

Chapter Thirteen



The guests

Ada started awake with the sunlight streaming onto her face – and Amaka, Chief Iwe’s first wife, leaning over her.

“Hurry up. You are not allowed to sleep so late.”

Ada sat up.

“I... I’m sorry... where is Mbe?”

“The boy is working. The crops need tending. And you should be working now.”

“Sorry, I did not sleep well...”

Ada took a gulp from the water jar.

“Follow me. There’s no time to eat now. There’s much to do.”

Amaka started off up the hill and Ada hurried after her with fist clenched tight – and as soon as the woman was looking the other way, she sneaked a handful of bambara beans into her

mouth.

Tomorrow would be a feast day.

Amaka pointed to the shade beside the compound wall, now crowded with people, all busy cooking, cleaning, cutting ingredients, and talking in low voices.

“Many guests will be arriving today. Important men. There will be no time for rest.”

Ada was shown to a pile of yams and given a knife.

There was no room in the shade, so she knelt with her back to the sun and began peeling.

But as she worked, she kept glancing around for any sign of Mbe – she was desperate to tell him about Nosa.

Finally she saw him. The morning had become hot, making the trees across the valley shimmer. Ada had finally found a place in the shade, squeezing in beside a group of women, who now sat talking with their backs to her.

At that moment two figures came into the compound. First came an old man, thin-legged with a stick in his hand – and following him was Mbe. He was struggling with a large bundle of reeds on his shoulder.

The thin man disappeared into a doorway on the far side of Chief Iwe's obi.

Behind him, Mbe let his burden drop to the ground.

He stood there for a moment rubbing his hands. Then he followed the man inside, dragging the bundle into the opening.

Later, Ada was sent with a group to wash clothes at the river's edge. The cool water felt good as she bent over the flat stone, kneading the cloth with her fists. But her back and her arms were soon aching.

Around mid-afternoon there was a buzz of excitement as a procession appeared on the path above them. They sat back and watched

as a line of travellers passed – guests arriving for tomorrow’s feast. In front sauntered a group of finely dressed men followed by a line of warriors – straight-backed, with swords and spears.

Ada had never seen such impressive people. Others came behind, with bundles on their shoulders or slung between them on poles.

At the back, some way behind, came a strange figure in a flowing, brightly coloured gown. His hand tapped lightly on a drum tucked under his arm. When he saw the women watching he pointed at them – then his skirts suddenly swirled as he spun on his heel, kicking up dust, beating a sudden rhythm on the drum.

A moment later he was gone, leaving the women chatting excitedly about the coming feast.

The sun was low by the time the washing was done. Ada followed the others back up the hillside.

At a turn in the path, a sudden impulse took

hold of her. She sat down in the long grass. Then she lay. None of the others seemed to notice, and the sound of their chatter grew more distant.

Ada kept still, feeling her heart beat. She thought about her home and about Papa Eze and, as she stared up to the sky, the dusk slowly deepened.

Hunger gnawed at her stomach and she felt weak from lack of sleep. She wanted to eat – surely they would be eating soon? – but really, more than anything, she just wanted to be gone from this place.

And then, for some reason, a picture of Mama Ginika came to her mind. She saw the old woman standing over her, fists on her hips and shaking her head – ‘Dear me! Why are you lying there, young lady? Don’t you have important things to do?’

The sudden thought made Ada smile.

“Sorry Mama...” she whispered.

“Good girl. Get along then.”

And Ada lifted herself and checked that

nobody was watching.

She picked her way through the shadows, back towards the dwelling beneath the tree.

She ducked inside and pulled the screen closed. Then she waited, hoping that Mbe would soon come.

“ **A** da! I’ve brought you some food.”
A hand was shaking her awake. In the half darkness she felt a bowl being pressed into her hands.

“I can’t stay long,” Mbe whispered. “I shouldn’t be here. I’m supposed to sleep in the compound now. And I don’t know when we’ll be able to talk again.”

Ada sat, hungrily scooping the food into her mouth.

“I have news,” she said. “I’ve found Nosa.”

And she told him everything that had happened – about how Madu had come the previous night and taken her to her brother.

“It *is* him, Mbe, I know it. And he wants to

leave with us.”

“Thank the gods!” said Mbe. “I do not like this place Ada. The sooner we can leave, the better.”

“Yes. So let’s go back to the river – Kene will find us there. Then maybe we can stay with him until it’s safe to go home to Papa.”

Mbe glanced over his shoulder to the doorway.

“OK, but listen – I went out gathering wood today. We walked a long way and Chief Iwe’s people are everywhere, even outside the valley.”

Ada frowned.

“Do you think they’d try to stop us leaving?”

“Yes. We offered ourselves to Chief Iwe – now they’ll say we belong to him.”

They sat in silence for a moment, listening to the night sounds outside.

“We’ll be careful then,” Ada whispered. “Tomorrow night Mbe, everyone will be at the feast – we’ll escape then.”

He still looked anxious, and Ada squeezed

his hand.

“Don’t worry, we’re a team. We just have to get through one more day.”

“Yes,” he said. “One more day.”

Chapter Fourteen



The feast

The next morning Ada got to Chief Iwe's compound while it was still dark and sat under a tree, ready to work.

Dawn brightened the eastern horizon. Two women swept the compound with brushes, but neither seemed to notice her.

Then more people began to gather. Amaka arrived with the sun, speaking sharply, giving out instructions – and Ada pressed herself to the back of the group. Today, all she wanted was to find Madu, get the message to Nosa and not be noticed.

“You. Where did you go last night?”

Amaka was in front of her, pointing.

“Nowhere,” said Ada, keeping her eyes to the ground. “I went back to my dwelling. Where you told me.”

“That is not *your* dwelling. And today, you do

not leave until I tell you.”

Amaka squeezed her shoulder roughly.

“Do not think I am stupid.”

Ada stared at the ground.

Her heart was beating fast as she joined the others, sweeping their brooms around the compound. The fire had been lit and the morning meal was being prepared for Chief Iwe and his guests.

Around midday Chief Iwe’s seat was carried out and set up in front of his obi, opposite the compound entrance, with an awning of bright cloth stretched over it to give shade.

Then the chief himself appeared, richly dressed in blue and red, followed by his elder sons and wives. He sat stern-faced to watch over the preparations, cooled by the fan of feathers.

Through the long afternoon more guests arrived and Chief Iwe waited to greet them.

For some, he stood, laughing and embracing them with his strong arms. For others, the poorer farmers from neighbouring lands, he stayed seated and waited for gifts to be laid at his feet before nodding and bidding them to come forward.

The warriors that Ada had seen the previous day were warmly and respectfully welcomed. They politely presented Chief Iwe with a bowl of kola nuts, but it was Chief Iwe who was keen to impress. He sprang to his feet and smiled as they approached.

“Welcome to my home – please, come and feast with us.”

Ada was relieved to be sent out of the compound again. Lodgings were being prepared for guests.

“The feast will go on late,” said Itohan, a thin woman who was showing her how to arrange the bedding. “Tomorrow Amaka will have us working again early.”

Ada nodded. But she was thinking, tomorrow I will be gone.

As the others chatted she kept looking out for Madu.

Her chance came as she was following Itohan and the others back to the compound. A huddle of workers were coming towards them, carrying food for the guests.

Ada caught sight of Madu among them.

This might be her only chance.

As the two groups passed, Ada let the cloth that she was carrying fall to the ground. She walked on, pretending not to realise.

“Pay attention!” snapped the man leading Madu’s group, pointing.

Ada turned, looking confused, and dropped another bundle of cloth.

Madu, whether he somehow understood or was just being kind, sprinted out before anyone could stop him to pick it up.

“Here,” he said, handing it back to Ada.

“Thank you,” – then under her breath –

“tonight – can you bring Nosa again – ?”

Madu was already turning to go, and he said nothing.

But his eyes replied: *I will try.*

The drummer with the bright gown began a low beat late in the afternoon. Sitting in front of Chief Iwe’s chair his fingers tapped out a steady rhythm that merged at first with the sounds of the day. But almost unnoticed the beat grew stronger and people stopped what they were doing to watch and listen and sway with the drum.

At that moment, as the sun began its final descent across the far side of the valley, it seemed to Ada that even here – even in this village, ruled over by Chief Iwe – there was a magic and a wonder in the world.

The faces of the people around her were bright and beautiful in the evening light, and with the smell of the cooking meat and wood

smoke promising the feast to come; whatever worries and troubles they felt during the day, for tonight at least did not matter.

Ada felt a hand on her shoulder
Amaka.

“There is someone who wants to speak to you.”

She was nodding towards the edge of the crowd.

There, she now noticed a group of tall figures, standing apart from the feast – three warriors, and an older man.

The older man carried no weapon, but he stood proudly and he had the strong arms of someone used to work. He had greying hair and keen, watchful eyes.

“Come,” Amaka ordered. “And mind your tongue. These are important guests from the forest kingdom.”

Ada’s mouth was suddenly dry. As she followed Amaka her heart was pounding.

These were the same warriors she had seen arriving yesterday, but only now did it occur

to her that they might serve Chief Obiro – the very men sent to hunt her and Papa down.

How could she have been so careless?

One of the warriors had stepped forward and was smiling down at her.

He was tall, with a strong face. His hand was resting on the curve-bladed sword at his belt, his fingers lightly gripping the handle. The finely worked ornaments on his arms reminded Ada of her own precious armlet, now hidden under the rock beside the road.

“Where are you from?” asked the warrior, smiling. His voice was soft, heavily accented.

Ada bowed her head respectfully, but her mind went blank.

“My parents died,” she stammered.

“Died? In the Edo city?”

“No, not there – we are farmers – from the north...”

The warrior nodded.

He looked intently at her face.

And then he spoke in Edo – a language that was strange to Ada – strange, and yet

somehow she could tell the meaning.

He was saying that she looked very much like someone he had once known... an Edo woman...

Ada looked down, shaking her head.

“No, I am from the north,” she repeated.

The warrior turned to his companions. They all looked to the older man. He said something – more words that Ada did not recognise – then shrugged.

“You may go,” said the tall warrior, stepping back.

As soon as she was sure that Amaka was busy, Ada got out.

She walked through the compound gate, then ran for her life.