

SPARKLINGS OF CHANGE

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Beneath an ancient ugba tree he views as the last living heartbeat of his people, Chikara defies his village's elders. When they move to destroy the tree in the name of tradition, he ignites a rebellion against them, his voice slicing through fear and silence with a warning they refuse to hear: this is not ritual, but ruin. In an instant, he is branded an infidel, accused of witchcraft, and hunted by a pastor who twists faith into a weapon of control. Surrounded by hostility and betrayal, Chikara stands alone, his truth kindling a volatile clash that threatens to tear the village apart.

What begins as a dispute over a tree erupts into a fierce struggle for survival itself. As fear tightens its grip and the old guard fights to suppress him, Chikara rises against ignorance, oppression, and the silent destruction of the environment. The ugba tree transforms into a blazing symbol of resistance, drawing a battle line between past and future, belief and truth.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the men and women, activists and advocates, who champion the protection of our environment and inspire positive change through their courage, sacrifice, and unwavering commitment to a sustainable future.

Chapter 1

No one had ever dared to challenge the entire village before.

Chikara's heart pounded within his chest as he prepared himself, facing the crowd staring at him.

In the charged atmosphere, brimming with tension, a frail figure emerged from the assembly of elders seated at the forefront of the gathering. Pa Chinagorom, laboring under the burden of his advanced age, rose from his seat on unsteady legs, his eyes fixed on Mazi Okabi, the chairman of the village council. With a voice as weak as the rustling leaves, he beseeched Mazi Okabi to recognize the seriousness of the situation.

"Mazi Okabi," he said, his words barely audible above the murmurs of the crowd. "It is time to speak."

Under the vast canopy of the ancient ugba tree, Chikara readied himself to make history. For generations, any decisions taken by the elders of the village were never disputed. Their authority was absolute, their judgments never doubted. Yet, at this critical moment, while the entire community complied with their mandate without question, he alone resolved to oppose it, prepared to confront the direction they had chosen.

The morning sun shone over the village square, casting long, dancing shadows across the weathered pathways. Chikara

felt the intensity of the moment bearing down on him like the heat of the coming day, acutely aware of the scrutiny of his fellow villagers. Their looks reflected a combination of curiosity, skepticism, and contempt.

This particular ugba tree had existed for generations as a silent protector, watching the steady rhythm of life in the village. Its twisted branches conveyed the narratives of history, embracing age-old customs, the events of birth and death, along with the contrasts of joy and grief. For many, it served as a sacred representation of their ancestry and a living testament to the relationship between humanity and nature.

Now that bond faced a threat. The village elders had decreed that the ugba tree must be cut down, its towering presence seen as a sign of dark omens and evil powers. And so, they had gathered beneath its timeworn branches, prepared to carry out the imposing task set before them.

Amid a tide of compliance, Chikara emerged as a lone figure of defiance, questioning the core of their beliefs, traditions, and way of life with relentless determination.

Chikara believed the ugba tree went beyond being a mere symbol. It acted as a fundamental part of the delicate structure of life that upheld their village and its inhabitants. Fear and superstition were no reason to destroy it. He refused to watch it happen.

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Now Pa Chinagorom, the venerable village head with deep wrinkles of age and wisdom imprinted on his face, began to speak.

“We are gathered here today because Chikara has chosen to oppose our decree, and to defy the foundation of our way of life.” At ninety-eight years old, Pa Chinagorom had weathered countless storms and witnessed the passage of time with steadfast vigilance. For that reason, the people listened to him.

Mazi Okabi, a stout man with a serious expression, nodded at Pa Chinagorom’s words. Though he bore the weight of authority upon his shoulders, he knew this was a moment unlike any other in their village’s history. With a heavy sigh, he stepped forward, his voice reflecting the seriousness of his responsibility as he addressed the assembled crowd.

“My fellow villagers,” he said, somber and composed. “We stand at a crossroads, faced with an issue unlike any we have encountered before. Chikara, whom we supported and sent abroad to study, now stands before us as an adversary who seeks to overturn our traditions and beliefs by challenging the entire people of this village.”

A wave of whispers swept through the crowd, mingling with the ugba’s rustling leaves overhead.

Amid the uncertainty and doubt, Mazi Okabi continued his address.

“We must approach this matter with the utmost care and thoughtfulness,” he went on, “for it is not only the fate of the ugba tree that hangs in the balance, but the fabric of our community.”

With those words, Mazi Okabi stepped back and looked around at the gathered villagers. The air carried anticipation, uncertainty, and a strong impression that they were on the verge of something extraordinary.

Chikara listened to the chairman speak, his heart burdened by the gravity of the message being conveyed. But he could not back down, not when the future of their village hung in the balance. He steeled himself for the battle ahead and took a deep breath, feeling steady and reassured that he fought for the ugba tree, as the soul of their village, as well as for the future of their children.

“Chikara!” Elder Uruka stepped forward, his voice piercing the whispers of the crowd. “You came back to this village only six months ago, after spending some years abroad. Do you believe that you, a mere boy, know better than all of us who have lived in this village for many, many decades? Because Unanka, your departed father, rest his soul, was a poor man, we—this entire village—supported your education. And now you oppose us?”

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Chikara met Elder Uruka's stare, his own eyes blazing with fierce resolve. "I am not here to challenge you, Elder Uruka," he replied. "I am here to stand up for what I believe is right. This ugba tree is a symbol of our connection to the earth, to each other, and to our ancestors. If we destroy it, we destroy a part of ourselves."

Some of the villagers nodded in acknowledgment, their response blending with the dissenting voices of those who remained unconvinced.

Chikara knew he had a long road ahead of him, but he refused to waver in his conviction. He had seen the devastation caused by changing weather patterns due to humanity's reckless destruction of nature. Because of this, he would not rest until he had done everything in his power to protect this village he loved from further harm.

While the debate continued, a hushed silence fell over the crowd as Pastor Udochukwu, the powerful man of God and the owner of Christ Is Able Pentecostal Church, made his entrance. His presence commanded respect, and many in the village feared him for the perceived miracles he performed.

Pastor Udochukwu approached Chikara with a severe expression, his eyes searching. "Chikara," he began, his voice loaded with authority, "do you believe in witchcraft?"

Chikara met the pastor's steady look. "Pastor, not in the case of this ugba tree, sir," he said.

The pastor raised an eyebrow, gesturing toward the tree's bark, covered with numerous nails. "And what do you make of these? Do you deny that these are the work of witches, as many in our village believe?"

"I do not believe that witches put them there as part of their rituals," Chikara said, shaking his head. "There could be other explanations for nails in the tree. Personally, I have the feeling that some children may have hammered those nails into the tree."

The pastor's lips curled into a knowing smile, and he turned to address the crowd. "My brothers and sisters," he proclaimed, "the word of God tells us to beware of false prophets who come to us in sheep's clothing but are ravenous wolves. Let us not be deceived by the words of those who would lead us astray from the path of righteousness."

A chorus of "Amens" and nods of agreement surged through the crowd, emboldened by the pastor's statement.

Chikara felt a pang of frustration. Taking another deep breath, he stepped forward. "My fellow villagers," his voice rang out clear and strong as he called, his words laden with the sincerity of his convictions, "I am not here to deceive you or lead you astray. I am here because I care about the future of our

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village, our children, and our planet. I have seen first-hand the devastation brought by deforestation, global warming, and climate change.”

He paused, giving his words time to settle before he went on. “This ugba tree is more than a tree,” he said as the people fixed their eyes on him, waiting for every word. “If we destroy it, we will not simply be cutting down wood and branches. We will be tearing away something that has protected and sustained us for years. And when the air grows hotter and people begin to suffer because of it, what shall we tell the children who come after us? That we inherited a gift and destroyed it with our own hands?”

While Chikara spoke, he moved his focus from one face to another, searching each set of eyes in turn. As he did, he sensed a change in the crowd. The hard certainty that had marked many of their faces earlier had begun to soften. Doubt, faint but real, crept across some of the men and women gathered beneath the tree.

Although much still had to be done, the glimmer of hope in their eyes heartened him. For the first time, they were beginning to listen, to think about the weight of what they were doing. The battle was far from over, and Chikara knew it. That realization only deepened his resolve to see it through to the end.

As subdued chatter rose and fell within the gathering, an elderly woman stepped forward, trembling with irritation. “Chikara!” she shouted, her eyes searching his face, “have you not seen the numerous snakes that coil themselves atop the branches of this ugba tree?”

Chikara looked at the woman thoughtfully. Growing up, and even shortly before he left the country, he had known about the snakes living in the tree and had been afraid of them. Not anymore, after what he had learned about nature’s balance.

“Yes, Mama,” Chikara replied, keeping his voice steady against the rising noise. “I know the dangerous snakes live up there.” He pointed toward the tree. “But they do not crawl down to hunt us. They stay up high, hunting the rats and pests that destroy our barns. If we chop down their home, where do you think they’ll go? They’ll come pouring into our kitchens and bedrooms. That is the truth.”

In the crowd, two women exchanged a terrified glance, their eyes wide with fear at the thought of snakes invading their homes.

For a long moment, a commotion of disagreements erupted as the people reacted to Chikara’s response.

When the noise quieted, a second elderly woman, leaning heavily on her walking stick as she stood, her aged features grappling with concern, spoke up. “Alright,” she said, “and

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have you not witnessed a branch of the ugba tree fall during a storm, destroying the market shades below?"

Chikara nodded with seriousness. "Yes, there have been instances of branches falling during storms. However, we must ask ourselves, is cutting down the tree the solution? Or should we find a way to trim some of its branches while we preserve its importance to our village?"

Chikara turned the question back on the villagers. But before he could elaborate further, a youth's voice piped up from the crowd. "Have you ever seen one of those snakes bite anyone in this village?"

All eyes turned to Pa Chinagorom, the eldest among them, hoping for affirmation, while a heavy silence descended upon the square. The absence of confirmation from the eldest man spoke volumes.

Undeterred, the first elderly woman pressed on. "Must we wait until someone is killed before we act?"

Chikara shook his head, his voice strong. "No. But the life this ugba tree provides to our village outweighs your concerns." He paused, letting his attention settle on the village elders. "Look around us. The rising temperatures we are enduring are a direct result of stripping the land bare. Every time we fell an ancient tree without a plan, we destroy a home,

making the animals disappear, and inviting sickness upon ourselves.”

He stepped forward, deliberately gesturing so their eyes followed the sweep of his hand. “We cannot look only at what is right in front of us. Look up!”

Chikara pointed directly into the bare late morning sky. “When was the last time any of you saw a vulture circling above our village? They have vanished because we cut down the high canopies they perch on. When the shade is entirely gone, our soil will bake, our crops will die, and the heat will swallow us all whole.”

The villagers grumbled in shock, some exchanging worried looks, while others shook their heads in denial. Chikara’s words had suddenly struck a chord, drawing increased attention, though not in a positive light.

Pastor Udochukwu’s booming voice cut Chikara off before he could say anything more. “Vultures?” he shouted, his tone a mix of theatrical shock and deep distrust. He weaponized the word, emphasizing it heavily so it rang across the entire square. His eyes narrowed with suspicion as he glared at the young man.

Chikara met the pastor’s stare with his own unflinching expression. “Yes,” he answered steadily. He knew that even if

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the rest of the assembly missed the significance, the pastor would pounce on the word to turn it against him.

With a triumphant sneer, Pastor Udochukwu turned to address the assembled villagers. “Are you all telling me that you did not hear what he said?” he cried out. “This young man speaks in favor of vultures which we dread in this land! It tells us that he must be in league with the witches and warlocks we fight against, that seek to bring ruin upon our village!”

The religious man’s assertions set off a wave of overlapping voices among the crowd, punctuated by exclamations of shock.

Pastor Udochukwu further seized upon the opportunity, quoting another passage from the Bible that seemed to lend credence to his accusations. “Ephesians 6:12!” he shouted. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

“I can bet you this Chikara wasted his time abroad, falsely claiming he went to university!” a young man shouted for everyone to hear. Chikara heard him clearly, and although he hoped the youths would be on his side, he never expected all of them to support him. Instead, he prayed he might secure the

backing of a greater proportion of the young people in his village.

“Tell us the truth, Chikara—did you really go to school overseas, or did our money pay for a long holiday?” another young man demanded. “From the way you speak, it seems you were keeping company with witches rather than learning anything of value.”

All of a sudden, Chikara found himself surrounded by a sea of hostile faces, their accusations ringing in his ears like a thunderous uproar. Yet he held firm, unyielding in his principles. This fight was for the future of their community, he told himself.

As the tension reached its peak, Chikara’s voice sliced through the tumult. “My fellow villagers!” he shouted with determined words. “But we cannot let fear dictate our actions. We must be guided by reason and compassion.”

He turned to face Pastor Udochukwu with an unwavering look at the man. “Pastor,” he said, his tone respectful but strong, “I understand your perspective, but it will be a terrible mistake if we let superstition cloud our judgment. We must rely on science and evidence to guide us.”

There came an echo of agreement in the crowd, and for a moment, it seemed as though reason might prevail. But then,

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with a roar, Pastor Udochukwu raised his voice once more, his words filled with a righteous outrage.

“Blasphemy!” he shouted, eyes ablaze. “This young man dares to challenge the word of our Lord God Almighty Himself! He must be cast out from our midst, otherwise his wickedness will corrupt us all!”

The crowd erupted into chaos as the air became thick with anger and confusion. But as the fury raged around him, Chikara stood firm amidst the storm with steadfastness, refusing to back down. His heart beat faster while he struggled to comprehend the depth of fear holding the people of his beloved village captive. Pastor Udochukwu had been the village’s religious guide for many years, but centuries of superstition still worked their way into his teachings. And it was becoming a dangerous combination.

Meanwhile, somewhere in the crowd, Chinwendu stood rigid and silent, her fingers clamped around the edge of her wrapper as she watched the villagers close in on her son with angry voices and sharp accusations. The noise around her rose from every direction, yet she remained fixed in place, unable to move.

Heat climbed into her face as whispers drifted among the nearby groups of women. Some turned toward her, their eyes lingering too long before they leaned together, whispering and

shaking their heads. Chinwendu lowered her gaze for a moment, fighting the urge to disappear from the gathering altogether. Shame and fear turned over inside her chest.

What had her son brought upon himself and their family? she wondered, as another woman looked at her with an expression that cut deeper than words.

Her breathing thickened. No. This could not go on.

As the shouting around Chikara continued, Chinwendu pressed her lips together and reached a hard decision. She had to speak to her son the moment he returned home. This fight over the ugba tree had grown too dangerous, too heavy for one family to carry. He must let it go and turn his mind toward something else before the village swallowed him whole.

In the midst of the crowd's fury, their collective rage swirling around Chikara like a violent storm, ready to consume him in its chaotic grip, the village chairman, Mazi Okabi, raised his hands. "Enough!" he shouted, his voice slicing through the din like a knife.

The crowd continued with the noise; nobody seemed to be listening to the chairman.

"Enough!" Mazi Okabi shouted. "Everybody be quiet if you want this gathering to continue."

But the hushed discussion persisted. So the chairman made a quick decision.

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“This meeting is hereby adjourned!” Mazi Okabi yelled. “Everybody go home.” The village’s meetings normally did not end this abruptly, but the chairman and elders had earlier decided to make such a move if things were to go haywire.

The villagers, caught off guard, turned their attention to the chairman, their expressions a mix of confusion and frustration. But Mazi Okabi stood firm as he addressed the crowd.

“We will reconvene in one week’s time,” he declared, his tone now diplomatic. “In the meantime, let us all take the opportunity to reflect on what has been said here today. Let us consider the arguments put forth by both sides and come to this decision with clear minds and open hearts.”

With that, he and the other elders turned on their heels and strode away from the square. The villagers slowly dispersed in their wake.

The elders’ departure became an opportunity for Chikara to disengage himself from most of the villagers and avoid any physical confrontations. From a distance, he watched in silence as the crowd dissipated, a heavy weight settling in the pit of his stomach. Nevertheless, even as the villagers drifted off into the gathering dusk, their voices ringing in his ears, he remained resolute. When he turned to leave the square, a fresh wave of

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resolve ignited within him to persist; the future of their village depended on it.

Chapter 2

“We must put an end to Chikara’s arrogance,” declared Mmaugo, Pastor Udochukwu’s wife, the following morning, her tone laced with anger as she looked at her husband.

The luxurious master bedroom of Pastor Udochukwu’s newly completed five-room mansion glowed with the gentle tones of dawn as the early beams of sunlight streamed through the curtains. Mmaugo started raging, still nestled in the plush confines of their bed, the moment she woke.

“His audacity threatens to undermine your authority and, by extension, our influence in the community.”

Pastor Udochukwu furrowed his brow. “But my dear, we must not underestimate the power of Chikara’s arguments,” he countered. “Although he is young, his message resonates with many in this village.”

Mmaugo’s eyes narrowed while a flicker of frustration crossed her features. “Passion without direction is meaningless,” she retorted. “We can’t allow sentiment to cloud our judgment. The tree must come down!”

“What about the repercussions?” Pastor Udochukwu searched his wife’s face. “If we force the issue without addressing the concerns Chikara raised, we risk being alienated from the very people we seek to lead.”

Mmaugo sighed, her patience clearly wearing thin. “You are too cautious, Udochukwu. Bold action is necessary to maintain control. We can’t appear weak in the eyes of the villagers.”

Pastor Udochukwu contemplated his wife’s words with increasing discomfort. She may be right, yet the idea of suppressing Chikara's opposition burdened his conscience. “Our fight against him is merely a struggle for authority, an attempt to retain dominance in the village—but at what cost?” he murmured, more to himself than to her.

“The greater cost comes if we don’t stand strong. Then the cost is our reputation, our influence.” Mmaugo’s voice was strong. “We have worked too hard to build our position in this community. We can’t allow one young upstart to tear it all down.”

With a heavy sigh, Pastor Udochukwu nodded in reluctant agreement. “Very well,” he conceded, a flicker of resignation in his eyes. “What do you propose we do?”

A look of satisfaction crossed Mmaugo’s face as she outlined her plan, detailing the steps needed to secure their position of authority. Her somber tone reflected the seriousness of the situation.

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“These three individuals hold the key to our success,” Mmaugo concluded with determination. “We must act if we want to be victorious in this battle.”

With a strong will, Pastor Udochukwu and his wife rose from the bed, ready to embark on their mission to quash Chikara’s rebellion once and for all. As they stepped into the new day, they recognized the future of their community was at stake and were determined to do whatever it took to guarantee their continued dominance.

The morning light bathed their house as Chikara’s mother, Chinwendu, summoned him into her bedroom. She sounded weary. Filled with sadness, Chikara chose a chair beside her.

“Take a look around, Chikara,” his mother said, troubled. “This room, this house, it shows the difficulties we have faced since your father’s passing.”

Chikara’s eyes scanned over the faded furniture and worn curtains. The weight of their hardships lingered in the room as his mother related her experience with three women after the village gathering days before.

“They insulted me, Chikara,” she said as she quivered with emotion. “They questioned why they wasted their money to support your education abroad, only for you to return and

start challenging the village's decision to cut down the ugba tree. They accuse us of betraying the community."

A feeling of guilt overcame Chikara while he processed his mother's words, the sacrifices the village had made for his education pressing on his mind. "I'm sorry, Mama," he muttered above a whisper. "I didn't mean to cause you pain."

Tears welled up in Chinwendu's eyes as she spoke of her fears for their family's safety. "You are my only son, Chikara," she reminded him, her voice trembling. "And your sisters. they are still young, and I can't bear the thought of anything happening to any of you. Not after losing your father."

The memories of his father's unfortunate accident flooded Chikara's mind like a tsunami, each recollection vivid and piercing. The sky that day was painted with hues of orange and pink as his father climbed the tall palm tree, his silhouette outlined against the skyline. Then came the sudden snap of his old, weathered oil-palm-fiber rope gear, and the sickening thud as his father plunged to the ground, his body twisting in anguish upon impact.

Chikara had rushed to his father's side, his heart racing as he took in the sight of his beloved parent writhing in pain, blood pooling beneath him. Panic surged through Chikara's veins as he struggled to comprehend the severity of the

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situation, refusing to accept the cruel reality unfolding before him.

In the days that followed, Chikara, just seventeen years old, watched as his father's condition deteriorated, the once vibrant man reduced to a mere shell of his former self. Traditional remedies offered little relief. And then, in a heart-wrenching twist of fate, Chikara's father passed away, leaving him, his mother, and his two sisters to bear their loss.

The memory of that fateful day still haunted Chikara, a testament to the fragility of life and the harsh realities of human existence.

But in the midst of their grief, a ray of hope had emerged when Chikara received news of a scholarship to study abroad. It brought an opportunity for him to escape the poverty that had afflicted their family since his father's death, a chance to pursue a brighter future, and a way to honor his father's memory in the process.

While the scholarship covered seventy-five percent of the expenses, the remaining twenty-five percent became a major difficulty for their family. They raised the remaining money thanks to the kindness of their community, which came together to support them in their time of need—a gesture that demonstrated the enduring bond of kinship and solidarity that ran deep within their village.

As Chikara meditated on these memories, an invigorated ambition ignited within him. His journey abroad had been a testament to his father's sacrifice and his community's support. This was why he must fight for the community, he determined, even if they didn't understand the fight.

Chinwendu's voice pulled his mind back. Her words boomed in his ears—a plea infused with desperation.

“My son,” she began, “you celebrated your twenty-fourth birthday the other day.” She looked her son in the eyes. “I am so proud of who you are becoming—handsome, strong, and wise. But I fear for you. You are too young to start going into the politics of our village. A lot of things are involved, and if anything happens to you, the world of this family ends.”

Chinwendu took a deep breath and paused for a long moment. “This small shop I run is no longer enough for us. You know you helped me open it with the money you sent while you were abroad. But your sisters are growing, and so are my responsibilities toward them. What I earn is no longer sufficient.”

Chikara felt a quiet happiness knowing he had been able to support his mother while studying in the United Kingdom. He had worked part-time during term and full-time during the holidays, and from the little he earned, he sent money home so she could set up a shop in their village.

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“I want you to leave this village and go to Lagos,” Chinwendu said. “I have discussed it with my younger sister, your aunt, to accommodate you and assist you in finding employment.”

Chikara felt a tightness in his chest at his mother’s request, a clear indication of the depth of her worry and the sacrifices she was willing to make for their family’s sake. He recognized the fear and hesitation visible on her face, deepening the lines of worry that had appeared in the wake of his father’s passing.

But even as his mother was asking him to leave, Chikara felt her unalloyed love and devotion. He couldn’t help but feel a swell of gratitude and admiration. “Thank you, Mama,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I am thankful to you for all that you have done for us since Papa’s death.”

To reassure his mother, Chikara stretched out and took her right hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “But I cannot leave,” he went on. “Not now. I think our community needs me the most at this time.”

Chinwendu’s eyes widened in surprise and concern. “But why fight, Chikara? Fighting against the village is not good.”

Chikara noticed the uncertainty in his mother’s voice and took a deep breath, steeling himself for what he knew would be a difficult conversation. Unable to find the right words, he

stood up and went to the window, looking across the land that had been theirs for generations until his strength found its voice. “I want to make a difference, Mama,” he said earnestly. “I want to honor Papa’s memory and the sacrifices he made for us. And I believe that staying here, fighting for what is right, is the best way to do that.”

“But I would rather you, yourself, be honored among us now, not hated.”

Chikara returned to his mother’s bed and grasped her hands. “Mama...” he hesitated, choking a little on his words, “this fight is bigger than me and bigger than our family. I am fighting because when people live in a good environment, life becomes easier. When trees are protected, the land stays fertile, rain comes as it should, food grows well, and people can farm, trade, and earn a living. Trees protect our water, our soil, and our future. A healthy environment helps free people from poverty and the deep sadness that comes with it. I want our community, and the children yet unborn, to grow up with hope instead of struggle.”

He met his mother’s look; the warmth of her love was reflected in her tear-filled eyes.

“I can’t turn my back on the village that raised me, that supported me through our toughest times,” he continued, with a quiet commitment. “Nothing would bring me greater joy than to

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repay its people's kindness, to give back to them as they have given to me."

Chikara's mother listened. She seemed as though she was starting to understand.

"And Mama," Chikara added, "part of the agreement with the university that granted me the scholarship was that I would return to our country and use my education for the improvement of our society. It is a promise I still have to keep."

He started to withdraw his hands from hers but found himself unable to. His touch felt like a comforting anchor in the storm of uncertainty. "You know that I am already in the process of getting employed here in our state," he assured her with quiet confidence. "There is no need for me to go to Lagos. My place is here, fighting for what I believe in, alongside the people who have always stood by me."

A surge of pride and admiration welled up in Chikara's mother's heart. She tried to let herself relax. Though the road ahead would be fraught with challenges, she now believed her son possessed the strength and dedication to face them head-on, to forge a path of hope and resilience for their family and their community. And while they sat side by side, intertwined by love, she understood they were capable of facing any

adversities that awaited them. She suddenly felt united in her son's resolve for a better tomorrow.

"Mama," Chikara said gently, "I believe that Agba and Acha-ere, these diseases that plague our community today—may be linked to the environment, especially rising temperatures caused by climate change."

Chinwendu drew back in her seat, her brows tightening. "You are not serious, Chikara," she cautioned. "These two ailments are not ordinary. They are of a spiritual nature. Wicked individuals plant them against their enemies like a poison. They are even sold in the markets."

Chikara laughed at his mother's final remark. "I am serious, Mama. Although I have not scientifically proven the connection between these two diseases and the temperature rise yet. Perhaps other factors could be the causes. But spiritism? No, Mama."

Chikara paused, searching for the right words to convey the urgency of the situation. "We need to educate people about the disastrous effects of these environmental changes and empower them to take action to mitigate them."

Agba attacked without warning, draining vitality and leaving its victims weak, disoriented, and overpowered with fatigue. It rose like the unyielding midday heat, persistent and

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harsh. The villagers believed that it affected people more often when the weather became very hot. For Chikara, the symptoms seemed to mirror those of malaria, dehydration, or heatstroke, intensified by the relentless heat of the sun. It could even be a localized form of illness.

On the other hand, Acha-ere adhered like the dampness of the early hours—a sickness that persisted and refused to vanish. Its symptoms would not go away, as though it had settled within the bones. An untrained eye mistook it for tuberculosis or an autoimmune disorder.

“Mama,” Chikara said, moving closer and tightening his grip on her hand. “It is not a curse bought in the market. Doctors call it Buruli ulcer. It is caused by a tiny bacterium. It damages the skin, not because anyone hates us, but most likely because the land is changing and the water is no longer clean. Our environment is growing worse, and if we do not protect the trees, the heat may only help it spread.”

“If this is your calling,” Chinwendu said after a moment, “you have a heavy burden on your shoulders.”

Chikara nodded. “This is my purpose, Mama: to use my education and knowledge to make a difference for our community.”

He continued to hold her hand, a soothing anchor in the turbulent waters of doubt. “I promise you, everything will be

alright,” he said with resolve. “I will be careful as I pursue the case of the ugba tree. We will get through this together.”

Chinwendu nodded hesitantly. As they sat together in the tranquility of the room and conversed, Chikara could sense her restless mind beginning to settle.

Chikara knew the path was uncertain. He understood the unpredictability of the journey. However, with his mother’s steadfast support, he had confidence he could overcome any challenges, make a difference in their community, and honor his father’s memory.

Later that same day, Chikara’s friend Obinna paid a visit. Even though they were from two different kindreds, Obinna and Chikara shared a deep bond forged during their shared years in secondary school. While Chikara went on to excel in academics, Obinna chose to pursue trade skills, now finding success as a skilled furniture maker.

The two young men greeted each other with a warm embrace and handshakes, then settled onto the aged benches located within Chikara’s father’s compound, sheltered under the branches of a mango tree. The air was thick with the fragrance of ripening mango fruits, and the shade created by the leaves provided some serenity.

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With an expression of concern, Obinna lowered his voice. “Chikara,” he said with unease, “there is something troubling I need to discuss with you.”

Chikara frowned, his face filled with curiosity as he turned his attention to his friend. “What is it, Obi?”

Obinna gave a heavy sigh. “You have become the most hated individual in the village,” he said with regret.

An intense feeling of despair engulfed Chikara as he processed what his friend had pointed out. Confusion and sorrow clouded him. “Why?” he asked, unable to believe it.

Obinna hesitated in choosing his words. “The younger members of the community feel you are disrespecting the village’s leadership, and Pastor Udochukwu in particular.”

“I didn’t intend to cause discord,” Chikara protested with both frustration and sorrow. “I am just standing for what I believe is right.”

Obinna looked at his friend with empathy. He nodded, his eyes conveying a deep understanding of Chikara’s struggles. “I understand, Chikara,” he said, resting a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “However, it is important to know that advocating for what is just may lead to resentment within a community bound by tradition.”

Chikara sighed. “How does one make a positive impact without being seen as a troublemaker?”

Obinna gave a supportive smile. “You will find a way, Chikara. I have faith in you. Don’t let others discourage you from your path. Your courage to stand up for what is right is a rare quality that I admire.”

Chikara’s eyes flickered. “Thank you, Obi. I find comfort in your sincere support. I will continue to fight for what I believe is right, no matter the challenges I may face.”

As the mango tree continued to cast a tranquil aura over the two young men, Chikara and Obinna sat there for a long time in quiet companionship with a bond strengthened by their shared belief in the power of standing up for justice and integrity, even in the face of adversity.

Obinna then leaned in closer to Chikara, a glimmer of mischief dancing in his eyes. “You know, Chikara,” he said with a playful grin, “I was the one who asked if anyone had ever seen one of those snakes bite anybody.”

“I had a feeling it was you,” Chikara smiled as he nodded. “Thank you for speaking up, Obi.”

Then Obinna leaned back, his features reflecting genuine concern. “I had to do something. I couldn’t just stand by and watch them tear you down.” He waited for a moment before he added, “But at the same time, I have to warn you to be careful over the next few days. You know what Nonso is up to, don’t you?”

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Chikara shook his head. “I don’t.”

“He was one of the people shouting, asking if you really studied abroad. I hear he’s planning with some other guys to come to your house and attack you. My source says he and his buddies want to ‘teach you a lesson.’”

Chikara frowned. “But I didn’t offend him in any way.”

“You know he’s very religious, a regular churchgoer. He’s been fuming since you said we should preserve our trees for vultures.”

Obinna’s tone suddenly shifted as he moved to the more serious topic. “But why did you bring up the issue of vultures?” he asked, his brow furrowing with curiosity. “That single statement made the situation worse. You know our people view those birds as agents of misfortune and death.”

“I see your point,” Chikara replied. “But sometimes, we need to question conventional beliefs and look at things from a different perspective.”

Chikara leaned forward to elaborate. “Consider this, Obi,” he raised his head and looked up into the sky, as if hoping to spot a vulture, “vultures don’t just eat dead animals; they clean up nature’s waste in a way that helps protect human health and wellbeing.”

Chikara gestured with enthusiasm as he sought to paint a picture of the interconnections within ecosystems. “When an

animal dies in the forest, or sometimes, around our villages, its carcass can turn into a breeding ground for disease,” he explained. “Vultures eat dead animals before harmful germs can spread from the carcass. Without them, remains would lie around longer, becoming breeding grounds for diseases such as rabies, which is associated with dogs. And the uncontrolled spread of these infectious microorganisms can threaten us humans living in nearby communities.”

Obinna seemed to be understanding. “So by eating up these dead animals, vultures help to stop the spread of dangerous disease?” he summarized, glowing with this new knowledge.

“That’s it,” Chikara nodded. “But it doesn’t stop there. Vultures have acidic stomachs that can neutralize even the deadliest bacteria. Therefore, the risk of contamination is further reduced.”

Chikara paused to allow his comments to sink in.

Obinna’s eyes widened as he understood the seriousness of it. “So, if vultures disappear, the natural environment suffers,” he said, worried. “And that means public health is at risk?”

“That is the case,” Chikara agreed. “That is why it is important for us to protect these misunderstood birds and

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recognize the valuable role they play in maintaining the delicate balance of nature.”

“Thank you, Chikara.” Obinna’s gratitude radiated as he looked at Chikara. “You have taught me more in this conversation than I ever learned in secondary school.”

Chikara smiled. “It is my pleasure, Obi. I am just sharing what I came to understand through my studies and experiences. I need to remind you that I was as surprised as you were the first time I learned about the importance of vultures.”

Obinna leaned in closer. “But what can I do to help stop the cutting down of the ugba tree?”

Chikara smiled as he weighed the question, but his shoulders slowly sank as the full weight of what lay ahead settled on him. “It won’t be easy, Obi. Our people’s belief in witchcraft is ingrained in every aspect of their lives. However, we can’t afford to give up. We need to educate our fellow youth, empower them with knowledge about the importance of preserving our natural resources such as the ugba tree. They are the future stewards of our planet, and it is very important that they understand the impact of their actions.”

Obinna nodded and declared, “I agree with you and will do whatever it takes to support you in this fight, Chikara. We may face opposition, but it will be good to stand together to protect our community’s future.”

Chikara clenched his fists. “Indeed, Obi. But it is not just about saving the ugba tree. It is about addressing the broader issue of climate change.”

Chikara drew in a long breath and lifted his eyes toward the sky before speaking again. “Our planet is facing a danger greater than anything we have known before,” he said. “The heat keeps rising, seasons no longer behave as they used to, forests disappear, rivers shrink, and the land keeps losing strength beneath our feet.”

Obinna looked at him seriously. “So what can we do?”

Something stirred harder inside Chikara. He leaned forward, his voice gaining force. “We must begin with the things around us,” he said. “The trees, the water, the land our people depend on. If we keep destroying them without care, one day we will realize we have ruined the very things keeping us alive. But if people understand what is at stake, then we still have a chance to change things together.”

Obinna inclined his head for a moment before looking back at him. “You are right, Chikara,” he said. “Sometimes I wonder what kind of world our children will inherit if we continue this way.” He placed his hand on Chikara’s shoulder. “I have faith in what you are doing.”

“I believe in you too, Obi. I need your help. The youth respect you. If you stand beside me, many will listen.”

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Obinna nodded. “I will speak to them before the next village meeting. I will also try to talk to Nonso and calm him down. But you need to be careful. Once Nonso sets his mind on something, he rarely backs away from it.”

Chikara looked at Obinna with gratitude and nodded. “Thank you, Obi. I will watch out.”

Several minutes after Obi left, Chikara remained beneath the mango tree. His elbows rested on his knees. His fingers locked together, then loosened, then locked again. His attention drifted across the ground, catching on nothing, moving from one thought to the next without rest.

A sound slipped into the quiet. At first it broke apart in the air, thin and uncertain. Then it gathered shape. Voices rose and fell together. Beneath them, metal struck metal. The gongs rang out in steady blows, each one sinking into the afternoon like a warning driven into soil.

Chikara lifted his head. His body stilled. He listened.

“Do not touch the tiger by the tail, dead or alive!”

The chant came again, fuller now, carried by many throats joined into one. The sound rolled through the village paths and pressed against the trees. Birds burst from nearby branches and scattered. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked several times and fell silent.

Chikara sprang to his feet.

He hurried toward the entrance of the family compound. Though there was no gate, the old block fence surrounding the compound still stood high enough to shield the inside from the road. Chikara pressed himself against one corner of the wall and leaned carefully around it.

A number of village youths filled the narrow untarred road from one side to the other, moving like a single body toward his house. Some carried sticks and fresh branches torn from trees. Others beat the gongs while they marched. Dust rose beneath their feet. At the front, Nonso led them forward.

Chikara's throat tightened and he pulled back from the wall as if the sight itself could touch him. The chant no longer sounded like a warning. It moved like a judgment already decided, waiting only to fall.

He turned and rushed back into the compound. His eyes swept across the space. The house stood open. The yard lay bare. Every corner felt exposed.

He kicked off his sandals and flung them across the compound. They landed apart from each other in the dust.

The mango tree. He ran to the mango tree and caught the bark with both hands. His body took over.

His fingers dug into the grooves. His toes searched for holds. His chest brushed against the trunk as he pulled himself

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upward. The movement came without thought, shaped by something older than fear.

A memory rose with him. His father stood below this same tree, one hand raised, pointing upward. Young Chikara clung to the trunk, his arms shaking, his feet slipping.

“Climb again.” The voice had carried no laughter. Only insistence.

Back then, Chikara had smiled through the strain, thinking it a game meant to fill empty hours. Yet his father watched with steady eyes, guiding each movement, correcting each mistake. Day after day, he pushed him higher into the branches, until the climb settled into his body.

Now that voice returned with weight. Chikara climbed faster.

Leaves brushed across his face. Bark scraped his skin. His breath grew thick in his chest, yet he did not stop until the ground fell away beneath him. He pressed himself into the cover of the branches, drawing the leaves around him.

Footsteps thundered into the compound. Nonso and the others surged in, voices cutting through the air. They spread out at once, moving around the house, along the walls, across the open ground. Sticks struck against doors. Feet crushed dry twigs underfoot.

“Find him!” Nonso’s voice rang out. The youths scattered further.

“Search everywhere!”

Chikara pressed himself closer to the branch. He drew in a breath and held it.

Then Nonso stopped. His focus dropped to the sandals lying in the dust.

“He has run away.”

Heads turned. Eyes followed. Several of the youths nodded.

“Chikara!” Nonso shouted. “Come out here!”

No answer came.

Nonso stood in the center of the compound. His chest rose and fell. His hands opened and closed at his sides. “You are daring this village, yet you cannot stand before us!” he roared. “Why are you hiding?”

He took a step forward, scanning the compound. “I know you can hear me wherever you are. From today, this battle is between you and me if you refuse to stop this nonsense of testing our elders’ patience!”

Above him, Chikara watched through the leaves.

Even alone, Nonso was not someone he would rush to confront. Years at the local gym he built in his father’s compound had transformed him into something hard and

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intimidating. The singlet clinging to his body revealed thick arms, broad shoulders, and a chest shaped by endless lifting of iron and concrete weights. Because of this, some village youths followed him almost like soldiers.

Chikara remembered secondary school. One fight. One stupid fight.

They had exchanged blows after an argument and Chikara knocked Nonso to the ground twice before teachers separated them. Since then, Nonso had never truly warmed to him again.

Could that single humiliation still burn inside him after all these years?

Sweat crawled down Chikara's neck as he clung to the branch. His shirt stuck to his body. Then his heart slammed against his ribs.

One of Nonso's men had wandered beneath the mango tree.

The young man stopped directly below him.

Chikara froze.

Slowly, he wiped the sweat gathering on his forehead and smeared it against his shirt. If even one drop fell through the leaves onto the man below, everything was finished.

"Everybody!" Nonso called out at last. "Bring the branches here!"

He pointed to one corner of the compound. The youths gathered the branches and sticks there before returning toward the entrance.

Nonso snapped his fingers sharply. "Let's go."

The group began filing out of the compound, their voices fading slowly back toward the road, while Chikara remained hidden above them, barely daring to breathe.

Minutes after Nonso and his men had gone, Chikara saw his mother rush into the compound. From his hiding place, he watched her turn from side to side in panic, her wrapper swinging around her legs as she searched the compound with desperate eyes.

"Chikara!" she shouted. "Chikara, where are you?" Her voice shook with fear.

Chikara tightened his grip on the mango tree branch for a moment before climbing down at once. Bark scraped against his palms and chest as he descended, and the moment his feet touched the ground, Chinwendu spun toward him. For a second, she simply stared at him drenched in sweat and dust covering his bare feet. Then both hands flew to her chest.

"Chikara!" she cried, lifting her face toward the sky.
"Thank God in heaven you are alive."

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She hurried toward him, breathing hard. Someone had informed her at the shop that trouble had erupted in her compound, and she had abandoned everything and run home.

Before Chikara could speak, Chinwendu's eyes shifted past him and landed on the heap of branches lying in the middle of the compound. Her expression hardened at once.

"What is this?" she burst out, pointing toward the heap. "Chikara, what have you brought upon this family?"

The words struck Chikara harder than he expected.

"I don't understand what you mean," he protested. "Nonso brought some people here to attack me. That's all."

"That's all?" Chinwendu repeated, her voice rising as she pointed again at the branches. "You still do not understand what this means? Those branches are a message. A warning. They came here ready for violence."

Chikara looked from her face to the heap of branches, and for the first time since the youths left, the full weight of what had happened settled deeper into his chest.

"Chikara," Chinwendu continued, stepping closer, "you are no longer a child. You must understand what people mean when they carry out acts like this."

Chikara opened his mouth to answer, but no words came out.

“From today,” Chinwendu said, cutting through the silence, “you must stop this fight against the will of the village. End it now.”

Chikara stared at her. “Mama, I cannot do that,” he said at last, his voice firm. “I thought you understood what I am trying to do.”

“I don’t want to understand anything anymore,” Chinwendu fired back. “All I understand right now is that my son is dragging himself toward death because of a tree.”

The words hung heavily between them.

Chikara lowered his eyes as exhaustion swept through him. His arms still trembled from clinging to the tree, and the fear he had held back while hiding now pressed down on him with full force. Without another word, he turned and began walking barefoot toward the house.

“Chikara!” Chinwendu shouted after him, stunned by his silence. “Come back here! I forbid you from continuing this battle over that ugba tree!”

The early morning sun poured its warmth over the village, bringing to life the rural surroundings and enveloping the landscape in a serene and soft morning light. Inside the grand sitting room of Pastor Udochukwu, characterized by its elegant

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furnishings, a mood of tranquil expectation permeated the environment as he looked forward to the arrival of Elder Uruka.

As the elderly man made his way into the room, leaning on his walking stick for support, Pastor Udochukwu greeted him with a warm smile, his demeanor gracious yet calculated. Without wasting a moment, the pastor reached into the pocket of his well-tailored suit and withdrew a bundle of money, the bills neatly stacked.

“Good morning, Elder Uruka,” Pastor Udochukwu said, his voice smooth and persuasive. “I trust you are in good health this fine morning.”

“Good morning, Pastor.” Elder Uruka bowed his head with gratitude, his aged face lined with thankfulness as he accepted the bundle of money from the pastor’s outstretched hand. “I am deeply thankful for your kindness.”

“You know we have always been there for you, Elder Uruka.” The pastor smiled as he reminded the elder of the support he and his family had provided over the years. “In times of need, we have stood by your side, and we will continue to do so.”

Elder Uruka nodded, his face serious and humble. “Yes, Pastor. I remember everything, and I am thankful for your kindness.”

As the pastor and Elder Uruka engaged in small talk, Elder Uruka mentioned his two sons, who left the village with their families long ago, leaving him to manage on his own in his later years.

“It has not been easy, Pastor,” Elder Uruka admitted, sadness on his face. “My sons are distant, and they hardly remember me. I have been on my own ever since my wife passed away fifteen years ago.”

The pastor reached out to console Elder Uruka, in a gesture of compassion. “You are not alone, Elder Uruka,” he assured. “We are here for you, now and as long as life takes us.”

Pastor Udochukwu renewed his commitment to support Elder Uruka in comfort and dignity.

“But now,” he locked eyes with the man, and took a more commanding tone. “Elder Uruka, you must remain strong in your backing for the cutting down of the ugba tree. This is the intention of my wife and me, and it must be carried out.”

The pastor leaned forward to emphasize the importance of their cause. “Chikara knows nothing about the ins and outs of the spiritual realm,” he stressed. “He is too young and too inexperienced to confront us, his wiser elders, on this.”

Elder Uruka smiled at the pastor. He straightened his posture, the weight of his age seeming to ease fueled by the

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pastor's words. "I understand, Pastor Udochukwu," he nodded, as he cleared his throat. "I don't blame the young man. It is obvious that the five years he spent overseas have distanced him from the realities of our culture and traditions."

Elder Uruka pledged his steadfast support to the pastor and his wife. With a strong voice he said, "You can depend on me, Pastor. I will stand by you."

Pastor Udochukwu gave a contented smile, and with a casual wave of his hand, he ushered Elder Uruka to the door and bid him goodbye.

Once the elderly man had departed, the pastor's mood darkened, the disdain evident as he mumbled under his breath, "A common drunk. It's no wonder his sons left." The pastor dismissed the matter with a disdainful shake of his head and turned his attention back to his plans, his resolve strengthened by Elder Uruka's vow of loyalty.

Pondering his next move, Pastor Udochukwu's attention turned to Mazi Okabi, the village chairman. He knew that Mazi Okabi, like Elder Uruka, could be swayed by the promise of financial gain. He would pay the chairman a visit later in the evening with a substantial amount of money to grease his palms.

While Pastor Udochukwu considered his strategy, contentment overcame him at the idea of exerting his influence

over another influential figure in the village. Mazi Okabi, although entrusted with the responsibility of leading the community, had a familiarity with corruption, and the pastor knew he could exploit this weakness to his advantage.

Later in the evening, as the sky painted itself in shades of orange, Pastor Udochukwu made his way to Mazi Okabi's house. The sound of his footsteps reverberated on the dirt path, his thoughts preoccupied with the task at hand. In his hand, he clutched a bulging envelope stuffed with money.

Pastor Udochukwu knocked.

"Come in," Mazi Okabi's voice answered from within.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. The sharp scent of fresh palm wine hung thick in the air. Across the room, the chairman leaned back in his chair, a cup resting loosely in his hand.

"Good evening, Pastor," Mazi Okabi said, studying him. "You look troubled."

Pastor Udochukwu did not sit.

"I did not come to exchange pleasantries, Mazi," he said. "There is something you must hear from me, now."

The chairman's fingers tightened slightly around the cup before he set it down.

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“I am honored to listen to you, Pastor. But before we continue,” he glanced toward the clay jar on the table, “the wine is fresh. Will you take some?”

“No, no,” the pastor returned. “Palm wine is good. But this is not the time for me to take it.”

Mazi Okabi shrugged. “Very well. Sit down, Pastor. Heavy words do not need standing legs.”

After a brief pause, the pastor took the seat opposite him. He did not lean back. His hands rested on his knees, his back straight. “I will speak plainly, Mazi,” he said.

In the course of their polite conversation, Pastor Udochukwu hinted at the reason for his presence, carefully evaluating Mazi Okabi’s reaction. The chairman’s eyes narrowed, curiosity flickering within them. He seemed to be absorbing the pastor’s puzzling statements, hanging onto every word with an intense sense of intrigue.

When he sensed he had the chairman’s full attention, and believed he would cooperate, Pastor Udochukwu introduced the subject under discussion. With careful expertise, he handed the envelope to Mazi Okabi. His attention remained fixed on the man’s face as he awaited a response.

Mazi Okabi felt the weight of the money in his palm and his eyes widened in surprise, his expression a mixture of shock and delight. “Pastor, what is this?” he exclaimed, excited.

With a sly smile, Pastor Udochukwu leaned forward in his seat to draw closer to Mazi Okabi, his tone hushed but confident. “Consider it a token of my appreciation, Mazi. This is a gesture of goodwill from a friend.”

Mazi Okabi stared at the envelope in his hand, then at the pastor. He cradled the gift, a warm smile across his face. “Thank you, Pastor,” he said. “I am determined to stand by you in any way I can.” He examined the envelope again, aware of the responsibility that the pastor’s trust had placed upon him.

Motivated by Mazi Okabi’s zeal, Pastor Udochukwu wasted no time in outlining his expectations. “I want you to mobilize support for our cause,” he urged. “Gather men and women who share our vision, and I will make sure you are always rewarded.”

Mazi Okabi looked the pastor in the eye. “My commitment never wavers as I pledge my full support to your cause. Consider it done, Pastor. I will mobilize the villagers and make sure your goals—our goals—are accomplished.”

While the discussion progressed, Mazi Okabi shared his thoughts. “Chikara has no legitimate argument,” he pointed out. “And he needs to be focusing on securing a good job for himself. Other young people like him are contributing to their families, not engaging in conflicts with their elders.”

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Pastor Udochukwu tilted his head in thoughtful agreement. “You speak nothing but the truth, Mazi. Chikara’s priorities are misplaced, so it’s up to us to guide him back onto the right path.”

Having set their plans into action, Pastor Udochukwu extended a cordial handshake to Mazi Okabi before exiting the warm sitting room. He walked away, a sensation of accomplishment flowing over him, and a slight smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. The pleasant evening air ruffled his clothes as he walked home.

Pastor Udochukwu’s confidence grew with the realization that both Elder Uruka and Mazi Okabi were behind him. He was one step closer to fulfilling his objectives and keeping his hold on power in the community.

The following day broke with a certain level of resolve for the pastor as he strode towards Pa Chinagorom’s home. Clutching another bulging envelope in his hand, he found it difficult to rid himself of the sense of unease within.

When Pastor Udochukwu got close to the dilapidated door of the weather-battered house, he hesitated for a moment. His eyes scanned the faded paint and aged wood. With a resigned sigh, he knocked on the door.

After what seemed like a long moment, the door creaked open. Pa Chinagorom was standing in the dim interior. Despite

the simplicity of his surroundings, an air of quiet dignity about the old man commanded respect.

“Ha!” Pa Chinagorom struggled. “Good morning, Pastor.” His voice revealed a hint of curiosity. “It’s good to see you in my house today.” The elderly man waved his wobbling hands and gestured the pastor to a simple wooden stool. “Take a seat, my son.”

The pastor returned the greeting with a polite nod. “Good morning, Pa Chinagorom. I come with a gesture of gratitude for your invaluable contributions to our community.”

Pastor Udochukwu stepped into the dwelling, his eyes scanning the sparse furnishings with a faint air of distaste. He settled himself upon the seat, closer to Pa Chinagorom’s, his expression carefully neutral.

With a slight bow of his head, Pastor Udochukwu extended the envelope towards Pa Chinagorom. His fingers trembled while he prayed that the old man would accept the goodwill, despite the ulterior motives that lay beneath.

Pa Chinagorom took the envelope with a gracious nod, the lines around his mouth tightening with quiet amusement as he examined its contents. “You are very kind, Pastor,” he said in a low voice. “Your generosity has no limits.”

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The response from the old man filled the pastor with joy. His veins throbbed with a sensation of victory. But his excitement soon vanished.

“Ah, Pastor,” Pa Chinagorom said. “You are aware of the proverb that ‘When a visitor brings a drink, whether there will be agreement or not, the drink must be accepted and not returned to its owner.’”

Pastor Udochukwu’s heart sank as the old man’s statement pierced through the air like a dagger. He realized with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that the elderly man resisted being swayed by gifts.

“I understand, Pa Chinagorom,” the pastor replied. “Your wisdom is unequalled, and I am humbled by your insight.” Pastor Udochukwu meant what he said. He had always admired Pa Chinagorom’s longevity and had wondered what made the old man still live, not just living, but in good health. It did not seem to the pastor or anybody in the village that Pa Chinagorom’s time to leave the earth was drawing closer.

“Can you tell me what you know about the ugba tree?” The old man watched the pastor with attention.

“I don’t know enough about the history of the ugba tree,” the pastor admitted, with uncertainty. Aware of the old man’s inquisitive nature, Pastor Udochukwu further sensed a wave of uneasiness rise within him.

“But I meant only to drop off this gift,” he said, “not to take up your valuable time.” He stood up from the seat, and took a step in preparation to leave the elderly man’s house before the conversation got uncomfortable.

“Please, Pastor, sit down for a few more minutes,” Pa Chinagorom said, gesturing towards the seat again. “Allow me to enlighten you on how important the ugba tree is to our village.”

Pastor Udochukwu obeyed with evident reluctance. His muscles stiffened as he eased himself back onto the plain wooden stool. The hard surface did little to alleviate his unease, and despite his best efforts, he could not dispel the sense of discomfort that lingered at the back of his mind. His fingers drummed nervously on his knee.

Pa Chinagorom cleared his throat, and his voice rang with authority while he spoke. “The ugba tree,” he began in the Igbo language, “holds a special place in the history of our village. Don’t look at it just as a tree, because it serves as a powerful emblem of our ancestral legacy and our relationship with the land.”

Pa Chinagorom’s words carried the weight of centuries of tradition and wisdom. He created a colorful depiction of long-standing ceremonies, important communal meetings that were held, and crucial decisions made beneath the extensive

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branches of the ugba tree, with every story steeped in the rich heritage of their collective experience.

“That ugba tree still standing there now has observed the passing of time,” Pa Chinagorom continued. “It has withstood turbulent weather and has been a witness to both successes and misfortunes, its roots planted deep in the earth.”

Pa Chinagorom’s words permeated the air, each syllable laden with the weight of generations past. He referred to the ugba tree as a lifeline that had sustained their village for centuries.

“That ugba tree that you seek to cut down has been a fundamental source of food for this village throughout many generations,” Pa Chinagorom began again after what Pastor Udochukwu considered a very long pause that enabled the old man to gather some strength. “It has provided sustenance for our families, nourishing us in times of plenty and scarcity alike.”

Pastor Udochukwu became very attentive as Pa Chinagorom spoke further, his initial unease transforming into a deepening sense of humility. It became difficult to deny that the ugba tree was more than just a tree; it served as the foundation of their local economy and offered a livelihood to many families.

“The tree you want removed provided the business of petty trading for my late mother,” Pa Chinagorom said, his voice nostalgic. “It fed my family, and every other family in this village, including your own grandfather’s.”

Pa Chinagorom’s words struck deeper than he expected. He had been thinking only of profit and position. The consequences beyond himself had meant nothing to him.

“I hadn’t realized that,” Pastor Udochukwu said above a whisper. “I hadn’t understood the true value of the ugba tree to our community.”

Pa Chinagorom continued to maintain a steady watch as he observed the pastor. “There is much you have yet to learn, Pastor,” he said gently. “But it is never too late to seek understanding and wisdom. Do you want me to tell you more?” the old man asked.

Pastor Udochukwu nodded silently.

“For over a century, the branches of the ugba tree provided canopy and shade as the village used it as a market square. And yet, from what I can recall, and from what my father and grandfather told me, none of those branches ever caused harm to anyone.”

Pa Chinagorom’s last statement gave Pastor Udochukwu pause, prompting him to consider the implications of the tree’s

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apparent peaceful presence. Could there be a deeper meaning to its branches, a hidden truth waiting to be revealed?

“Do you know why that was, Pastor?” Pa Chinagorom asked.

Pastor Udochukwu furrowed his brow, mind racing as he searched for an answer. “I’m not sure I do,” he admitted, perplexed.

Pa Chinagorom tilted his head in understanding. He explained. “It is because the weaker branches come loose in the depths of night, when the world is at rest. This phenomenon has continued to baffle many of us, but you may agree with me that it reflects the wisdom nature possesses.”

Pastor Udochukwu pondered Pa Chinagorom’s words with some admiration. There was something humbling in the way nature stood — ordered, patient, untouched by human pride. In moments like this, he was certain it could only be the work of God.

“Thank you, Pa Chinagorom,” the pastor said quietly after the old man had finished. “You have given me much to think about.”

For a brief moment, he allowed himself to imagine the tree as the elder described it — rooted, patient, part of a design greater than man. But almost at once, another image rose in his mind: the rusted nails hammered into its trunk, the whispered

stories of rituals performed beneath its shade. He had seen the fear in his congregation's faces. He had prayed against it.

"Will you reconsider your position about the removal of the ugba tree?" Pa Chinagorom asked gently.

The question struck deeper than the pastor expected. Doubt pressed at the edge of his thoughts. Was he mistaking tradition for evil? Was he acting from fear rather than faith?

He straightened.

"No," he said, his voice steadier than he felt. "For religious purposes, the cutting down of the tree must be carried through."

Pa Chinagorom acknowledged the pastor's words with a smile characteristic of his age, his demeanor reflective as he contemplated the message. "I understand," he said, his head turning in the direction of the venerable ugba tree that stood watch in the distance, visible through his window.

The pastor went on, somber as he revealed the true motivation behind his unrelenting desire. "The ugba tree may have been vital in the life of the village in the past, but today witches and wizards have converted it into a death camp," he explained. "They must be destroyed for the safety of our community and our children."

Pa Chinagorom kept his face blank as he listened in silence to what Pastor Udochukwu said.

SPARKLINGS OF CHANGE

What Pastor Udochukwu dared not confess to the village's eldest man stemmed from the fact that he did not call the shots. His wife held the authority, and had been adamant in her insistence that the tree must come down. He could almost hear her saying it again, just as she had the night before. She had spoken with such conviction, such urgency. In their home, her word carried weight he rarely challenged.

Pa Chinagorom's gratitude cut through the tension like a ray of sunlight breaking through storm clouds, bringing warmth to the air. "I thank you for the money you have given me, Pastor," the eldest man said with genuine appreciation. "May it serve its intended purpose well."

The elder's gracious remarks gave Pastor Udochukwu some relief. "Thank you, Pa Chinagorom. I appreciate your understanding."

Pa Chinagorom gestured towards the door. With a firm compassion he said, "Go in peace, my son. And may your day be blessed."

Pastor Udochukwu made his way out of the humble home, feeling some gratitude towards the elderly man. Despite their differences in opinion, Pa Chinagorom had shown him kindness and understanding.

He regretted having to stand against him.

CHRISTOPHER CHIBUEZE ONYEKURU