

The Second Link
of a Broken Chain

Ejiofor

A Short Story

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The following tale is a work of fiction.

While drawing on actual people, places and incidents, their use does not claim complete accuracy of said people, places, and incidents and how they relate to real world events.

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Dedication

This is book 2 of a series of 4.

The series is dedicated to every person who has lost a life, a loved one, a hope or a dream in Nigeria.

It is dedicated to those who work against impossible odds to make Nigeria great again.

To countless, fallen soldiers and the families they left behind.

To the victims and survivors of every bomb that went off in a food market, bus station, or shopping mall.

Together we will overcome these troubles and repair our broken links.

Together we will put back the things that fell apart.

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Chapter 1: Aba to Abuja

Aba, Nigeria. January, 2012

Ejiofor's eyes blinked open.

He shut them again as bright sunlight stabbed through the gaps in his curtains. He peered at his watch; a black G-shock given to him by his mother two weeks ago for passing his secondary school graduation exams.

It was 7.45am.

Ejiofor rolled out of bed, conflicted; today was the day his uncle from Abuja would come and take him away to learn a trade. He would serve as an apprentice, and after three years he would 'graduate' and his uncle would give him money to set up his own store and start off on his own.

He should be thrilled, Abuja was the golden city where money fell when it rained, but Ejiofor had always wanted to be an architect and had hoped doing well in secondary school would make his parents send him to the University in Nsukka to study Architecture. Instead he got a G-shock watch.

"EJIOFOR!!"

His mother's voice startled him.

"Come downstairs, your uncle is here."

Ejiofor sighed. Uncle Ikenna wasn't even really his uncle but his father's close friend. In Africa, every older male was an uncle.

Ejiofor rushed a bath, he had packed his things the night before, and 30 minutes later he was waving goodbye to his parents.

And so, a few minutes after 9.00am, Ejiofor sat staring through the tinted window of his Uncle's jeep as his journey from Aba to the unknown that was Abuja began. He mouthed a silent prayer, hoping everything would turn out for the best.

Chapter 2: Deceived

Everything had turned out for the worst.

Ejiofor's three year stay with Uncle Ikenna was almost over and he had spent more time running errands in his uncle's home than learning any trade. He hardly went to any of his uncle's shops, and when he did, he just ended up running even more errands for the shop attendants.

"Ejiofor! Go and buy me food. Go and buy me Coke for the food. Go and return the Coke bottle. Go and wash the plates. Ejiofor!!"

Three years of his life almost gone, and Ejiofor knew he had been deceived. He had told his parents what was happening from the start; his mother wanted him to come back home, but his father wanted him to stay.

"My son, nothing good comes easy."

He had said, in his slow, deep voice.

"Hard work does not kill. Don't mind the unpleasant situation when you come home for Christmas we will talk more."

That was the first year. Uncle Ikenna had taken him home himself, bringing gifts for everyone. Ejiofor could only watch, helpless, as Uncle Ikenna convinced his parents that he had their son's best interests at heart. He had assured them of his continued commitment to Ejiofor's success, and declared he would be spending Christmas with them.

Ejiofor and his father didn't have that talk; after Christmas he had returned to Abuja with his uncle.

The second year had been just like the first, only worse. Twice Ejiofor had called home to complain but his mother's cool tones, telling him to *"be strong and just manage"* told him he was on his own. He hadn't gone home for Christmas that year.

He had determined in his mind to see out this sham of an apprenticeship; he would collect his money and go home, and he would enroll for that architecture course.

Just five months left, Ejiofor thought to himself as he finished ironing the last of his uncle's dress shirts.

Chapter 3: Sowing Seeds

Mr. Ikenna Okoronta had two problems.

A calendar hung on the wall of his office. It was a nice office in EMAB plaza; one of the high-end shopping malls in Wuse 2, a high brow area of Abuja.

Today was the 24th of November; 30 days more before he would have to send Ejiofor off with a payout of about N1million.

"Foolish villagers."

Mr. Ikenna muttered angrily to himself.

"Not only 2 million, I will also give him my wife to marry. That's how they want to collect all my money after I have housed and fed the silly boy for 3 whole years. I took him out of the village and opened his eyes to city life. They should even be the ones paying me."

Mr. Ikenna opened the top drawer of his large marble-topped office table, he took out a bundle of freshly minted 1000-naira notes.

He planned to slip the bundle into Ejiofor's bag tonight, and, in the morning, he would declare that he had brought some

money home and it was missing. After a long search he would find it amongst the boy's things. He would feign deep disappointment and would send the young thief home that same day, empty handed of course. His payment would be forfeit, after all, who knew how much more he had stolen, perhaps even been sending home to his parents. They were lucky he was being kind about it, he could have called the police.

Mr. Ikenna smiled; one problem solved.

Business in Abuja had been particularly good, but for every penny he made, his wife spent two. He couldn't keep up with her mindless demands, not unless he did something drastic; something that would bring in big money, quickly.

He heaved a sigh, picked up his phone reluctantly and dialed a number.

"Hello Alhaji Ibrahim, this is Mr. Ikenna."

He turned down the volume of the flat screen TV on the wall.

"You came to my office about a week ago, you wanted...."

Yes. Good afternoon Sir it's me. I wanted to know if you still need my services?"

Mr. Ikenna waited a bit, beads of sweat forming on his forehead despite the cool air from the air-conditioner.

"Yes, I can do it. I can do it. You said you would pay me very well."

Mr. Ikenna stood up; the sweat was flowing down his neck now. He waited a bit more, then he smiled.

"Yes. Yes. We go every month, and we have one leaving in two days' time, Okay. Okay. Yes. Yes. 5 million naira is very good."

Mr. Ikenna sat back down, his smile wide, forehead and neck dry again.

"Okay, but they have to get to my shop before 6.00am, that's when we will take off. They should please bring cash sir."

Then something threw Mr. Ikenna off.

"You want me to send you a young boy on this trip. Did I hear you well?"

Pause.

"A young Igbo boy? But why?"

Another pause.

"Sorry Alhaji, but I don't have any boy I can send with the goods. Igbo or non-Igbo."

Another pause.

"Another 5 million naira!"

A long pause this time.

"Alhaji, please let me call you back."

Mr. Ikenna placed his phone on the table, his mind spinning.

"What am I getting myself into?" He thought to himself.

Once a month Mr. Ikenna shipped building materials to markets across Northern Nigeria. A week ago, an elderly man had come to his office and offered to pay him to ship certain items along with his regular goods and deliver them to a contact in Borno state; name your price the man had said.

Mr. Ikenna had become suspicious when the man refused to disclose the nature of the items, and so he had refused point-blank. The man had taken the refusal very well, insisted that Mr. Ikenna take his number in case he changed his mind, and then left.

Mr. Ikenna had sworn never to call him and for one whole week he had been faithful to that pledge, but how many people asked you to *'name your price'* these days.

However, Alhaji Ibrahim's request for a boy bothered him; specifically, an Igbo boy, for an additional 5 million naira.

"It cannot be for ritual sacrifice." He told himself.

"Someone that has 5 million naira to blow on a small boy already has money."

The picture of 10 million in crisp, mint notes flashed through Mr. Ikenna's mind.

"10 million is what I make in a whole year, but where can I find a young Igbo boy?"

The image of Ejiofor's young, Igbo face flashed through Mr. Ikenna's mind.

A cold tingle ran up his spine; Mr. Ikenna thought long and hard for all of 15 seconds. He picked his phone and called Alhaji Ibrahim back, quickly, before he could change his mind.

"I have a boy, he is Igbo. 20 years old. Is that too old?"

A long pause.

"Okay. Bring the money with you when you come, 10 million. Next tomorrow. 5.30am in the morning, at my office. Bring cash."

Mr. Ikenna disconnected the call and placed the phone on his table. He felt a numbing sense of self disgust, like he had just eaten a cockroach.

"I will send one million to his father." He said to himself as he replaced the bundle of cash in his table drawer.

The cockroach tasted better.

Seated in a mud hut, far away in an abandoned village in Borno state, Alhaji Ibrahim returned his phone to his pocket and turned to face his companion. The man seated across the table from him was as scary as he was ugly, with a jagged scar that ran from the edge of his hairline, across his face down to his jaw. It passed through the place where his eye should be, but there was just a grayish, unseeing ball there. He had the short, curly hair and light skin tone of the people from neighboring Chad Republic.

"He has agreed. He will transport the weapons in two days' time."

Alhaji Ibrahim said in perfect Kanuri.

The Chadian just grunted; Alhaji Ibrahim continued.

"10 million naira. It is a lot of money my friend. I can understand the weapons, they are imported and better than what we steal from the army, but of what use is the boy?"

Alhaji Ibrahim shifted uncomfortably as The Chadian fixed his single good eye on him.

"The boy is for my pleasure, payment for the sacrifices I have made while you live in the lap of luxury, wining, and dining

with infidels. You think that because I have one eye, I cannot see."

Alhaji Ibrahim rose and walked to the door.

"You will get the weapons and the boy in 3 days' time. I have arranged for an escort."

The Chadian watched him leave.

He pictured the boy who would arrive in 3 days' time. Killing was boring work and the thought of this distraction brought a shiver of anticipation. He had heard the Igbos were indomitable in spirit, he would find out for himself.

Chapter 4: Road Trip

Ejiofor waited till the van got out of Abuja and had gotten onto an interstate highway heading north before he let himself relax, scarcely believing he had been allowed to go on this trip.

His uncle had come to him two nights ago.

"Be ready early tomorrow. You will follow Tony to deliver some materials in Borno and Adamawa. I will take you to the shop by 5.00am."

They had gotten to the shop at about 5.30am, his uncle had given him two thousand naira to *'eat something on the road'*, Tony the driver was already there, loading the van. There was a black jeep there too, with a tall man who was waiting for Uncle Ikenna; the man had gone into the shop with his uncle, another man came out of the jeep and followed them, carrying a black bag.

At 6.00am, they were set to go; Ejiofor got into the van, sitting at the back to make room for a stern looking soldier who appeared out of nowhere at the last minute. Tony had said he was there to help them *'pass all the checkpoints without*

paying money to those useless policemen'; apparently there were several security checkpoints on the road to the North.

Just before they left, his uncle had come over and called Tony aside and they had talked briefly in hushed tones; the fact that Uncle Ikenna seemed fidgety and couldn't look Ejiofor in the eye when he came over to say goodbye didn't register as strange.

Such was Ejiofor's excitement.

Then they were off; true to Tony's word the sight of a soldier in the front seat helped speed them through all the checkpoints along the route. Nobody checked their cargo until they got to a military checkpoint at Chibok, a small town deep inside Borno state.

Ejiofor checked the time: 8.25pm. They had spent 14 hours on the road with no stops; excitement had turned to hunger and exhaustion. Tony had said they would spend the night at a hotel nearby, deliver their cargo tomorrow morning and then continue to Adamawa. Their escort had gone out to talk to the soldiers on duty; Ejiofor wished they would hurry up and let them go, he needed a meal and some sleep.

Then he heard voices rising.

"I must check the cargo." A firm voice said.

"Those are my orders. No vehicle passes here without getting checked."

Ejiofor, who had been seated in the back, looked out and saw a female soldier caught in their headlights, she was talking to their escort. He also saw three other soldiers, but they stood aside in a way that made it clear she was in charge.

Escort looked agitated as he argued with her, after a while he took out his phone to call someone. The female soldier left him and walked over to the van.

"Come out." She said, flashing a torch in their faces.

Tony stepped out and Ejiofor followed. Ejiofor noted her name from a tag on her chest: Lieutenant. Sade Omotayo it read.

"What are you carrying." She asked.

"Building materials, ma," Tony answered, clearly uneasy, he kept looking over at their escort who was still trying to get through to whoever he was calling.

"Show me. I want to see them for myself." She held her gun in a way that made Tony obey; he opened the doors to the van's storage space.

"See ma, it is just building materials. We are delivering them to customers in Maiduguri tomorrow." Tony said, pointing vaguely at everything in the cavernous space; the hold was

filled full of wood planks, tins of wood glue, bags of nails and the like.

She ran her torch cursorily over the cargo then signaled to her men; all three of them came over.

"Bring everything down. Check everything. Then they can go."

The soldiers worked fast, under 30 minutes later, all the items in the van had been brought out and arranged on the ground, a large black box stood out.

"What's in that box?" Lieutenant Adesola asked.

Tony didn't answer, he looked at Escort. Escort was trying to punch a hole in his phone with his finger. Both men were sweating.

Ejiofor wondered why they seemed so uneasy.

She turned to one of her men. *"Open it."*

A short, muscular soldier dropped to a squat in front of the box, forced its lock and flipped it open before Tony or Escort could react. Lieutenant Adesola shone her torch; the shiny gleam of several rounds of bullets and the dull, matt black of automatic weapons were unmistakable.

She spun round to face them. Her gun was leveled at Escort but she kept Ejiofor and Tony in view. Tony dropped to his knees

as though she had fired already; he pointed an accusing finger at Ejiofor.

"I am just their driver o!" He shrieked.

"The load belongs to his father. I didn't know it was guns o!"

Then he collapsed in a heap, seemingly passed out.

She shifted her focus to Ejiofor, who was only just then starting to realize what was going on.

Escort's phone call finally went through; Ejiofor heard him speak into it.

"Hello General. We have a problem Sir."

Chapter 5: Snatched from the Fire

Ejiofor could not believe what was happening. His uncle had sent him into Borno state, the center of the Nigerian war on Bokoharam terrorists, with a shipment of smuggled weapons.

He watched, numb, as Lieutenant Sade and Escort argued over the phone call. The General whom Escort had called had spoken to her, he ordered her to stand down and take no further action; he would be there shortly.

Tony lay on the ground, still passed out.

After about 30 minutes, a military jeep pulled up and a plump army officer came out.

He walked toward them slowly, taking in the scene, he looked at the box of weapons briefly, then turned to face the young, defiant Lieutenant.

"You will release these people and weapons into my custody, Lieutenant."

"Understood sir, but I would like to call my Supervising Officer for clearance, I have orders to report any incident like this." She replied coolly.

"Lieutenant, do you know who I am? I am sure you know your supervising officer answers to me. Your conduct could be viewed as insubordination, I will overlook it because you're a young girl. Now return to your post, you and your men, I will handle this matter myself."

Escort was smiling now; Lieutenant Sade might have stood down if he wasn't. She also didn't appreciate being called a 'small girl'.

"Sorry General, but my orders are clear. I will have to get clearance from my SO before I release these men or these weapons."

The tension was palpable now. The General took off his beret and raked his hand through his short hair. "Is that your final position, Lieutenant?" he asked threateningly.

"I'm sorry sir, but I have no choice." Lieutenant Sade replied bluntly.

The General turned to the next soldier in rank among her men.

"Relieve her of her weapon." The soldier hesitated for a moment then rushed to obey.

The General replaced his beret on his head. "Take her to base. Place her in a guardroom until I return. Who is her SO?"

"Major Al-Hassan, sir." Replied the young Private.

"I want him present when I get there, he will explain why his men are so mutinous."

He pointed at Escort. "You. Go with them"

Together, both soldiers hustled to carry out their orders; she shot daggers at them but followed without resistance.

The General turned to the two remaining soldiers.

"Put the weapons in my vehicle, then return to your post."

They obeyed and left, the General took out a phone and made a call.

Ejiofor watched him in a daze, everything was happening so fast.

"Hello is this Alhaji Ibrahim? This is General Orubebe, I am not happy with you at all Alhaji."

Ejiofor sat silently as he ranted for several minutes.

"I should have been carried along..."

This is my zone...

I feel cheated...

You used my boys...

Without my knowledge...

Or permission...

I want my usual cut...

You have no choice; the weapons are with me...

2 million cash...

Take it or leave it...

Call your people and get back to me...

Quickly, before I change my mind."

General Orubebe hung up and turned round to face Ejiofor and the prone figure of Tony.

"Who are you and where are you both coming from?"

Ejiofor told his story. He started with his uncle taking him from Aba and finished with Escort calling the General on his phone.

The plump officer looked at Ejiofor for a long time, then he looked at Tony who was just now starting to stir.

"You are a very lucky boy. Very lucky." He said finally.

"Your uncle does not like you at all. Go home. Home to your parents."

He pointed in the direction they had come from.

"If you trek down like that for about 3km, you will get to Chibok motor park. There are vehicles there that travel to Aba. Do you have money?" He asked suddenly.

Ejiofor hesitated for a moment then remembered the money his uncle had given him to eat.

"Yes Sir. I have some money."

"Good, because I don't have any to give you." Said the General, reminding Ejiofor that he was not a friend.

"Go, and just be thanking God till you get home."

The time was 11.30pm. Ejiofor started walking in the direction he had been shown, tired and hungry, but grateful that he was safe. He would go home, but he would be damned if he went without his money, besides, he needed to know if his uncle knew about the weapons. He was a wicked, stingy man but sending Ejiofor into such danger was extreme, even for him.

Ejiofor got to the bus park at 12.25am. It was deserted except for an old man who guarded the gate. He found a small stool, sat, and waited for dawn, when the first vehicles to Abuja would leave.

The Chadian flung his phone against the far wall of the mud hut; the phone was tough; it fell to the floor in one piece.

He had just spoken to Alhaji Ibrahim; as painful as it would be to meet the demands of that incompetent General, what really vexed him was that there had been no news of the boy; that could mean one of two things: either he had been arrested by the army as a Bokoharam collaborator or he had been allowed go free. Both scenarios led to the same conclusion: he would not be getting his pound of young, Igbo flesh.

He upturned the table and kicked out the chair from beneath him in a wild rage.

"Somebody WILL pay for this." He thought to himself.

He rushed to pick up his phone, checked that the screen was intact, then made a call.

"Alhaji Ibrahim, send me the address of the man you paid to deliver the weapons. The situation has become untidy, and I want to tie up all loose ends."

He hung up before the Alhaji Ibrahim could ask any questions; his mood lifted slightly with the knowledge that somebody else would be sharing his pain.

Chapter 6: Reaping Fruits

Ejiofor walked into EMAB plaza a few minutes to 2.00pm. The rickety vehicle he had travelled with had broken down several times, extending his journey significantly. He had arrived at the Abuja motor park at 1.35pm, then spent the very last of his money on a taxi that took him to his uncle's office.

Mr. Ikenna was just finishing a spicy meal of pepper soup with a cold bottle of beer; he had just swallowed a large spoonful of the peppery liquid when Ejiofor walked in. He gasped, taking in a breath that drew a good portion of the peppery liquid into his windpipe, he almost coughed himself to death.

A full minute later, he finally stopped sputtering, stood up and faced Ejiofor, eyes streaming.

"Ejiofor my boy. How was your journey? How come you're back so soon? Where is Tony?"

He walked to the door and looked out nervously. Ejiofor took a gamble.

"Tony was arrested," he said. "Soldiers stopped us in Borno and found weapons in your van. They are on their way here." He watched closely for his uncle's reaction. It was immediate.

"Whose van? I said, 'whose van?' Do I know where you and Tony went after the both of you left here?" His uncle shouted, panic written all over his face.

"I don't know what you people took to Borno o! Me, I sent you with wood and nails."

He picked up his phone, frantically searching for a number.

"...Alhaji Ibrahim...Alhaji Ibrahim... where is that number."

He muttered to himself, but Ejiofor heard the name, the same name that General Orubebe had called.

"So, you know Alhaji Ibrahim." He asked, his anger flaring. Uncle Ikenna stammered.

"What do you mean Ejiofor? There are many Ibrahims you know. Even the man who supplies me wood glue, his name is Ibrahim." Ejiofor wasn't buying it.

"What have I done that you would send me with smuggled weapons to Borno where soldiers could have killed me. Is it because you didn't want to give me the money you owe me?"

He was close to tears now, angry and sad that his three wasted years were ending this way. It was clear that his uncle would rather have him killed than pay him. The money had been his anchor over the last few difficult years. His dreams of going home and restarting his life on his own terms were falling to pieces.

Mr. Ikenna just watched him, slack jawed and fidgeting. Unable to find any more lies to fight the obvious truth.

"Please give me my money." Ejiofor said brushing tears from his eyes.

"I am going home today, let me have it."

"Which money?" Shrieked Mr. Ikenna, suddenly finding his voice.

"Who do you think you are? After all I have done for you. I picked you from that dirty hole in Aba and brought you to ABUJA. Tell me, are Aba and Abuja the same thing? I showed you the real world, opened your eyes to modernity. Now you and your ungrateful parents want to rob me. I am not giving you one penny."

He stalked across to the door and yanked it wide.

"Now get the hell out of my office. You can go back to Aba or hell for all I care. I never want to set my eyes on you again. I said GO!!!"

Ejiofor walked out of his uncle's office in a daze.

Just then, a small, black car pulled up and parked just outside his uncle's office. Ejiofor didn't even notice.

With empty pockets and a shattered spirit, he walked out of the plaza and down the street, without a clue where to go or what to do. Time seemed to stand still; what was he to do? Lost in a giant city with no family and no way to get home. He trudged on for what seemed ages.

Suddenly, the sound of a massive explosion ripped the air.

Ejiofor scampered for cover in terror as people, screaming, ran for cover all around him. He looked back and to his shock realized the explosion had come from the plaza where his uncle's office was. He ran there.

The shopping complex was in chaos, screams of pain and fear filled the air, from the injured and the frightened alike. An angry red fire raged, and thick black smoke billowed from the blackened, bombed-out shell of a smallish car parked just outside the place where Mr. Ikenna's office used to be. The entire front wall had caved in, as it had taken the full force of the blast. Ejiofor ran there, squinting to protect his eyes from the smoke.

He made his way carefully over the rubble that used to be his uncle's office wall. The entire office interior had been obliterated, such was the force of the blast. Mr. Ikenna Okoronta's large, marble-topped office table had been flung across the room; from beneath its shattered form Ejiofor could see an unmoving, mangled arm sticking out and, he knew his

uncle was dead. Strangely, he felt nothing; neither elation nor sorrow, just a deep nothing.

He turned to leave when the sight of a black bag caught his eye. It was the bag that one of the men had carried, the men who had met them at the shop, the day of the trip.

Ejiofor opened it and gasped; it was filled with dozens of bundles of 1000 naira notes, in all it looked like 8 or 9 million. For a moment he hesitated, then quickly he stuffed the money into his backpack and climbed out of his uncle's former office.

He would take the money to his father. A fair man, he would know how much was due to Ikenna for 3 years' worth of trouble. He would know how to send the rest to uncle Ikenna's wife.

Ejiofor made his way out of the plaza, past the burning car and wounded people; he wanted to help them but knew he couldn't. He had to get to the motor park quickly.

There was a vehicle going to Aba tonight, but he would miss it if he didn't hurry.

He glanced at his black G-shock watch, glad that he still had time, and for the first time noticing how nice a watch it was.

THE BEAST

The beast tore through the boot of the car. It wasn't meant to be there. It wasn't even meant to be. It was an unnatural thing; bits of this, bits of that; innocent parts brought together to make a terrible whole.

It was made for ripping and roaring and so it ripped and roared, tearing through metal and plastic, slicing through foam and glass. It was a lion in a bird cage, an ocean in a bottle. The bars snapped, the bottle cracked, and the beast broke free.

It hurled a metal rod to the left and flung a piece of glass to the right. With a boom that shook the sky it belched a thick, black cloud; furious for being made; enraged at being caged. It tore the car into a thousand pieces and flung them in a thousand directions.

The beast was blind, but it could hear. It heard voices all around; voices screaming and shouting. It screamed back, spitting hot, red flame; angry and afraid and determined not to be caged again. It would return to its home, to the sky and the earth. Nothing would stop it; nothing would hold it back, not metal or concrete.

Not skin or flesh or bone.

*In an instant it was gone, escaped from the bonds of evil men;
free to be a beast no more, unaware that innocents lay dead in
its wake.*

15 minutes later the police arrived.

*For the victims of the EMAB plaza terror attack in Wuse2,
Abuja, June 2014.*