,” I said, trying to make light of it. “They stupid o—the guys they actually send to recruit us. I don’t know if they think that anyone who actually considers himself a fine boy will actually *blend*.” Wilhelm was already smiling, so I continued. “Imagine the guy who accosted me with a proposal that I, a *fine boy* according to him, should join the Buccaneers a week ago. Smelly, with a dirty yellow T-shirt underneath a black one and the dirtiest and most caked jeans I’d ever set my eyes on. You wan’ know wetin I tell am?”

“What did you tell him?”

“I said if being a fine boy meant looking like him, I’d rather be ugly.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did. It worked. He left scratching his head. Probably trying to figure out which confra I belonged to. Anything that would explain my liver.”

We were now on the corridors of Hall One. As we made our way up the stairs of the three-story building, Wilhelm said, “You know both of you are in love, right?”

“Guy, that na nonsense talk. We are just friends. Just close friends. Wetin dey do you and your rotten mind? Everything between a guy and a girl must include sex to you?”

“No vex o. No vex. Just making small talk,” Wilhelm laughed.