


Chapter Five



Treasure in the earth

Ada unwrapped the precious bundle of golden-leaf and went to tell Papa what she had found.

But there was no sign of him.

She checked the store room. Everything was in its proper place. Then she went to the household shrine where she knelt down in front of the carved wooden figures of Papa Eze's ancestors; all the past generations who watched over them. For as long as Ada could remember, these figures had been a part of her life.

“Protect Papa Eze tonight. Guide him safely home... and don't let him be cross with Mbe for leaving the crops for one day.”

Ada remembered to leave a gift at the shrine

– a small handful of palm kernels – then went to look outside.

She followed the path through the village, past the evening chatter of neighbours, and a sudden thought came to her. She changed course and hurried across to the hidden grove that Papa Eze had once shown her.

Perhaps seeing the stone would help her feel less worried – the amber coloured stone given by her own ancestors.

Ada stood quietly at the edge of the grove, dusk behind her, total blackness ahead.

Were her ancestors watching her here? She felt her heart racing.

She knelt, and reached forward.

The stone must have been lighter than it looked – or maybe Ada was pulling it harder than she realised – because suddenly it shifted.

She gasped.

Even in the gloom she could see what had happened. The stone had moved forward and tipped up.

She stared, suddenly appalled at what she'd done. She was not even supposed to be here...

Ada pulled desperately at the stone, trying to set it straight again. But her hand brushed into the space beneath it – and she felt something.

Something hidden under the stone.

Unable to stop herself, Ada reached further in – and her fingers wrapped around something hard and curved. She drew the object out to hold it up in the moonlight.

And stared.

Even in this darkness, glinting in the moonlight, she could tell that it was the most strange and beautiful thing she had ever seen.

What was it? It had hard, fine edges, like the bark of a young iroko tree. How was it even possible to create something so fine?

She turned it over in her hands, marvelling at

it.

Where had it come from?

And then a shadowy figure, its head hooded beneath a large cloth, stepped out from the bushes behind her.

Ada froze, too startled even to move, as the figure reached out to her: an open hand, gesturing for the treasure.

And again she could not stop herself. She gave the thing up.

And in a moment it was gone. The hooded figure wrapped it in folds of cloth.

“This should not be seen...”

The voice was a whisper, a sound like a night breath in the leaves.

The figure knelt beside her and bowed towards the stone.

“What does this mean, beloved ancestors? Why did you bring this child here like a thief in the night? Why did you tempt her to lift the stone?”

Suddenly Ada heard her own voice, small in the darkness.

“I... I should not have done it...”

There was silence for a moment, before the figure spoke again.

“Perhaps. But I do not think that is true.”

The head turned, the cloth covering fell away and Ada found herself looking into her Papa’s eyes.

“My daughter, I think you have found this thing for a reason.”

He reached out and pushed the stone back into place.

Then he drew her to her feet, and led her out of the grove.

“The time has come.”

Chapter Six



A truth by the flame

“**M**y daughter, I have been keeping a secret for many years. I did it to keep you safe. I hope you will forgive me.”

The flame of the oil lamp flickered on Papa Eze’s face. He looked unfamiliar and worn, like one of the carvings in his ancestor’s shrine.

“Papa! There is nothing to forgive!”

Ada’s heart was racing. She had never seen her father like this. It felt as if the world she knew was shifting around her and she was fearful of what would come next.

“I already know the truth...” she protested. “I know that you found me in the forest. Our ancestors differ – but I am still your

daughter...”

He laughed.

“Of course you are. You will always be – and I will be your Papa, for as long as you want me to be.”

Then he looked at her, and his kind eyes were touched with a deeper sadness.

“The time has come for you to know the full story. I did not tell you when you were younger because I thought it was the best way to protect you. But that has changed...”

He pulled his shawl around his shoulders.

“Today I went to see a man that I do not like. He is a diviner Ada. One who finds answers to our most difficult problems. But he is one that I do not trust.”

“Why... so why did you go?”

Papa Eze shrugged.

“Sometimes we must seek for answers beyond ourselves. People think I am wise and it is true I am skilled in plant lore. They come to me for healing, and I help them if I can.”

“Yes Papa.”

“But recently... I have found that I could not help myself, so I sought the advice of this man.

“He told me that he knows the cause of my pain. He said that I am being punished for keeping the truth from you...”

Eze laughed and shook his head. “Ujo is used to working out people’s secrets I think. He is a cunning man, very crafty. And he seemed to guess a lot. But still...”

“He gave me his advice. I was not convinced, but when I saw that you had found it, this thing, I made up my mind.”

He unwrapped it again – the object from beneath the stone – and Ada gazed at it, now shining brightly in the light of the flame.

It was intricate and beautiful, a brass armlet decorated with carvings of warriors and leopards. Up close, each leopard’s spot was shown as a delicately made hole.

“Daughter, there is a reason you found this treasure tonight – ” he lifted her wrist, and he slid the armlet onto it “ – it belongs to you.

And now I must tell you why.”

“ **T**he night you were born, your mother had to run for her life. She was wearing this very armlet. She left her home in the Edo city and fled into the rainforest.”

“My mother lived in the forest?”

“Yes, because she was Edo,” replied Papa Eze.

“But why... why did she leave?”

“Where many people live, there can also be danger,” sighed Papa Eze. “Your mother was no ordinary woman. She was from a powerful family – the most powerful family. Ada, your mother was a wife to the Ogiso himself. You are the sky-king’s daughter.”

His eyes watched her intently in the flame light, and she stared back at him.

“The sky-king?”

“Yes my child. You are a princess of the royal house, as your mother was a queen.”

Ada gasped.

“Her name was Akele,” continued Papa Eze. “She was young and perhaps naïve. One night, word reached her that a powerful warrior – one trusted by the king – had accused her of bringing bad luck to the land. This chief said Akele was an evil omen. And he convinced your father, the Ogiso.”

“Evil? But why would he say that?”

Papa Eze sighed and shook his head.

“A man may tell lies for many reasons. Sometimes it is jealousy. Sometimes spite. In this case, I believe the warrior chief had failed in battle and wanted to make an excuse – he needed to give the Ogiso a reason as to why he had failed. So, he blamed Akele.

“Luckily, your mother learned of his lie just in time. And she fled into the night, dashing out through the city gates. She was fearful of the dark and the wild trees beyond the city – but it was still safer than the certain death she had left behind. It was the rainy season, the ground was muddy and slippery. Poor Akele,

I have often thought how she must have struggled.”

“Were you there? How did you know her?” asked Ada.

“I wasn’t there, child. I found Akele the next morning while I was looking for plants in the forest. I heard somebody breathing heavily among the bushes, and when I looked I found her – covered in mud. And groaning.”

Papa Eze turned away and sighed.

“When I knelt and touched her hand, her eyes opened. I told her to lie still. She was tearful and begged me to help.

“And I did. You were born, my child – you came crying into the world.”

Papa Eze’s eyes were full of joy, glistening with tears.

“Your mother’s breathing was shallow, so I cradled you for her. She asked me to care for you and she pressed this precious armlet into my hands. ‘When she grows, give her this.’ ‘Yes, yes,’ I replied, all the time thinking that she would give it to you herself.”

“What happened to her?” whispered Ada – although she dreaded the answer that she knew would come.

“Your mother died my child. I am sorry – ” he stared into the flame for a moment before continuing.

“But this is not the end of the story. She cried out before she died – and it was then that I saw she had given birth to a second child. You had a brother. A twin.”

He leaned forward to comfort Ada. Her eyes were running with tears now.

Papa continued:

“I tore a piece of cloth from your mother’s wrapper – I hated to do it but I had to, to wrap you in. I sat with her for a long time, and I would have stayed longer, but then I heard voices approaching. Two men, carrying swords.

“Just in time, I hid. Your mother escaped her enemies, but only through death. Then I escaped too, with you.”

He paused for a moment, adjusting the

lamp.

“Each day it makes me sad that I could not also keep your brother safe,” he said, holding her face in his hands. “But I have done my best. And I have never revealed the truth – for words travel child. Stranger talks to stranger. And I did not want news of your survival to reach the Edo kingdom. We could not be found to be sheltering you – it would have brought trouble to our village and death for you.”

Ada looked at the bronze armlet on her wrist. She had never seen anything so beautiful but it was too big for her.

She pictured how her mother must have looked wearing it.

But then she slipped it off and passed it back to Papa Eze.

“We can put it back,” she whispered. “You’ve told me the secret now Papa, so your pain will go.”

Papa Eze took the armlet but said nothing.

The next day the sun rose in the east and climbed above the village as it always did, and life went on as normal. Families went to work on their land, some of the men set out to hunt, women sat at their looms weaving, children ran between homes, playing, or on errands and young Chika, in her home nearby, comforted her new baby.

Ada knotted her wrapper neatly about her body and tucked the end in tightly, the way Mama Ginika had taught her. She was thinking how the sun must also be shining on the great Edo city, deep in the forest. It was no longer only a far off place from a fireside story. Suddenly it had become real to her.

She thought about her mother. And the twin brother she had lost.

And in the city – although Ada could not know it – at that moment, a man was thinking about her.

The man was kneeling.

He was in one of the maze of rooms, deep in the royal palace. Two mighty elephant tusks stood at either side of the doorway and a display of spears, knives and swords hung along the walls.

The man bowed again before the figure seated in front of him.

“Humble greetings, Chief Obiro.”

“Who are you? Why do you disturb me? Speak.”

“My name is Ujo, my chief. I am a diviner from the lands across the great river. I have come with news that may be of interest to you.”

Ujo risked glancing up, meeting the war chief’s eyes – and he flinched at the hardness of the gaze looking back at him.

Chief Obiro was lean, his face scarred from battle. Ujo saw that he was wearing a necklace of leopard’s teeth and his knotted arms spoke of hidden strength.

He was a famed leader of Edo armies,

trusted by the Ogiso himself.

“Well?”

“I have travelled for days my lord. I am a humble man, a poor man...”

Chief Obiro smiled coldly.

“And you think that I will pay you?”

Ujo lowered his eyes again.

“My chief...”

For a moment, there was no sound except footsteps and the hushed conversation of two slaves passing outside the door.

Chief Obiro was turning a knife over in his hands, studying the blade.

“And how much do you think your information is worth?”

“Very much, my chief, I truly believe it. But...” Ujo glanced up again, risking everything now “...I would settle for three bags of cowrie shells.”

Chief Obiro looked at him with contempt.

Beyond his shoulder, a window opened onto an enclosed courtyard garden, where a parrot paced along a branch, rubbing its beak.

And then Chief Obiro laughed.

“Three bags. Very well, they will be yours, if your information pleases me. If not you will leave here without one of your ears.”

“My chief?”

“That is my bargain. Take it or not.”

Ujo bowed – “I humbly thank you chief” – and the words spilled out of him. Words that told of the herbalist Eze, and the long hidden secret of the dead queen’s child, Ada and her twin brother.

Chief Obiro listened. And learned.

And though his gaze remained fixed and unflinching, behind his eyes his thoughts were racing.

A short while later Ujo took his blood money, and left as quickly as he dared. The ruthless Obiro would now send hunters to find the herbalist and his daughter, Ujo was sure of it – Obiro would want none of Queen Akele’s children to

survive. But that was no concern of his.

He slipped through the palace gates, bowing to the guards, and quickly lost himself in the crowded lanes.

He hurried along the street of iron-workers, past the workshops where weapon makers' fires burned bright, and where newly made tools were stacked against walls, ready for digging and clearing land.

He slipped past the quarter where the potters did their trade, and where – today – a skilled artist from the famous city of Ite was teaching her apprentices how to create portrait heads that captured not just the likeness of a person, but something of their spirit too; past the weaving sheds, the timber stores, the ancient musical instrument maker's shop and the hushed studio where ivory was being shaped and carved into delicate ornaments.

And he paid attention to none of it.

He had his cowries.

He just wanted out.