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Philip Odoh stood up from his seat at the head of the table and walked towards the window of the conference room. He peered through the pane, inattentive to the discussions going on in the room. From where he stood, he could see the beauty of the mid-rise structures of Hotel Presidential in the distance. It was impressive, what the lights did to the hotel at night, turning it into an edifice of class and magnificence.

"I don't want to hear any further," Mr Philip said, turning around, and interrupting the younger man that was speaking. The man paused, looked at Philip, and took a seat, obviously not happy to be interrupted.

"But sir..." another man seated at the meeting table tried to speak.

"Enough!" Philip interrupted him as well. "I didn't fly down here from Lagos to hear that over again. Gentlemen, I have made my point clear: price increment cannot solve our problem. There are several other ways we can solve this problem without making our clients perceive our products as expensive. I made a mistake last year by listening to that. We all saw the result. Our sales plummeted, shockingly."

"With all due respect, sir," the man he interrupted spoke again,

"I don't think that the drop-in-sales we witnessed last year was as a result of the strategies we employed."

"Oh, crap." Philip threw his hand in the air. "What was it, Felix? What was it?"

Felix swallowed uneasily. "Well," he said, "We all know that last year wasn't a favourable business year for many companies. It wasn't just us."

Philip drank from the glass of water on the table and retook his seat. He spent some time, looking through the table of thirteen men. He sighed and spoke, "I still maintain my stand. We have to look for

some other ways." He raised a finger in the air. "We should know that our clients have other options and will easily run off once they discover they can get the same thing cheaper elsewhere. Everyone wants to cut cost for Christ sake!"

"So, what do you suggest we do, sir?" Felix asked as politely as he could.

Philip glanced at him. "Are you serious?" he asked. "What do you think I pay you for?" He looked at everyone else. "All of you! I left the comfort of my home. My daughter left for The States today, and I wasn't around to kiss her goodbye. I left so many things just to be here. Still, the employees I placed on my payroll look me in the eye and ask me what we should do. That is what I pay you for, and I'm not leaving until you bring up reasonable suggestions. Anyone?"

"If I may suggest," Felix was talking again, "I think we should withdraw some of the products until we've reached a conclusion on this issue."

Philip shook his head. "Too risky," he said. "Does anyone here have something else to say? Felix is not the only one here." He looked to his left. "Frank?"

The man he called Frank shook his head.

Philip frowned and got up from his seat. "You all should be problem solvers. So, everybody must speak. Maybe you are tired, and for that reason, I'm calling for a break. You all should eat, and by the time I get back from my hotel room, everyone here should be prepared to give me an opinion; a reasonable one." He walked out of the room, and his personal assistant, Tonye, followed him.

He walked into his hotel room, fuming and pacing. The door opened and Tonye walked in.

"Are you okay, sir?" Tonye asked, closing the door gently.

Philip mumbled a few things and moved to the window, looking out from it with his hands locked behind his back. Again, his vision caught Hotel Presidential, imposing, and overlooking Birabi Street like some modern Tower of Babel.

Tonye picked up the remote on the bed and turned the television on.

"Tonye," Philip called.

"Sir?" Tonye answered, moving close to him.

"Do you think I'm being unreasonable?" he asked, still looking out the window.

"Unreasonable? No. But, this region is one of our most important zones, and the managers we have here are experienced and well-grounded on the job. Everything they are saying out there makes some sense. Felix knows what he's saying, sir."

"Hmm." Philip nodded. "You're probably right. But if these men are as experienced as you say, why are the others not bringing up more suggestions? Honestly, sometimes I feel like closing this region and sacking everybody. It's like we hired the wrong guys."

"With all due respect, sir," Tonye came to his front, "I think that would be a big mistake. There is more to lose than gain, if there's anything to gain at all."

"Tonye ..."

"Sir, do you know why these men are not saying anything?"

"Why?" Philip asked with a purse of the lips.

"Fear; they are afraid of you, sir."

Philip shook his head. "That's ridiculous. Why would they be afraid of me? They've never been afraid of me."

"Sir, frankly, you've been quite different today." Tonye smiled.

"I must admit, I was afraid of you too." The smile faded. "Nobody would want to speak when the previous person was cut short and told to his face that what he said was totally irrelevant. All I'm saying is, if you can calm down, make them feel relaxed a bit, we would accomplish our mission for coming here, and by tomorrow morning, we would be on the first flight home."

"Relaxed?" Philip snapped. "I have given these men enough room to relax. Now, they have to be on their toes and prove their real worth. If we go out there and they don't come up with a reasonable solution, we shall commence talks on closing down the branch."

Tonye was speechless for a few seconds before he spoke. "Sir," he called politely, "is anything the problem?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're so angry today. Is this about Aiwa?"

Philip's countenance saddened, and he raised his face. "I'll miss her," he said.

"But you can always go see her in The States whenever."

Philip moved away from the window and sat on the chair. "She's mad at me, Tonye. At times, I fear I didn't do the right thing."

Tonye turned to face him. "You are a concerned father, and soon, she would realise that. Trust me."

"If I were to—"

They were interrupted by the news.

"... that flight 234 has reportedly crashed. Shortly after takeoff from the international airport, the aircraft disappeared from radar after a distress call was received. A team has been set up to investigate what actually caused the crash. Some people have said it was due to some technical flaws ..."

"My phone," Philip demanded, stretching out his arm to Tonye.

"My phone!"

Tonye frisked his jacket nervously. "I think I ... it's in the conference room, on the table." He started moving towards the door. "I will just rush down and grab it."

"Then, be fast!" Philip yelled.

Tonye left the room.

Philip stood in front of the television, with his eyes fixed on it when the door opened.

"Your wife has been calling, sir," Tonye said, extending the ringing phone to him.

Philip was forced to look away from the TV. He looked at Tonye, his eyes beaming with fear. Slowly, he took the phone from Tonye, picked the call, and placed the phone on his right ear.

"Please, Viki," he said with a calm voice that was filled with horror, "Tell me it's not true."

He heard his wife sniffle. "Philip," she called. "Our daughter was on that plane."

Philip felt a sharp pain in his heart. He dropped the phone on the ground and bent, grabbing his chest.

Tonye held him by the shoulder. "Sir, are you alright?"

"Get me water," he demanded with a weak voice.

Tonye took steps towards the refrigerator.

As Philip tried to rest on the bed, the pain came again. This time, it lingered. He grabbed his chest and dropped on the ground.