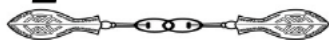


Chapter Three



Divination

Eze had made good speed at first. He had climbed the hill outside the village and crossed the land beyond, where young men were watching the cattle.

Then he passed Mama Ginika's house. The old woman had been pounding yam in the shade beside her door.

Papa Eze had continued on, joining the main track towards the west. It was a clear line stretching away through the grass, trodden for generations by cattle and people.

A long day's journey lay ahead. But today he wanted answers, and there was only one man he could think of to ask.

The sun was past midday and Eze was limping by the time he saw what he was looking for – a great grey rock, some distance from the track.

The ache in his right hip was slowing him down. He rested, leaning on his staff. The old man thought briefly about what plants he might use to help with his ache. But then he shook his head and sighed.

His suffering came from a deeper cause.

It had been growing steadily and each season, as his daughter grew taller, the pain got worse. He had always been careful to hide it from her.

Many of the cures that he used to treat others, he gave to himself.

They helped for a while.

But finally – reluctantly – Papa Eze decided to seek the help of another. The only other man said to have as much skill with healing as himself.

While Eze used his herb lore to treat illness, this man, it was said, understood the spirit world.

Ujo. The diviner.

The great rock loomed up directly ahead and as Eze approached a figure appeared, silhouetted against the sky.

Eze felt a gloom pressing down on him.

The path to the top was narrow and stony. Halfway up, it also became a roadway for termites, and Eze found himself following the same course as countless numbers of tiny creatures, a black river of life flowing out and back again, carrying food to a towering nest somewhere far below.

In happier days he might have followed them, just to see where they went. There were always things to be learned.

But today, he had no time. Their paths separated and Eze struggled on upwards.

“**Y**ou seek answers?”
The man was thin, gaunt almost. Eze studied him and was surprised to see how much he had aged in

the years since they had last met. His hair was sparse and grey, his cheeks sunken.

There was nothing special about him, thought Eze, nothing to mark him out as one who spoke with spirits – except for his eyes perhaps. They were still piercing, set deep under heavy brows. For a moment Eze felt himself unbalanced by their gaze.

But he settled his grip on his walking stick and recovered himself.

“Yes, I have questions,” he replied. “Whether or not you can answer them.”

The man smiled and Eze saw that his teeth were stained dark.

“Of course I can answer them,” he said. “Herb master.”

Then he turned without speaking and crossed the flat top of the great rock.

Eze followed.

The diviner ducked down and pushed aside the ragged cloth that covered the doorway to his small home.

Leaning on his stick, Eze followed.

It took a moment for Eze's eyes to adjust to the gloom. The clay walls were crumbling and not properly repaired – or even patched-up – after previous rains. Opposite the door, a cobweb stirred restlessly in a crack that gaped through to the outside, letting in a muffled light.

The room was plain, with barely space for two to sit comfortably.

Ujo was already sitting, unwrapping a cloth parcel. He spoke softly to himself, as he lifted the diviner's tool within – the four strands, tied with seed pods, that would be cast on the ground in search of meaning.

Eze glanced past him to the twigs and dried leaves stacked against the wall – there was nothing here that he didn't use himself, and he knew that many of these plants had more power when they were fresh cut. There was

little point in storing them like this...

He turned back to the diviner, almost making up his mind to leave. Perhaps this journey had been a mistake.

But he found those eyes fixed on him again. And Ujo began speaking.

“You are in pain,” he said. “Because of the secret you are hiding.”

Chapter Four



Lost

“**N**o – I remember now! It’s this way...”

Ada changed direction again, leading Mbe up a tangled bank beside a river channel. They had been searching all morning, scanning the horizon for any sign of the golden-leaf tree.

The day had grown hot, and Ada had begun to feel tired. And cross with herself. She felt suddenly childish for leading Mbe out here on this wild search, instead of staying at home to do the job she’d been told to do.

Mbe kept following her without complaining – and his patience only made Ada feel more annoyed.

“I know it grows here somewhere...” she said again.

She scrambled to the top of the bank,

grabbing fistfuls of grass to help herself up.

She stood up straight – and the breath caught in her throat.

“Look!”

From up here, they had a clear view over the tops of the reed beds. In front of them was open grassland dotted with trees, the same as it was behind. But not far to the south was the great forest.

It lay ahead of them like a dark wall.

Mbe reached her side.

“We should not be here,” he whispered. “The forest is dangerous.”

But Ada could see the wonder and curiosity in his eyes as he too stared towards the trees.

“I came here once with Papa. It’s not dangerous. Not if you’re careful.”

Mbe glanced behind him.

“I think we should go back.”

But Ada was already scrambling down the bank ahead, splashing through the water.

“Come on!”

Mbe scrambled down too. He paused at the

water's edge to refill his gourd, then he hurried after her.

When he caught up with her again, she was crouching down in the undergrowth signalling for him to keep quiet.

“Look!” she hissed. “Duiker!”

“Is that good?”

“Yes – Papa told me they like to eat golden-leaf leaves. We might be close.”

Mbe glanced around again, then gripped his spear.

“Come on then Ada. Let's look. But then we must get home.”

The duikers scattered as Ada and Mbe approached – and then Ada let out a whoop and started running.

“I was right! This is it.”

Mbe ran up beside her.

“Really?”

“Yes!”

She was already at work with her knife, pulling at a low branch of the tree and stripping bark and leaves from one side.

“Not too much,” she said. “We only take what we need.”

Mbe held the end of the branch for her and watched.

“Will it help Papa Eze a lot?”

“I hope so,” she nodded. “We came for it once when a neighbour was very sick.”

She wrapped some leaves and bark in her bag. Then she looked at him.

“Thank you for coming with me.”

But Mbe wasn't listening. He was staring past her.

“Men!”

Edo. The forest people.
Ada and Mbe stood frozen in fear as three figures emerged from the trees, close enough to call out to. They were tall and strong, with red wrappers. One carried a bow, the other two had curved swords hanging from leopard skin belts.

They stood staring out across the open land

for a moment until one of them pointed. Then they turned to look at the river where it flowed into the trees.

If they had spotted the children, they showed no sign of it.

Now, as Ada and Mbe watched, a boat came into view, gliding towards the armed men. It was a long, low canoe, steered by two men and loaded down with goods.

Voices reached them – words in Edo, hard to understand.

The canoe paddled onwards, beneath the canopy of the trees, and the men followed.

As soon as the forest men were out of sight Ada and Mbe started running, scrambling up the steep bank and sliding down the other side into the long grass.

And as they ran, they were laughing.

It was almost dark when the children got back to the village. Mbe walked with Ada to the edge of the yam plot and watched

as she went to find Papa Eze.

Then he walked across to his own small home.

It had been built for him by all the villagers at the end of the last rainy season.

In just a few weeks they had made it for him, young and old working together – treading the earth with their feet to make good clay for the walls, gathering and bundling the thick ata grass for the thatched roof; and at the end of each day everyone eating together by the fire, with Papa Eze laughing, telling stories and passing around palm wine.

Eventually a neat, circular structure with red clay-earth walls, and a well-knit, conical thatched roof had grown up out of the ground.

Inside, Mbe lay down on his mat to sleep.

He pictured the Edo men they had seen earlier.

Before he'd come to live with Papa Eze he

had dreamed of escaping to a new life. On his loneliest days he had even dreamed of what it might be like in the great Edo city in the forest.

Everyone had heard stories about the Edo sky-king – the great Ogiso! The ironsmiths and other tradespeople brought tales of the fabulous kingdom whenever they came to into the village.

Mbe had listened, entranced.

There would be good work, clearing space in the forest, digging ditches, building walls, farming new land. For a while Mbe had dreamed of such a life, imagining how it would feel to be a part of a great kingdom.

Mbe used to think about that all the time.

But that dream seemed less important now.

He liked helping Papa Eze and knowing that he really belonged somewhere. He liked growing things and learning about the secrets of all the plants. And he liked Ada.