

Part Two



Chapter Eleven



Chief Iwe

Yesterday they had been desperate to reach the river. Now they had crossed it.

The path trailed over open grasslands dotted with trees, not so different from home. But still, both children felt as if they had strayed out of their own world and into a strange country.

Mbe glanced at Ada.

“Kene was a nice man. He reminded me of Papa Eze.”

“Yes,” answered Ada. “He was very kind. If he hadn’t helped us those warriors would have caught us for sure.”

Mbe shuddered and glanced back.

“They got too close.”

“Do you think we are safe now?”

“We have come a long way,” he replied. “And

thanks to Kene we left no trail to follow...”

Mbe pointed towards a thin plume of smoke rising in the distance. He frowned.

“We must remember what Kene said about Chief Iwe.”

“Don’t worry,” said Ada. “If we need to, we can come back to the river.”

She put her hand on his arm.

“Thank you Mbe.”

“For what?”

“For putting your life in danger because of me.”

He laughed, and shrugged.

“Oh no problem. I promised Papa.”

But inside, he felt a glow of happiness.

The path grew wider, where it had been trampled by many feet and hooves. The smoke plume was rising directly ahead, and they could see buildings beyond a line of trees.

Mbe gestured to Ada.

“Quick, over here.”

Beside the path an ancient, twisted tree was growing hard up against a massive rock, almost as if it had emerged from beneath it.

Mbe knelt down.

“Let’s hide our things here.”

Ada nodded.

They emptied what was left of their food into one bag, and put everything else – including the precious ornament – into the other. This, they pressed against the base of the stone, and covered with rocks and earth. Mbe scattered grass across the top.

Then Ada had an idea of her own.

She grabbed up more of the earth in her hands and began rubbing it into the palms of her hands, and onto her knees.

“What are you doing?”

“Chief Iwe is not to be trusted. So let’s disguise who we really are – let’s just seem like poor children looking for food and rest.”

They shuffled on, carrying one bag between them, now looking ragged and tired.

When they reached the line of trees, a man sauntered out and leaned on his spear.

He said nothing, but stood blocking their way.

The children stopped and Mbe bowed respectfully.

“Please sir, we are looking for Chief Iwe.”

“What business do you have with him?”

“Our father sent us. He told us to ask Chief Iwe for help. We need food. We can work. I am a strong worker. So is my sister here.”

The man shrugged.

“So you say. Chief Iwe will decide.”

He gestured, with a flick of his eyes: *follow the path.*

They continued on, feeling themselves watched from behind – and also from the land beside the track, where people now stopped in their work to look at them.

The path led straight onto an impressive

compound – and to the entrance in its red earth walls.

A woman stood there, with her hands on her hips, and it seemed to Ada almost as if she were waiting for them. She had similar look to the man they had just spoken too – a strong, proud face, but with eyes showing little kindness.

“You’ve come looking for food I suppose?”

“Yes, Ma. Thank you Ma – ” Mbe gestured back towards the trees “ – the man said we should speak to Chief Iwe.”

“The man said that, eh? Well then, I suppose you’d best go in.”

She pointed into the compound.

Within, Ada saw a wide, open space with groups of buildings of different sizes, mostly well kept, with new thatched roofs. The largest of these, with the highest roof, stood facing the gate.

“Over there,” said the woman. “Wait until you are called.”

They went where they were told, into one of the simpler houses a little way from the main building. Inside was a plain earth floor and no windows.

Two men sat on the floor in gloomy silence and hardly seemed to notice when Ada and Mbe ducked in through the door. In the far corner was a young boy, knees drawn up to his chin. His eyes flashed suspiciously at Mbe, then looked away.

Ada sat on the floor too, leaning against the earth wall. Mbe sat beside her.

The morning passed. Through the doorway Ada caught glimpses of people at work around the compound, men carrying firewood, children running past on errands – the sounds of chatter, someone giving instructions, laughter and a shout – then, around noon, a large man looked in on them. He pointed at the men.

“You two.”

They glanced sourly at each other – there was no love between them, Ada thought – then they followed the man out, one after the other.

“Do you think they going to see Chief Iwe?” whispered Ada.

Mbe nodded.

“I think so. Maybe there is an argument between them...”

The silence settled for a moment, then suddenly the boy in the corner spoke.

“Those two men hate each other,” he said. “They are fighting over money.”

Mbe nodded.

“And they have come to ask Chief Iwe for his judgement?”

The boy shrugged.

“Yes. But Chief Iwe will have them both punished for arguing.”

Ada looked at him – he was scrawny, with dark, serious eyes. He seemed half her age, but it was hard to tell – he might just be small.

“What about you? Why are you here?”

The boy looked down.

“Last night while I was serving Chief Iwe and the elders I broke a bowl.”

“Will you be punished too?”

The boy nodded.

“They will beat me.”

Ada looked at Mbe.

Then she reached into her bag. She pulled out a bundle of roasted palm nuts that Papa Eze had given her.

“Are you hungry? Quickly,” she whispered, “eat these before anyone comes.”

The boy looked at her amazed – then he took the nuts and ate hungrily.

“Thank you!”

“My name is Ada,” she smiled.

The boy whispered back, “I’m Madu.”

Ada watched him as he ate.

“Madu,” she whispered. “Do you know all the boys here? We are looking for someone, a boy the same age as me – and he looks like me too...”

But before she could say any more, the

large man returned and beckoned for Madu to follow.

It was late in the afternoon before Ada and Mbe were finally led into Chief Iwe's obi.

In the few moments she was outside, Ada looked around the compound again for any sign of someone who might be her brother. But apart from a few men, she could only see women and younger children.

Chief Iwe's home was finely decorated, unlike any room that Ada had seen before – the walls were painted with patterns in white, yellow, red and black.

Chief Iwe himself sat sprawled on a wide stool. He was a man in his middle years, his hair showing signs of grey, his shoulders still strong but his stomach no longer lean – its wide spread a sure sign of his wealth.

Mbe knelt and bowed his head.

Ada did the same.

“Respectful greetings Chief Iwe,” said Mbe.

“My sister and I are hungry. We’re looking for somewhere to rest and somewhere to work...”

He glanced at Ada as he said it.

Chief Iwe raised his hand, and the woman at his shoulder, who had been cooling him with a fan of bird feathers, became still.

Chief Iwe leaned forward.

“You and your sister, eh? You want to work?”

“Yes Chief Iwe. I am young and strong. I can do any job.”

“I am sure. So why are you so poor then? Where is your family? Why do you beg for my help?”

Mbe hesitated.

“Our village was attacked by raiders from the south. A war. We fled into the forest...”

“Hmmm...” Chief Iwe nodded. “I have heard such stories before.”

He looked at Ada

“You. What work do you offer me?”

Ada looked back at him, holding her gaze steady.

“I can cook, Chief Iwe. My father was a skilled herbalist – ” (she remembered Mbe’s lie just in time) “...and my brother here learnt everything from our father. He knows almost as much of herb lore as an elder.”

“Does he indeed!” Chief Iwe snorted.

His voice had lost none of its sneer – but all the same, something about Ada’s coolness seemed to make him pause.

“Well we will see,” he said.

He beckoned to one of the younger men, one of his sons.

“This girl and her brother will stay tonight. They may be useful.”

Chief Iwe’s son led Ada and Mbe out of the compound and along the valley. As he walked, he swung a heavy stick in his hand, flicking the tops of the grass stalks.

Soon they came to a huddle of smaller dwellings, where people were gathered

around a fire. The chatter grew quieter as they passed.

He led them on, always flicking with his stick. They came to a house that was half collapsed against a tree.

“In there,” the young man nodded. “You’ll find food and water. Don’t leave until we call for you.”

Mbe bowed.

“Thank you, sir. We will wait.”

The man pointed his stick at Mbe for a moment, then turned and headed back along the hillside. Mbe squeezed Ada’s hand.

“We did it!” he whispered. “We’re in!”

Ada leaned into the room, checking that it really was empty.

“Yes,” she replied. “But I hope we don’t have to stay long. This place feels dangerous.”

As they settled down to sleep, Ada was thinking about Papa Eze. And wondering when she would see him again.

Chapter Twelve



A meeting in the dark

Ada woke in the deep night. Mbe was asleep.

But something had disturbed her – some sound or movement outside.

Her hand reached for the stick, the one that Mbe had found beneath the tree and placed between them before they slept.

Then she saw – or imagined – a dark shape crossing the bamboo screen at the entrance.

She leaned forward – not breathing – and nudged the screen just a crack, wide enough to peep out.

And a voice hissed.

“Ada. Is that you?”

A small figure was crouching in the moonlight.

“Madu?”

“Yes, it’s me, Madu! They wouldn’t let me talk to you before.”

He shot a nervous look over his shoulder.

“I shouldn’t be here.”

“Are you OK? Did they hurt you?”

But he ignored the question.

“You asked about a boy...”

Ada’s heart skipped.

“Yes Madu! You mustn’t tell anyone, but I think he is my brother...”

Madu nodded.

“There is a boy. He looks like you Ada. His name is Nosa. I can take you to him.”

Madu ran sure-footed, leading her past the nearest dwellings and the last smouldering embers of a fire, then downhill into the darkness beside the river.

They followed the path as it twisted downwards and at each turn Madu looked

back to make sure she was still following.

Once, Madu stopped dead, listening, and gestured for her to keep still. Then he ran on again until they reached the shelter of a great tree.

“Nosa is in there Ada,” he said, pointing. “Many workers sleep there – but Chief Iwe always leaves two of his sons to guard it.”

Just ahead Ada could see the black outline of a ditch and bank, and the conical shapes of more thatched-roofs.

“Wait here,” whispered Madu, and before Ada could reply he had gone.

Ada waited. The leaves stirred in the night air, and she was glad that she’d kept the stick in her hand.

It was not much of a weapon, but it was better than nothing.

She heard a hog grunting somewhere across the river. A splash of water. A snapping twig.

Then suddenly a face appeared out of the

darkness.

A boy was standing right in front of her. The same height. The same face. The same eyes looking back.

“Nosa?”

“Yes. I am Nosa,” he replied confidently. “Madu said you are asking for me. Why? Who are you?”

Ada stepped forward and held out her hand.

“Do you not know?”

The boy gave no answer for a moment. He looked at her, staring at her face.

“No.”

But still, he kept staring at her as if a thought – a strange thought – was forming in his mind.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“My name is Ada. I am your sister.”

Nosa stepped back.

“That’s not true! My mother died when I was born.”

“And mine did too.”

She reached out.

“Show me your hand. Look – ” she lifted her

own hand, pressing it palm to palm with his.

“Our fingers are the same...”

“But where did you come from? How are you here?”

“I will tell you.”

She pulled his hand gently, drawing him to sit down with her beneath the tree.

“You do not belong in this place Nosa, you should not be here. Do you want me to tell you who you really are?”

He was still staring.

“Yes...” he replied at last, his voice almost a whisper. “Tell me then...”

They spoke together for a long while.

Ada told Nosa about herself, about her journey with Mbe, about Papa Eze, and the truth she had learnt since the night she had found the precious armlet.

He listened quietly, only occasionally nodding his head very slightly.

Ada asked him about his life.

“There’s not much to tell... I work for Chief Iwe. I have always worked for Chief Iwe, for as long as I can remember.” Nosa shrugged. “Chief Iwe is a harsh master. And his sons are worse.”

“Brother, we will find a way out.”

There was a stirring in the bushes behind them suddenly and Ada’s hand tightened.

But it was Madu.

“It will be light soon,” the young boy warned.

Not long after, when Ada got back, she found Mbe still sleeping soundly. She settled down beside him and waited. It would soon be dawn, and she couldn’t wait to tell him her news.

And at that moment far away, at the edge of the rainforest, Papa Eze sat huddled under a shawl. A tangled path lay ahead of him. It was too dangerous to tread at night but as soon as it was light he would have to follow it.