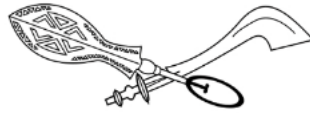


Part Three



Chapter Fifteen



Escape!

The moon was a thin smile, low in the sky. Only a faint grey showed the line of the river. Ada ran straight towards it.

She had agreed to meet Mbe by the big rock. Maybe he was there already?

As she ran, the beat of the drum grew louder, seeming to chase at her heels.

Then she came to the curve in the track, and the twisted tree beside the rock loomed out of the darkness ahead.

And at that moment she heard a stir in the grass behind her, footsteps approaching fast.

“Mbe is that you?”

“Yes!”

“Thank goodness!”

They ducked down into the long grass.

Mbe sounded frightened.

“Did anyone see you leave?” he whispered.

“I don’t think so... And I spoke to Madu. We couldn’t talk much but I asked him to bring my brother. I think he understood.”

“Let’s be quick and find our things then.”

He was searching around in the darkness at the base of the rock.

“Here Ada – ”

She felt him press a bundle of cloth into her hands: the bag, with her mother’s armlet still wrapped inside.

“Thank you.”

The feel of the metal made her glad, and she slipped it over her wrist.

There was no point in hiding now. She would wear this precious thing tonight, just as her mother had done. She would make her ancestors proud.

Mbe was standing again, looking out across the hillside.

“Come,” whispered Ada, standing beside him.

And she led the way through the darkness

– towards the place where she hoped Madu would meet them.

“**A** da!”

Madu was waiting beside the great tree. The instant he saw Ada, he ran to hug her.

“Well done Madu! And where is Nosa? Did you tell him?”

But the boy was staring up at her, eyes wide.

“Your brother has been tied up! They’re going to punish him!”

“What? How do you mean?” Mbe crouched, his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Tell us! What’s happened?”

“Chief Iwe’s son – Uche he’s called – started beating Nosa. He’s always doing it! And for no reason. This time Nosa fought back! But then more came – and they tied Nosa up – and...” Madu stared at them. “ – tomorrow they will take him in front of Chief Iwe...”

Ada pictured her brother held prisoner. And

she was suddenly aware of the distant drums – a more urgent rhythm was rising up.

Voices were singing with the beat, wave after wave. It was the sound of the storm in the tree tops, the wind through the grass, the roar of the leopard, the thunder of hoofs, the fight for life.

Somewhere close by she knew Nosa was hearing the same sound. And his own heart must be full of dread.

“Ada – ”

Mbe was talking to her again.

“ – we can’t wait any longer – ”

She turned to Madu.

“Where is Nosa now? Can you take us to him?”

Madu darted along the path, ducking low past the small crowded homes where the farm workers slept – and they came to a place further on, where the ground had been cleared.

“There!” hissed Madu.

Ada could see a cage made with heavy wooden posts set close together – too close for even a child to squeeze through – and inside it, a crumpled shape, curled up on the ground.

“Keep down,” hissed Mbe.

And at that moment a figure stepped out from bushes and stood looking up at the sky – a boy not much older than Mbe, but old enough to be taller and stronger. He was standing guard, spear in hand.

“Uche,” whispered Madu.

“The one who beat Nosa?”

“Yes.”

Mbe reached for something at his belt. And a blade flashed in his hand.

“I kept this from my work today...”

For a moment they all looked at each other – and the knife.

None of them spoke.

Mbe turned the knife over in his hand.

“We’ve got to get Nosa out – ” he whispered

– at which Uche turned in their direction, seeming suddenly to hear.

In that instant Ada made up her mind.

“Stay here.”

And she stepped out into the open ground – and headed straight towards the cage, her brother, and his captor.

The lie came easily to her. Fear made it seem real.

She held her hand against her side, imagining a pain, almost feeling it.

“Help us...” she gasped. She stumbled, reaching out for the young man, falling down in front of him.

Uche stepped back, raising his spear.

“There is fighting... ” Ada panted. “...Chief Iwe was attacked... needs your help... ”

Uche gasped – but his eyes were searching past her, looking for signs of a trick.

In desperation Ada raised her arm, showing her brass armlet.

“Chief Iwe gave me this – he was giving us all gifts and then the men attacked – please... ” she broke off, sobbing.

And whether it was her tears, or the sight of the rich ornament, suddenly Uche was convinced.

“Keep watch here,” he ordered – and sprinted into the darkness.

How long would they have? If enough time, only just.

Iwe’s son would soon realise his mistake – maybe before he even reached the feast.

Then fear of his father would drive him back here. And his fear would be surely be matched by anger.

“Hurry!”

Mbe’s stolen knife made quick work of the ropes and he dragged open the cage door.

Nosa scrambled to his knees, holding out his bound wrists.

“Sister?” he asked.

“Yes brother – we are here for you.”

His face was bruised, his eye looked swollen and painful even in this darkness.

Mbe’s knife cut through the bindings – hands first, then feet – and he leaned down to help Nosa stand.

“Hurry!” urged Madu again, so tense that he was almost hopping from foot to foot.

“Let’s go,” said Ada.

They left the cage hanging open and followed Madu into the night.

Chapter Sixteen



The hunted and the hunters

The hunt began while it was still dark. By the time dawn was brightening the eastern sky, the children had run and stumbled a long way. In the distance, the calls and shouts of Chief Iwe's men had faded.

So at first it seemed they would escape.

They passed beyond the edge of the valley and followed the stars eastward, trying to find their way back to the river.

Time and again they stumbled in the darkness. Mbe went in front, beating and testing the way with his stick. As it grew light, the borders of the rainforest appeared ahead like a soft green line.

"Come on," urged Mbe.

If they could only reach it – at least they might find a place to hide.

But they were all tired, especially Madu, and Nosa's limp was getting worse.

“It's not much further,” called Mbe, leading the way again.

But suddenly Madu cried out – “Uche!” – and looking behind Ada saw, sure enough, there was Iwe's son, close behind them. Eyes blazing, he was leading others with him, along the trail straight towards them. They were all carrying spears and knives.

Not far ahead, the bushes grew taller, and closer together, as if the rainforest were now reaching out with protective arms.

There was just a final, short run of open grass to cross.

“Nearly there! Come *on!*”

Mbe began to run, setting the pace, and Madu followed. Somehow even Nosa found

some hidden reserve of endurance and forced himself to keep up. Ada had her arm around him, pulling him on.

They crashed together into the foliage – and into Mbe and Madu, who were standing dead still.

Facing him were the four Edo men from the feast.

In a moment the Edo warriors had surrounded them, swords held to their faces.

The stick was pulled from Mbe's hand and dropped at his feet.

"You have put us to much trouble," one of them smiled. "Much trouble..."

His thickly accented words were spoken carefully. Ada recognised him as the tall man who had questioned her at the feast.

"Leave us alone!" cried Madu – but the warrior flashed a warning with his eyes – *be silent!*

“So, where do you young ones go in such hurry?” he continued, still smiling. “Not into Edo lands?”

“We just want to get away from Chief Iwe,” pleaded Mbe.

“Ah yes, Chief Iwe,” the warrior replied. “He is not so happy today. I have never seen a man so vexed...”

He glanced back at his companions and they laughed.

Madu protested again – but this time Ada couldn’t understand him. Whatever the boy was saying, it must be in the Edo tongue because the warrior grew serious and looked at him.

The older man, who had been watching, stepped forwards now. And to Ada’s horror she saw that his dark eyes were staring at her armllet.

He said something – his voice quiet and commanding – and then the tall warrior was staring at her too.

“Where did you steal this thing from?”

He pointed to her wrist.

But before she could answer, Uche and his followers burst into the clearing.

The older man gave an instruction and the tall warrior raised his arm.

“Stop!”

Uche stopped, his spear half raised.

“Before you take these runaways, my companion wishes to speak with them.”

Uche hesitated, teeth bared, fist tensed on the handle of his weapon.

But then he shrugged.

“Very well. As our guests. But be quick...”

At his back, a murmur rose from his followers.

The tall Edo warrior nodded to his men and then the children were pushed at sword point further into the clearing. Now Ada watched as the older man leaned over Madu. He stared intently at the boy with his dark eyes, speaking words too softly to be heard.

When Madu turned towards her again, his eyes were wide.

“Ada,” he said. “This man wants to know the name of your father.”