

Chapter Two



A quest for Ada

“**Y**ou’re almost as tall as me, daughter. It’s time to stop growing, or you will make me feel small.”

Ada laughed.

“But Papa, I *am* as tall as you. And you are small!”

Ada was twelve now, and her smile was the brightest thing in Papa Eze’s world. Her long black hair was parted in the middle and neatly arranged into two thick plaits (Mama Ginika had taught her that). She always walked with her head held high.

“Daughter, today I am leaving you in charge of our home. I have an important journey to make.”

Ada’s eyes brightened.

“Is it a secret?”

Papa Eze looked surprised.

“What makes you say that?”

“Because you haven’t told me where you’re going.”

“Well then,” he replied. “Yes. It is a secret.”

“Papa!”

But he refused to tell her anything more as he packed his bag with provisions. Ada stood watching him wrap plump bean cakes in a palm leaf.

“I will follow you.”

“You can’t,” he smiled. “You have a job to do.”

She frowned.

“What job?”

“It’s very hard work. I want you to help Mbe clear away the yam stalks.”

Her shoulders slumped.

“That’s boring Papa, do I have to? And Mbe is so serious and gloomy. He never laughs.”

“Mbe is trying to learn,” said Papa Eze. “And

he's trying to be helpful.”

Mbe was only a year older than Ada but much quieter. His parents had died when he was young, and he had lived with his uncle for a while. But then his uncle's family grew and there was little room for Mbe. Eze had stepped in and offered to take the boy on as an apprentice.

That had been last year. One evening, Eze had looked at Ada as they were eating and told her about his plan.

“His name is Mbe. He needs a new home, and we need some help.”

“We don't need help Papa. I can cook now.”

“But I'm getting old. And you cannot do everything. We have the crops to keep, and plants to gather – and soon our home will need a new roof...”

Ada shrugged.

“OK. But only if he's nice.”

Mbe was nice. He worked hard. Every morning he woke early and went to the enclosed land where Papa Eze kept his remedies – the dried leaves tied in bundles, bark strips laid neatly out to dry and earthenware pots containing seeds and roots. Every day Mbe set out matting beneath a large cotton canopy, ready for Papa Eze to sit and speak with anyone who travelled to see him.

Mbe filled the water jugs and laid out dried wood for the fire. Then he would run back to Papa Eze’s crop rows, and begin work before the day grew hot, raking out weeds and preparing new beds for planting.

“I would help him myself,” continued Papa Eze. “But I have my important journey to make.”

“Your secret journey you mean. That’s the only reason you want me to stay with Mbe. And be bored,” Ada said.

“Correct,” replied the old man. “And Mbe is not boring. He’s just bored of waiting for you. Now hurry up child.”

Papa Eze looped his bag over his shoulder and took up his stick. He embraced his daughter and set off. Ada watched him making his way along the path through the village.

Mbe was already half done with the yam plot. He’d dug up the old stems from last season and was preparing the ground, ready for the new planting.

He looked up and smiled as Ada joined him. She started working at the far end of the row.

As she dug at the earth, she was thinking about finding the golden-leaf with Papa.

And she remembered what he had said – how he had been wanting some of its bark for a while...

She had noticed, recently, that Papa

sometimes walked with a limp. And sometimes, when he thought nobody was looking, he rubbed at his hip.

Maybe he had an illness, and needed the bark to cure himself?

Ada looked at Mbe, gathering up another heap of cut stalks to carry away.

And suddenly she had an idea.

Back at the herb store she checked through Papa's bundles of leaves and plants, some dried and stacked, some growing fresh and neatly tended, marked out with stones.

But no golden-leaf bark. None that she could see anyway...

Papa would be so pleased if she could fetch some for him.

Mbe frowned, uncertain.
“Really. It won't take us long,” Ada continued. “And we can finish this when we get back.”

“But Ada, how far is it?”

“We go straight south. We’ll be back before nightfall.”

Still Mbe didn’t move.

“Papa will be pleased. He’ll see how clever we are.”

Reluctantly, he laid down his hoe.

“You’re sure it’s not far?”

“Not if we walk fast.”

Ada ran into the house to pack food and drink for the journey, just as Papa had done a short while earlier.

When she’d finished, Mbe was already waiting – standing at the end of the garden, leaning on a spear and watching the path out of the village. Seeing the weapon, Ada instinctively checked for her knife.

Mbe was right of course. On such a journey they might need to protect themselves.