

## **From Chapter 5**

It was a Tuesday, two weeks into training, when we were officially ordained as child soldiers. Of the only forty two of us who survived those weeks, we all came out injured to various degrees. Medical care was only available on weekends, though only sporadically and almost never for new recruits. The eighteen who perished were all victims of gunshot wounds. This particular day, however, the camp was overtaken with celebration. We had the rare opportunity to bathe ourselves and put on our brand new uniforms in preparation for the party. During the general assembly, an announcement was made that gun shots would be fired later in the day as a welcome for our "father," Commander in Chief Joseph Kony. The man we had been told to revere, trust and fear was to grace us with a personal visit.

Our father arrived around midday with a large convoy of security and other top commanders. My entire body was gripped with fear. I had been told powerful spirits possessed Kony and these spirits could read the minds of others. If those spirits told him a child was thinking of escaping or even thinking a single negative thought about him, it was believed that Kony would simply point at that child and he would be killed instantly. I tried my best to think positive thoughts and to appear happy for his arrival, though my mind constantly threatened to betray me. In my heart, I knew he was an evil man.

I was instructed to help unload the large boxes from Kony's convoy of vehicles. Later that afternoon those boxes were opened, and we were all given candies and cookies. Joseph Kony came to address my camp, his face covered almost completely by his long dreadlocks. He stood before us all and proclaimed:

"I am so happy to have all of you here as my new children and I as your father. Each one of you here is, from now on, a permanent member of this family. Your friends are now your brothers and sisters. We are going to work together as a family to overthrow the government of Uganda. Each one of you is guaranteed employment with a good earning, provided that you follow the rules and regulations here. Let me remind you of the two major rules: no cell phones at all and no listening to radio."

Radios were seen as a threat to the rebel movement because many were used to air information about escaping from the bush and encouraged child soldiers to flee, return home and be granted amnesty.

Kony assured us of our safety throughout any mission we would fight. He shared his belief that the spirits of our ancestors were in him and that they were constantly instructing him to do good. He promised that we would one day return home to our families if we obeyed all of the commands. I had no choice but to believe what he was saying.

During Kony's visit, we were officially commissioned and given brand new guns that he had brought to our camp that day. I was given a brand new G2 that would not leave my side for the remainder of my time in the bush. Before the gun was placed in my hands, I thought about the magnitude of it all and fear gripped my young body and mind. Holding that gun for the first time, I was not even sure which part might easily blow a bullet and end someone's life when accidentally touched. I wanted only to drop the gun and run as fast as I could. Yet, once it was in my grasp it felt like 'this is life for now; I am a man, I am strong, I am prepared to fight.' At this moment, I knew for certain I was no longer myself.

I had to convince myself at ten years old to do as I was told and made up my mind to hold that weapon with confidence. We were given practical training on what it would be like to hold a gun,

dismantle and reassemble it, and use it to kill the enemy. No further instructions were given but we had to join the older kids who were shooting randomly into the air to welcome us officially to the camp in the presence of the overall commander Kony.

As Kony was leaving, I watched him from close proximity as he slowly pulled back his dreads. All at once, I saw the fiery eyes of a man possessed. They were red, smoky and glazed over. Shaken from this trance, I heard loud gunshots blasting from every direction as the camp assembled the official sendoff. We jumped, shouted and tried to chase after him, showing our loyalty and admiration. We were taught to worship and serve Kony as if he were a god among men. With everyone acting in this way, the behavior of holding a gun, firing it and honoring Kony quickly seemed completely ordinary.