

CHAMPION OF THE IROKO

BY ZEE GHARA

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This book is a work of fiction adapted from Igbo folklore tales. Names, characters, places and incidents are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead or events is entirely coincidental.

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CHAMPION
OF THE
IROKO

To my *mum*, Eddy *nwamma* (*aka cinema-umuagbala*)
Thank you so much for the folk songs and stories that
Brightened those nights that NEPA sought to darken

+

For my kids, *the Zees* and anyone out there,
who dream of worlds unfamiliar,
magical plains and yearn to experience
the literary world differently—this is for you!

+

To my *Huggie Bear*, my real life magic
Dalu, *thank you!*

Contents

Acknowledgements	<i>ix</i>
ÁFÓ ÍRÍ NĀ ÁBUÒ—12 Lunar Moons Ago.....	1
1. ÓSÓ—RUN!.....	25
2. ÚJÒ—FEAR.....	41
3. ÒBÌ MMÁPÚ—ANXIETY	51
4. ÌJÉ—THE JOURNEY.....	69
5. ÓGÚ—THE FIGHT.....	91
6. MMÈRÍ—VICTORY.....	103
Glossary.....	115
About the Author.....	119

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Unu e mela! Thank you all!



MADU CLAN

PROLOGUE

ÁFỌ ÍRÍ NĀ ÁBUỌ—
12 Lunar Moons Ago

One starry night, the screams of a great warrior were heard from under the *iroko* tree as the newborn child took its first breath. The thin cries pierced the night air and reached all the people of the clan—those who anticipated the news with an air of celebration, others who thanked the gods, and one whose fate hung perilously in the balance.

The moment that the sign of life made its way to Ika's worried ears, she gasped, halting her restless pacing. Her eyes went wide and she grabbed hold of an axe, driving it madly into a cut of firewood and shattering it to bits. Her chest heaved with anger. Why should she—a mighty warrior princess of the Ama Kingdom, feared by so many—tremble at the

vulnerable cry of an infant? Bile rose in her throat at the thought of that wicked man being blessed with an heir—the man who had destroyed her kingdom, the one who had taken her as a prisoner wife, the one who had enslaved her people. It would be an injustice.

More than anything, it may mean the end of her usefulness to him. After Ika had been defeated in battle by Adol and his men, she was taken captive because of the legend that had reached the fools of the Atu Kingdom at the time—an Ama princess had been rumoured to birth a son as her first child. Since all women of the Ama Kingdom were known for their valour in battle, the prophesied child would be a great warrior and a powerful heir. Ika had been a prize that Adol could not resist, for his first wife had borne him five children but—until tonight perhaps—no son, no heir. If this child were a boy, the son that Adol had sought after for so long, what would become of Ika and her people?

Ika wasted no more time speculating. She moved toward the sound of the child who might mean her end but, on second thought, turned back. The seasoned warrior knew there would be no hiding

in the moonlight in her white, ankle-length wrapper, the attire prescribed to married Atu women. She unwrapped the garment—the symbol that she belonged to Adol—and tossed it aside, immediately feeling more like herself. She swathed herself in a looser, mid-length wrapper that would allow her to move freely and stay hidden in the dark of night; it was black and matched her flawless midnight complexion, perfect for her mission. Finally, Ika grabbed a basket, knowing that she would need an excuse if someone were to catch her sneaking around. Gathering herbs in the darkness might be a poor explanation, but what choice did she have?

Ika made her way toward the centre of the Madu compound, careful not to be seen. This wasn't difficult in the dimness of the night, despite the soft and brilliant moonlight lighting her path toward the Iroko. She moved with the stealth of a trained killer, ensuring that the way was clear at every corner. After a sprint that brought her nearly within sight of the Iroko, Ika stopped to take in the sounds around her. She ignored the high-pitched buzzing of the opportunistic mosquito looking for a place to land near her right shoulder. Beyond that, only silence.

Onward, then. One step forward—then the roar of her husband’s voice stopped her in her tracks.

“More wine, brothers!” he bellowed cheerily from within the *obi*, where the warriors of the Madu clan had gathered to celebrate.

She let go of the breath she was holding and breathed a sigh of relief. As her hammering heart began to slow, she let out a soft and quiet laugh. She narrowed her eyes towards the *obi*, imagining the back of Adol’s powerful hand meeting those of his congratulators in threes, the customary warrior handshake. A familiar bitterness began creeping into her heart. She choked back her hatred at the rising sound of joy and laughter, choosing to concentrate on the task at hand. Ducking back behind a thatched-roof structure meant to serve as a kitchen, Ika scanned the *obi* in the distance. There. Her eyes caught Adol celebrating with his friends. He was far from where she stood, but she recognized his wrap of resplendent scarlet, woven with gold thread. His broad, bare chest grew broader with each laugh, and his strong, white teeth shone in a wide smile. Pride, she thought. Not a good sign.

Ika jumped at the intrusion of a man's voice sounding from much closer. She relaxed when she saw the two men relieving themselves outside the obi. They probably thought they were whispering, but the wine had seen to it that they had forgotten themselves.

"I'm telling you, like the moon. It's a sign."

"What d'you mean, the moon? These are women's whispers, brother. Best not to speak of omens."

"Moon-coloured. The midwife said the newborn's eyes could light up the night! If I were Adol, I would be frightened."

"You're always frightened, *onye ujo!*" his companion said, laughing. "What kind of warrior are you?"

Moon-coloured eyes? What could that mean? She carried on, tiptoeing closer for a view of the iroko tree. No one was there. The woman and her babe must have been moved. On to Mma's hut then.

When she arrived, she couldn't see what was happening behind the mud walls, but the door had been left open. Ika set her basket down and leaned her back against the cool mud walls, compressed as deeply as possible. She kept both palms flattened, maintaining her stealth as she moved. She inched

forward, listening and watching carefully, hoping she might hear or see a sign of whether Mma had given Adol an heir. At first, all she could see was Mma in her raffia-mud bed. She might have even been sleeping. Then, the tall but slightly bent midwife stepped into view with the child in her arms. The old woman was cleaning the babe, and even from here, Ika could tell that the woman's eyes were trained helplessly on those of the child.

"May Ana, the earth goddess, be praised!" the midwife said, leaning forward to place the baby in Mma's waiting arms. "The prophesy is true."

Mma was glowing. Tears ran down her gorgeous face. The woman may have borne six children, but her beauty had not been diminished in the slightest. The corners of her full lips were held in a deep smile; her look was that of pure love. There Mma lay, so full of joy, beloved, completely at peace. And here was Ika, crouching in the darkness like a cast-down thief. She immediately stood up tall, stretching her long, lean body, damning the risk of being seen. She was no lowly slave. She was a princess. A warrior. And she was certainly brave enough to get a closer look.

Ika looked around and inched closer, but it didn't help. Perhaps if she could stand just to the side of the door, she could catch some of the conversation. She picked up her basket, then backtracked to approach the hut from its western wall. When she reached it, she pushed herself flat and listened carefully. She could hear the midwife chatting, but it was too muffled to understand. Just a bit closer. She inched around and, finally, found herself just behind the doorframe. She held her breath, eyes closed, readying herself to peep through the crack between the wall and the frame

“My son, my long-awaited warrior son, welcome!
Your mother greets you!”

The warrior princess felt dizzy.

“*Nwunye anyi, Ika*”

Ika started, her eyes flying open at the sound of her own name. The midwife.

“You’ve come to see the child,” the hag said, a mild look of disapproval on her face. “All is well. Our lord has an heir.”

Ika imagined herself swinging the empty basket in her hand across the face of the miserable old crone. She cleared her throat to speak, setting her strong

shoulders back, her head high. But no words came. Affecting a calmness she did not feel, Ika slowly ran her free hand along the sharp, high edge of hair in the middle of her head, avoiding the woman's imper-
tinent glare. She nodded curtly and stepped into the light of Mma's hut.

As Ika entered, Mma looked up at her with surprising warmth, but it was only a fleeting glance; the mother's full attention was fixed on the face of the child. Ika approached. The boy—yes, it was a boy—opened his eyes as if to greet her. She stepped back slightly with a sharp intake of breath. Two small penetrating orbs, round and magnificent as the moon in the sky, shone up at her. The depth of the light from within those tiny, innocent eyes shook her guard for a moment. But only a moment. Surely the gods had sent this child, and she felt the fear of what it could mean ballooning in the deepest pit of her stomach.

“His name?” Ika asked.

“It will be decided tomorrow when the high priest-
ess of Ana comes to divine his future. This is the way for Atu men, Ika. You know that.”

Ika snorted. “I have always believed Adol to be the sort who does as he pleases.”

Mma winced, but Ika didn’t know if it had been the tone of her voice, the mention of *their* husband, or the implied defiance against the gods that bothered her.

“My lord husband will do as must be done,” Mma said, stroking the infant’s cheek gently. “We will wait to hear what the gods have planned for the child’s future.” She fell into a long silence after that and Ika wondered momentarily if Mma remembered she was there. Her skin was itching to get as far away from mother and child as possible. She needed to think, and she couldn’t do that here—she couldn’t even believe she was there at all!

Suddenly, Mma looked at Ika squarely. “His eyes, what could they possibly mean?”

Ika did not expect that from Mma, although she had been wondering the same question, except with her own fate and that of her people in mind. She was terrified of what the answer might be. And anyway, why would Mma ask her of all people?

“They are just eyes,” she answered flatly.

Mma seemed disappointed at this but nodded wordlessly, returning her loving gaze back to the child.

Ika stood tall to leave. “*Kachifo*, may the daybreak.”
“*Ka o fo*, may it break, Ika.”

That night, Ika could not be sure if she had truly slept at all. Her mind was restless and she was taken in turn by flashes of hatred, burning deep and hot, and then cold waves of desperation that sent her into hopeless, senseless scheming. All these thoughts were coloured by a pale, moonlit glow. What would happen to her now? What could she do? What could a prisoner *ever* do? At the cock’s first crow, Ika gave up on sleep and prepared herself for the child’s divination. The entire clan would be there, and perhaps the priestess would shed light on the mystery of the child’s eyes.

Later, Ika spotted Adol’s tall, sinewy frame emerge from his hut. She absolutely despised the very sight of him. He must have been quite pleased with himself; he finally had his long-awaited heir. Ika didn’t look away when he turned his back to her to

relieve himself. If he weren't such a wicked man, if she weren't his prisoner, perhaps in another life, she could have found him handsome. She noted the bulging muscles beneath the dark skin of his broad back from where she stood. On hot days, that skin glistened radiantly, as did the strong white teeth in his immense smile.

The Atu warriors were loyal to their chief and he was, she was forced to concede, an exceptional warrior—he had, after all, defeated her and her people in battle. But he had imprisoned her and had been cruel to the Ama people, so she could find no forgiveness or love for him in her heart. Now that he needed nothing from her, he might be more dangerous than ever.

As Adol was answering the call of nature, he suddenly stiffened. Ika followed his gaze to the source of his tension. Some creature—perhaps a large dog—sat upright at the door of Mma's hut. Adol eyed the animal passively for a moment, but he must have suspected some sort of danger because he disappeared into his hut and reappeared seconds later, spear in hand. As he ran toward it, Ika, too, ran closer, slightly bemused as she watched the

idiot charge at the mysterious foe who sat impassively, unmoving. What stopped the warrior in his charge also made Ika freeze. The creature, unfazed by the approaching attacker, was a wolf—just a pup, but a wolf nonetheless—white as a peeled yam. Yet it wasn't this nor the curious trinket that dangled around his neck that mystified the onlookers. It was the wolf's eyes. They were grey and as bright as the moon. The second crow hadn't even sounded, and Ika's worries had already doubled.

Eventually, the high priestess arrived at Adol's obi, waking the whole Madu clan with her high-pitched greetings.

“Goddess of the land, I greet you! Goddess of Atu, Madu greets you! Goddess of this great and fertile land, Adol greets you! *Anyi ekele o! Onye ike! We all greet you, great one!*”

The woman was round and plump and had chubby cheeks. Though she had the shortest arms and legs Ika had ever seen, the woman rolled about like the wind. She was a sight to behold, donning a white wrap tied across her heavy chest. Every move

she made was accompanied by the ceaseless clinking of tiny, colourful calabashes, mirrors, pins, and bones which crowded the fabric she wore. Her hair was beautifully arranged with white cowries and black thread, tied up and stacked at the top of her remarkably small head.

The priestess held out her sacred calabash to Adol, who dropped two cowries in as was customary. She nodded in satisfaction, turned her head to the great iroko tree, and raised the calabash to the heavens. Suddenly, she moved toward the wolf pup in a trance-like manner, stumbling from side to side as she wavered in his direction, until she sat face-to-face with the creature, her eyes fixed on his. Torrents of words poured out of her mouth, words foreign to Ika. She looked to Adol, Mma, and the others present, but if they understood, no one gave a hint. The wolf sat as still as it had when Adol first set eyes upon it. Ika studied the object on the creature's neck. It was an *oja*, a flute.

After what seemed like an eternity, the priestess got up slowly, her long wrap and its components clattering. She waited for quiet before her loud, shrill voice filled the air.

“Bring me the boy!”

The baby’s mother looked to her husband, and he nodded his approval. Mma went into her hut and brought out her son. She handed him to her husband, who then gave the child to the high priestess.

The woman lifted the child high toward the heavens. “A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches, Ana be praised!”

“*Ise!*” echoed the clan.

“Ana has decreed that this warrior child shall exist in its spirit animal and human form. The wolf pup is his spirit animal and will grow as the boy grows. He shall not be like those whose palm kernels were cracked by a benevolent god and then forget to be humble.”

“*Ise!*”

“The spirit shall be with him until his last days on earth. Neither can exist without the other, but they can only be one. This child shall bring a decisive end to a war which will occur between our people and a strong enemy! The wolf pup is to be called Ocha and the boy must be named Ojadili. It is well with him, *eeeeee!*”

“*Ise!*”

The high priestess placed the baby gently back into his mother's hands. She took a long, lingering look at the peculiar eyes of the child, then drew Mma close and whispered into her ear. When she was done, she said,

“Do well to keep this secret. You must tell no one.”

The diminutive woman's chubby cheeks suddenly seemed to come alive like *akara* in hot oil, and with a twirl, she was gone.

On *Eke*, the first market day after the birth of Ojadili, Ika set off on a long journey to visit the chief priest of the sea goddess, Mili. Since the divination, she could not stop thinking about the mention of the great enemy in the child's prophecy. Was it the Ama? Was this child to be the end of her people? And what was the great secret that the priestess had whispered to Mma? There was only one way to find out.

Mili had always been the protector of the Ama kingdom. With her blessing, no Ama warrior could be defeated in battle. There was a ritual undertaken by the female warriors before any battle—they drank from the unending bowels of the sea goddess, a rite

forbidden to men. This ensured victory, and the Ama had never been defeated in battle until the surprise attack by the Atu. Ika's present circumstances didn't include a battle in the traditional sense, but she did need protection and guidance now more than ever; it was only Mili that Ika trusted.

When Ika entered the thick wood surrounding the chief priest's home, she took an *omu*, a palm leaf, which would protect her from any poisonous traps. She placed it between her lips before approaching the hut. Ika knew that the chief priest would have placed poison in strategic places to protect himself against enemies. The *omu* would keep her safe.

The chief priest's hut was circular in shape and stood suspended in the middle of a lake. Ika took in the splendour, remembering when her grandmother first brought her here and explained that no one could get to the hut without first knowing the secret words. If one attempted to swim to the hut, he or she would swim endlessly, never arriving at a destination.

Ika straightened, raised her hands and head toward the skies, and softly muttered, "*ka m bata*" three times—asking to be let through. Suddenly, a light wind began to whistle and whoosh around

her. She felt its coolness go around and through her before it whooshed toward the lake. As quickly as it started, the whistling wind dissipated and the lake along with it. In its place, solid ground led to the hut.

“Who goes there?” the priest squawked, in a voice like the cackling of a bird. He appeared in the doorway of the hut, hunched over.

Ika remembered the first time she met the shrivelled old man, and the shiver that travelled down her spine. His skin was as dark as night and though he walked with a long, crooked white stick, his legs wobbled when he moved because of his uncommon height. Over his right eye he wore a black patch—made from the skin of the mamba snake—and a lively darkness danced in his good eye.

“It is I, the daughter of the sea, princess warrior of Ama. I humbly greet you, great and most feared servant of Mili!” She walked on the barren ground toward the hut.

“My daughter, what brings you to these paths? Does the despicable warrior of Atu permit his prisoner to roam freely?” He held out his skinny hands to bring her into the hut and she noticed how long and sharp his fingernails were.

“He does not, great priest. But the frog does not run at noon for nothing; something must be chasing it.” With fingers steepled, Ika continued with imperturbable confidence. “I have come because the lives of our people depend on it.”

“Please, come in, my daughter, come in. Mili’s children are most welcome. Where there is fire, must not water quench its flames? There is always a solution here for every problem. Come, tell me how the Great Mother of the Sea can help. We shall drown it all in torrents of water, my child.”

“Thank you, fierce, wise one, mouthpiece of the goddess.” Ika looked around the dim, large room. The walls and floor looked watery; flashes of large fish and sea creatures glided across the walls and floor like an illusion. Ika took a deep breath and moved toward the centre of the room, where the chief priest stood. He motioned for her to sit and suddenly there was a red stool, in the form of a seashell. Ika sat, then cleared her throat to regain her composure before she spoke.

“As you know, I have been forced into an unwanted union with the chief warrior of Atu Kingdom to bear him a son. I agreed in order to foster peace between

their people and ours, but I have not been able to hold up my end of the bargain. All the able-bodied men and women of the Ama kingdom have been captured and enslaved while our elderly have been left to die without any care. If I fail to provide him with a son, he and his men have vowed to kill all our people!”

“*Tufia*, the goddess forbids!” the priest spat.

“His first wife recently birthed a son, much to everyone’s surprise. The boy is mysterious, great one. He is—”

“Ah, my daughter, worry not about the mysterious child or the animal with him,” he said calmly, his lips turning up wickedly. “You shall have your victory when the time is right. But first you will bear your own child, one who will have the blood of an Ama warrior running in its veins. That child will be our weapon. The little warrior will end the suffering of the Ama at the hands of the Atu. This is what Mili has willed, and so shall it be.”

The priest opened his snakeskin medicine bag and brought out several shark teeth, placed them in a calabash filled with water, and began muttering words of incantation. An explosion of lightning

and thunder erupted from the calabash. The water bubbled violently as the priest's muttering grew louder and Ika jerked abruptly, fidgeting as the muttering grew. She put her arms around herself to calm her anxiousness. Suddenly, he was quiet. He reached into the calabash and, from where there had been water and shark teeth, he produced a starfish. He placed it, along with the calabash, in Ika's hands.

"Take this, warrior princess, and when you get home, place the starfish in your *udummiri*. Drink out of the water pot for seven days. After the seventh day, you shall conceive a child. You must name the child Adi. Fourteen days after the birth, bring the child to me along with the starfish and calabash. Go now, my daughter. You have a long and lonely journey ahead, but the magnificent Goddess of the Sea is with you. The children of Mili have suffered enough torment at the hands of fickle land children. *Tufia!*" he spat.

"I am grateful, great one, but in Atu Kingdom, it is customary that the future of a son be divined the morning after his birth. The high priestess of Ana always divines his future and names the child. What am I to do then? How do I insist on Adi as his name?"

“Does the rain reveal when it will visit land? Or the sun discuss why it allows the moon to replace it at night?” The chief priest raised his face, his venomous good eye slightly eased as they met her perturbed orbs. “All shall be revealed in good time. Do as I have told you.”

Ika took the items and thanked the old priest. Although she was worried, she trusted and believed in his words. When she got home, she did as she was told and conceived.

Exactly one year after the birth of Ojadili, on a cold, dark, wet, and starless night, the screams of Ika birthing a child could almost be heard from under the great Iroko, were it not for a great storm that had suddenly befallen Atu Kingdom in the middle of dry season. The farmers had already harvested their crops and thanked the goddess Ana for a bountiful year during the *Iwa ji*, the new yam festival. The storm that came was unusual, bringing with it a heavy, strong rain and vicious flickers of lighting followed by the fearsome rolls of thunder. Such was the terror of the night that only the old midwife and an assistant attended to Ika as she struggled to birth her child. A small tent woven with palm fronds had

been put up to protect them from getting wet, but the wind that blew was wild and frightening. The old midwife, wishing to hurry the process, loudly ordered Ika to bring forth her child into the world.

Finally, the baby was free and slid into the midwife's waiting arms. The old woman held the child for a while, her face blank.

"I can't hear the baby's cry. Is he alright?" Ika asked weakly.

The old woman wrinkled her brows as if to scold Ika. She tapped the baby's buttocks gently and the child opened its mouth, letting out a fierce cry, but the sound had to compete with the shattering claps of the heavens. At that very moment, the erupting thunder seemed to shake the earth; everything around them rattled. *GbuaGbu! Gbuua! GbuaGbu! GbaGba! GbaGba!* went the petrifying rumble. The baby's first cry was lost to it.

"Here is your daughter," said the old midwife, a malicious smile dancing on her lips as she handed the baby over.

Ika ignored the woman's face and received her daughter. She was the most beautiful child Ika had ever seen. She was spellbound. The child's skin

was like the setting sun, neither fair nor dark, but glowing. She had long, curly hair like none Ika had seen on an infant before. Her full lips were red like palm oil, and her large slanted eyes were as dark as a moonless night. Nothing else mattered in that moment. Ika became oblivious to the strange storm erupting all around her; she was not even troubled by the fact that she had borne a female child. She trusted completely in Mili's will. Then, suddenly, it dawned on her why the child was to be named Adi, as the priest had commanded. The birth of a female in Atu Kingdom wasn't given the significance assigned to that of a male. Women could name their daughters themselves. Ika let her lips form a smile.

“Adi,” she whispered to her precious baby girl, “the Ama shall win.”



CHAPTER 1

ỌSỌ—RUN!

B*eneath the watchful rising moon and the silvery* gaze of the goddess Ana, Ojadili ran, but not fast enough. The warrior boy urged the burning muscles of his long legs to push harder than they ever had in all his twelve lunar moons. Propelling himself through the deepening darkness, he sped away from the Achalla forest's densely packed columns of bamboo, away from the Nwangene stream, toward the village—toward help.

Every stride was matched by the tireless gallop of the loyal wolf at his side, the magnificent creature whose thick fur shone white in the moonlight. Ojadili's feet pounded against the red earth and sweat streamed down his bare scalp. His breath came fast and his heart thumped wildly, but he heard and felt none of it. He could think of only one thing: how