

Chinedu Ogoke

Under Fire

A Novel

ATHENA

I

Imoni didn't think he had come out here today to watch the man and Aham move from one corner to the other in their discussion. But, that was exactly what he was doing. Worried, he decided to end his exclusion from the discussion, intending to assist his friend. He addressed the man in the most polite manner. If they had up to the money he asked for, they wouldn't hesitate to give it to him. Just simple.

Such a harmless plea, but what was the man's reaction? "Give it to me?" He looked instead straight at Aham. "What's this supposed to mean?" he asked further. "I don't like it at all. Hear me? I don't like it."

"Are you dealing with him or me?" Aham wondered.

"Don't worry, Aham," Imoni said, merely reacting to a demeaning crack. "I can see the hall supervisor myself, since..."

The chief porter's eyes glowed with unbelief at the young man's arrogance and threat which were already affirmed in his unwavering eyes. "So, my friend," every word was worth the emphasis, "you want to walk in there and tell him you know he's receiving money from students?"

"No, not that." Aham looked angrily at Imoni. "I told you to leave the negotiation to me."

"It's alright, boys." The man was leaving. "I don't blame you."

"Listen, please." But Aham couldn't stop him.

Corruption's now vindictive and intimidating posture. It only met Imoni's contempt.

"See what you have caused?" Aham's words filled the emptiness shed by the man's departure.

"That scum-turned-saviour. After all it's all out of self-interest."

"These people are helping us students. You ought to know that."

"It's a lie. They're peeling us." He linked an indifferent index finger with a passer-by, then pointed. "Brand new. Can his annual salary fetch him that? And a 55, and the one he's running errands for."

"You made an allusion to that just now, see the result?"

"Don't mind the man. He'll accept that one-twenty we're offering. If he thinks he can easily post me, he should look elsewhere."

Imoni shook his head. Students' tolerance was nil. The student he had dreamt to be had been demystified. The pampered student had

suddenly been replaced by one operating, in his own constituency, like a beggar and stranger, while every other person conducted himself like a humanitarian or superior. And how these people, emboldened by a disturbing immunity, toasted this power shift. A need had been created by a simple legislation. Now, securing a deal from the man meant crawling on the ground.

It was a sad thing to have to put one's money into those people's pockets. Yet one was compelled to do it. It was a market place out here.

In spite of their differences, he still joined Aham to meet a student who had apparently pulled off a deal. Imoni beckoned to him. He wanted to know how much the young man had to put down for a bed space.

One hundred and eighty naira, the young man unwillingly said, showing the receipt. "One-eighty?" both Imoni and Aham exclaimed, surprised.

"Is it too much?" the young man asked.

"Is it downstairs or upstairs?" Aham knew why he asked. "Downstairs. Maybe that's why it's so much."

"Wait. I hope these people haven't cheated me. How much are they demanding from you guys?"

Aham told him it was one hundred and fifty naira the reason being the room's location. The rooms downstairs were justifiably costlier. It made economic sense, the way Aham worked it out, the difference against the comfort. Those downstairs provided year-round comfort, especially during the hot season. And to secure the enjoyment of good accommodation, he was reminded, one had to pay more. "It's true, anyway," Imoni agreed. "We are simply trying to get each space under one-thirty naira. But the one-eighty, one-fifty are too high. Only the official sum, ninety, appears on the receipt. Funny."

"So, the two of you will be paying three zero zero?"

"Not the two of us," Aham said. "This one is for one of us, Yunusa. He went to the town. We want just the three of us in the room. We can only find such opportunity in a room upstairs."

"The three of you are not part one students."

He was asked how he knew. How he knew? Part one students, obviously, wouldn't have the kind of balls and knowledge of the place they could boast of. He learned they were in level two, and from him, they

were informed he was a direct entry student; a new student. He was Yinka, from the receipt. Aham introduced himself, as well as Imoni.

Imoni's interest was already diverted. Strange, Imoni hadn't seen Gladys since school resumed and there was she coming from a nearby hostel. "Aham, see who's rolling by," he said casually.

"Gladys," Aham acknowledged, looking ahead of him.

Why she preferred that road puzzled him. When a girl stepped out of the normal routes for an isolated one, free from interference or interception, then one would become suspicious. Aham's presence might give him away, so he went behind Yinka to set him against whatever would be revealed to the girl. She had seen him, already, Aham said.

The girl called him from across an interfering wire fence. "Hello, babe," Imoni responded, withdrawing to meet her. "Dear angel, where could you be coming from?" She came up to the fence. She had escorted a friend to her boyfriend's, but had had enough of the friend's time-wasting, so she left. She had to unpack. Or the boy wanted to hold back longer, he thought. "What a cool lie!" he told her.

The girl frowned in bewilderment. She struck back the way he never expected, and charged he must have gone out of his head. He out of his head? he asked.

"Come, come, Imo," Aham intervened. "What's this supposed to mean? Trading abuses or what?"

"Let him," Gladys said. "Let him keep embarrassing himself before all these people."

Imoni adjusted his outburst because of the conventions, and the revered grounds. "And this minute, Aham, we must go to meet the boy and the girl to satisfy every doubt." The girl's eyes almost yielded tears.

"It's just alright, Gladys," Aham shifted. "Please. The mags."

To hell with them, and, didn't she have the freedom to feel around with a friend? she asked. Fool around, Imoni said. What a worthy passion. But he turned his back to her fury. He heard her call him names, 'shameless, small boy. Could never grow up,' as she started walking away.

They reverted to their original objective though discussing the girl and Imoni. Imoni's first round adversary still held sway, meanwhile. Aham went to meet him. Their conference moved them to a corner.

He still considered the collision with the girl as he handled Yinka's questions on school and its ways. They hardly came as questions, for Yinka wasn't your toddler on his first day in school. It was merely up to him, for instance, to explain why Aham had the man's attention in spite of other students. Aham was successful with the people, even beyond here, he told him. But not that they, Aham's friends, derived any favour from such advantage. Yinka considered it rewarding to penetrate such quarters.

Imoni looked up and saw Yunusa coming. "That's the guy whose accommodation we're trying to secure, just surfacing."

"I see."

Yunusa joined them. "Hello." He shook hands.

"You've come in good time," Imoni observed.

"I didn't meet the man, so I left immediately. How goes about the accommodation?"

"A good circumstance. Your receipt's on the way."

Imoni smoothly plucked the receipt from Aham's hand when he came around. "Still that amount?"

Aham ignored him. To Yunusa, he said, "You're back so soon."

"I missed the man."

Later, as they left the hall office, Imoni said, "We planned to go to Bee Hive. Could we now go?"

"What's the time now?" Aham looked at his own wrist watch.

"Three thirty," Yunusa said.

"Why don't we wait till around four-thirty?" Aham advised. "Just walk around and see the school."

"Okay."

They were now walking casually along a main street into the D hall area. Both Aham and Imoni stood shoulder to shoulder at six feet, while Yunusa and Yinka, taking the flanks, shrunk by a few inches.

Imoni never tired of inward criticism of the school's depreciating beauty, was now impressed by the place and its unusual and wonderful elegance occasioned by the revived plants all around. He thought that was how a university environment should be. Some rouges here and there, and the intertwining at the hedges. The return of pleasant horticulture. Some of the plants still had protective gears. That somebody thought about these plants out here. Aham said the unseen hand

responsible for the change was a friend; an Indian or Bangladeshi. He could even be Singaporee. They all looked one-in to him. He gave the man's unseen back a pat.

"Who is that guy?" Yinka suddenly asked.

"Haven't seen him before?" Imoni asked. "Ah, he's all bristled up. That's Silas on the stomp."

"What's he doing? See. He has no audience."

The others laughed. "His audience is visible to him alone," Yunusa told him. "He with his invisible audience is a common spectacle here."

Yinka stared on, perplexed. In earnest, and with strains of his fury standing out on his face, Silas was making a ferocious speech with the professional delivery of a gifted politician at a rally. "They want to kill poor Silas," his hands were moving. "They want to drive me underground because I dare uphold the truth. But their actions will come to naught. Even now, they whimper with their bruised nose. Even the veecee, Mr..."

Yinka was shocked. "He calls the Vice Chancellor? His name, and by Mr.?"

"The guy can tear. One of the warheads we have here. Whom does he spare? Let's go, else you turn spectacle instead of Silas himself." Imoni drew him by the hand.

They amused him with Silas' stories, providing him with a lot to laugh at, especially his softness for women. He would get to know him anyway, they told him, then he would learn to ignore him. The young man had such incredible eloquence, but he appeared underfed and unbalanced. So, why were they ignoring him? he inquired. Why they were ignoring him, no one knew, said Yunusa. His condition was put down to opium. So, they were told. And some said he studied too hard and had brain fag. And others, he took a relation's woman and a curse was following him.

Yinka couldn't hold back on Silas whose voice sound was being reduced by distance. "Such unskillful display of strength can't deter me," Silas was saying. "The university as a fine soil for intellectual activism, not kneading unworthy.... Abilities should be determined by..."

The quartet received and extended pleasantries at the trade fair complex corridors, then crossed into hall B. Through the entire frame of the school, transfer and transport of furniture, gathering of sweep-

ings, interesting circumstances and initial marks of a young semester, enterprised earnestly. Some students with a head start had already taken to entertainment.

“Waltz,” some students practising music with instruments under a tree called.

“Orlando.”

“Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year.”

“Aham.”

Hands were in the air.

A student from the opposing direction hooked fingers with Imoni, and was on his way again.

“You’re karried?” Yinka asked.

“Ah, he’s woked,” Yunusa said, laughing.

“And you?” Imoni asked him.

“Karried.” They both affirmed their fraternity. “This is Illya du?”

“Illya du Sahara,” Imoni told him. “I even want to see the Chief, Bokassa, very soon.”

“We’ll both go together, then. But, what’s the guy’s karability?”

Karability meant the Chief possessed the vision and wisdom of their ancestors. The local Palm Wine Drinkards Club was blessed with a Chief, a fellow empowered by insane gods and surrounded by his own voice. In the club, few were called, but many were chosen. It sought converts, but never begged for them. Imoni and Yinka spent some time discussing the club and affirming their fraternity.

“I guess I have to go back,” Yinka said later.

“Why?” Aham asked. “We’re just taking a stroll around. Aren’t you enjoying it.?”

“I am, but I have to see a friend about the new bed space. I want to swap with a friend of his.”

He would be missed, they regretted. They exchanged addresses with him and begged him not to go watch that poor Silas. But, he had a problem. The place had completely disarranged his geographical balance; what it did to every new comer. “How do I go back now?” he asked. He was told to just turn left, go straight, then, after about five hundred metres, turn right.

“Thank you.”