


Chapter Nine



Heading north

The sun was just below the horizon when Ada woke again.

Beside her Mbe was stirring too. The fire had died to ashes.

And Papa was gone.

“Are you OK?” whispered Mbe.

She nodded, sitting up.

“Yes. You?”

“Yes.”

Ada stood and turned her back to the spreading dawn.

And when, a moment later, the sun rose directly behind her, a new shadow sprang out from her feet and tumbled away across the grass.

“That way,” she pointed, and her shadow pointed too.

Mbe gathered the bags.

“Let’s race the sun to the river.”

They set off. And, whether it was the drink Papa had given them or the clear words he had spoken, at that moment neither was afraid.

They avoided the herdsmen’s trails. And they steered away from villages, whenever they caught glimpse of a thatched roof or a plume of smoke in the distance.

As the sun rose, the country opened before them, grassland dotted with trees and shrubs.

They passed a watering hole where a herd of thick-horned buffalo grazed, ears flicking against the irritation of flies.

“Be watchful,” warned Ada. “Predators are drawn to such places.”

“And the buffalo are not friendly!” replied Mbe.

Ada glanced at Mbe, and noticed how he walked tall and showed no fear.

He found her a long stick, almost as good as his spear. When they stopped to eat, he borrowed Ada’s knife and sharpened the stick

to a point for her.

They shared some fruit and after a short rest, they went on.

Every so often Ada looked behind, to check that no-one was following.

Back at the village, Mama Ginika was sitting by her door weaving.

She had a good view down the hill.

She could see the young men, driving their cattle slowly across the valley.

Later, she saw a group of children and women sauntering towards the lake with bundles of cloth.

And around mid morning she spotted three tall figures passing along the crest of the hill.

Her eyes narrowed and she stood up for a better view.

The three men had fine curved swords slung at their sides and Mama Ginika recognised the shape of them at once: umozo swords, used by the Edo.

The men were moving very quickly, and soon they vanished from sight – out towards the ancient baobabs.

Mama Ginika forgot her loom, letting it tumble to the floor. Inside her house, she knelt at her ancestor's shrine.

“Watch over those dear children. Keep them from harm!”

The children kept walking through the heat of the day.

At last, by the time the sun was setting, they reached the top of a bank and saw it – the curving line of the river, shimmering orange and gold in the setting sun.

They felt the light of it on their faces.

“Just like Papa said,” grinned Mbe. “Now we turn and follow it.”

“To the place where the reeds grow tall,” smiled Ada – but an instant later the words froze on her lips.

From somewhere behind echoed a long, high note – a whistle. It was followed by three quick shrills in reply.

“What was that?” frowned Ada, turning.

“Down!” cried Mbe suddenly.

He dragged her away from the top of the bank and they scrambled together down the slope towards the river.

The vegetation grew denser, closing in behind them.

“It’s the Edo!” exclaimed Mbe. “Come on!”

The ground began to feel soft and damp under foot, and a forest of tall reeds was growing up. They stumbled onto a narrow path, bending and curving through the vegetation.

“Don’t stop...” urged Mbe from behind.

A moment later Ada saw, just visible above the rushes, the top of a thatched roof.

She ran towards it wildly, not caring where she trod. But Mbe turned aside

“Over here!” he hissed, ducking off the path.


They crouched down together in the reeds

– only just in time. Moments later heavy footsteps pounded by, an arms-length away.

Then, before the children could move again, someone shouted. It was in a language they could not understand, but its meaning was clear.

The hunters had found them.

Chapter Ten



The great river

The thicket in front of Ada suddenly thrust open – she shrank back and Mbe scrambled to lift his spear – a man was facing them, knife in hand. He glared, gesturing for them to be silent – *don't make a sound!*

Then he spoke, his voice a low, urgent whisper.

“I’ve been watching you. Tell me why those men are following you.”

“Sir, please help us,” hissed Mbe.

“What do they want? What have you done?”

“They’re going to hurt my sister!”

The man’s eyes narrowed.

He looked at Ada, then back to Mbe.

“My name is Kene,” he said, finally. “Wait here.”

He slipped away into the long rushes,

instantly vanishing.

The children waited. Ada grabbed Mbe's hand and he held hers tightly.

Then they heard sounds again from the direction of the path.

Kene reappeared.

“Quickly. This way.”

They were at the riverside now. And Kene was dragging something, scraping through the rushes – a long canoe – sliding it down into the dark water.

“Get in.”

The thin boat rocked as the children climbed in, Ada first then Mbe. Kene stood knee-deep holding it steady. Then, with one easy movement, he climbed in too and sent the canoe gliding away from the bank.

“Lie down low and cover yourselves,” he said, sweeping his paddle into the water.

And then they were moving fast, out into the wide river, the reeded banks on each

side rushed past while the children lay with their faces pressed low, both praying for the evening shadows to hide them.

“What have you done? Why are those men hunting you?”

Kene had guided his canoe across the water and slipped beneath the overhanging trees there.

Through the branches, Ada could see the distant bank.

In the last of the light, she had the impression of figures moving about among the reeds.

“They came to our village. They’re warriors from the Edo city,” said Mbe.

“Our father said we must flee,” added Ada.

“Why did the Edo come to your village? Who is your father?”

“He’s herbalist, a good man,” said Ada, ignoring the first question – and before Kene could ask again, she went on: “We are looking for the village where Chief Iwe lives. It is in the south, close to the rainforest. Papa said we

will be safe there, and he will meet us.”

“Chief Iwe...” Kene repeated.

After a pause, he nodded towards the high bank above them, where the trees were leaning out.

“Sleep up there tonight. Keep quiet and you should be safe. I will return in the morning.”

The children scrambled up. In the tree top they stayed quiet, too frightened to make any noise.

Ada reached into her bag, feeling for the armband again. But this time she heard no warning voice.

Then despite their fears, exhaustion took over and they fell asleep in the dense branches.

At first light Kene returned.

“I will take you to the place you are seeking,” he said. “Or at least most of the way. It is a full morning down the river but I need to go that way anyway.”

Mbe bowed his head.

“Thank you sir.”

Ada bowed her head too. “Do you know Chief Iwe?”

“I know a man of that name. Climb in quick and keep hidden,” he replied. “Your hunters won’t be far away and if they are true Edo warriors you will be lucky to escape. Lie very still.”

They saw that he had put a bundle of matting in his boat and they used it to cover themselves.

Kene laughed.

“Now you will both just vanish! Your enemies will believe you’ve been swallowed by the water...”

And twisting against the paddle, he thrust them forwards.

Ada lay looking up at the morning sky – clear and blue – and watched the riverside branches flitting above her. Then the branches were gone as the boat eased out into the river’s deep currents, and there was

only the sky and the birds.

Beside her Mbe breathed deeply and easily.
The sound made Ada feel glad.

As the water carried them south, mile by mile, Kene told them stories about the lives of the fisher folk whose villages they passed, and whose men were out on the river too. And he pointed out two bigger boats – longer and wider than his own. These were traders from the north, guiding their boats down as far as the great forest.

“Many cowries change hands – the forest kingdom is rich in its craftworks but hungry for supplies. The Ogiso’s men venture out far and wide along the great rivers and across the land, to meet with the traders and find cloth, metals, ivory and many other things.

“The place you are going to is a trading village, close to the forest. The man you seek – Chief Iwe – is the head man. He has grown

rich on trade.”

But now Kene was looking at something else on the riverbank.

“Be watchful. Treat them with respect,” he said.

The children turned and followed his gaze. On a muddy shore not far off, three huge crocodiles basked, totally still, their mouths gaping.

“Are they dangerous?” asked Mbe.

“Of course. When their spirits are hungry. But do not fear the crocodile you see in front of you – fear the one who lies hidden. Yesterday you were foolish rushing blindly to the river. You met me, but you could have met him.

“You have nothing to fear, if you are respectful,” he said. “And remember – in the forest kingdom, the Ogiso himself is said by some to be like a crocodile.”

The children stared at each other, but Kene laughed.

“No, he does not have clawed feet! Even

though he is descended from a god, he looks just like a man. But I hear that he can be unforgiving. And he has the power of life and death.”

Finally, their journey ended.

Before Kene left them they sat for a while with the canoe drawn up on the bank, sharing their food.

“Children. I hope your Papa comes soon,” he said. Then he added: “Chief Iwe is a great man but he is ruthless... be careful when you meet him.”

“We will,” nodded Mbe, respectfully.

Kene pointed towards the track that led up from the shore.

“You see this path? It has been trodden by many traders. You will not get lost.”

They left then. As they climbed away from the river, he called out to them.

“In a few days I will pass this way again. You can return with me if you need to.”