

Chapter Seventeen



The hidden paths

Ada felt her blood run cold and her voice die in her throat. “Ada! He says you must answer quickly,” hissed Madu.

But the man pushed the boy aside and spoke for himself.

“You are the herbalist’s child. Do not lie.”

Before Ada could find any words, her face had given her away.

The man nodded.

“And this –” he gestured towards Nosa. “He is your brother?”

“Please, he has done nothing wrong – ” she heard herself saying.

But the Edo man raised his hand.

“Quiet, child.”

He turned and spoke to the tall warrior – who crossed the clearing to stand in front of Uche.

“Tell Chief Iwe that we will take these children to Edo city.”

Ada felt her arm being pulled – she was being led away, into the forest.

“No!” Uche said. “They are ours. They belong to my family!”

Around them, as if in protest, the forest birds shrilled back.

The warrior raised his sword in front of him. Uche’s gang crowded forward.

The last thing Ada saw, before the leaves swallowed the view, was the tall warrior blocking the way, his arms raised.

“These are the Ogiso’s children. And this is his land. Leave now! Or feel his anger.”

“**Q**uickly now,” said the older man. “Follow my men. Do not be frightened, we will not harm you.”

Confused, Ada stumbled along the path after the warriors. The forest grew dense around

them. And above them the sky was blocked out by layer upon layer of green, rising to a barely visible canopy. Sometimes, she caught sight of the briefest flash of blue sky, but it was impossibly high above them and immediately blocked out again.

And everywhere she looked was teeming with life. The forest air pressed around her, warm and damp – and alive with the buzz and flutter of darting wings.

Nosa stumbled in front of Ada, the tall warrior now followed at her back.

The sandy path forked. They took the smaller way, scrambling down into a gully. The trail was lost for a while as they ran through water, ankle deep, and the vegetation rose thick around them.

Finally, they were allowed to rest. The children collapsed together beside the path. The tangle of undergrowth had been cut back, and the

ground carefully trodden to make a small, open space.

But there was barely a glimpse of sky through the branches above, and Ada noticed that the vines and creepers were already pressing in on every side. Whoever had cleared this space would need to do it again very soon.

The old man and the tall warrior had disappeared, and the other warriors sat apart, seeming to pay them no attention.

“Nosa – are you OK?” Ada whispered.

He looked up and nodded. His bruised eye was swollen shut.

“I am tired, sister. But this is the best day of my life – wherever we are going, nothing can be worse than Chief Iwe’s place.”

Madu sat beside Nosa, his thin arms wrapped protectively around the older boy – but his head had already nodded and he was fast asleep.

Nosa turned to Mbe.

“Thank you for helping us brother. I can

never repay you.”

“Brother, you will never have to.”

How long they rested there, Ada had no way of knowing. In this dim light there were no shadows to reveal the time of day.

She fell asleep and when she woke she saw that the older man had returned with the tall warrior. They were sitting with the other two men, eating.

The tall warrior noticed Ada.

“Chief Iwe’s people have not crossed our borders,” he said, between mouthfuls. “They are afraid. But even so, they might follow us yet – they claimed that Chief Iwe himself would be coming, with lots of men.”

“So we must go deeper in,” said the older man. “But first – come. Come eat.”

Mbe, Madu and Nosa were sitting up.

“Here,” said the man, beckoning them forwards. “Do not be afraid.”

But Ada did not move – instead, she heard herself speak.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Are you Chief Obiro?”

And above them a parrot shrieked in protest as the man suddenly threw back his head and laughed.

Chapter Eighteen



The shrine of Ogun

His name was Amenze.

The tall warrior was smiling too.

“Amenze is one of our great craftsman, famous in the Edo city,” he said. “Chief Obiro is another great man in our city, but he is not our friend.”

Then he looked at the children.

“We must be careful. Eat quickly, then we will go on and I will explain.”

The two other warriors hung back – hiding among the trees with their bows and arrows, to make sure that no one was following – while everyone else set off again with Amenze along the path, this time walking not running.

Amenze spoke to them, haltingly, searching

for the right words.

“What do you know of our city?”

“It is huge,” said Madu. “Hundreds of people live there!”

Amenze laughed.

“Many more than that,” and he lifted his arm towards the canopy above them. “Imagine a person for every leaf you see.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Madu. “What do they all eat?”

“You will see for yourself soon enough. In the heart of this great forest, hidden from enemies, our Ogiso has had lands cleared for growing crops. Many people work the land – we do not lack for food.”

“Do *you* farm there too?”

“Me? No! My trade is with metal...”

“Amenze is head of the iron workers’ guild,” said the tall warrior gently.

And when Madu looked at him blankly, Amenze explained.

“There is a guild in our city for every craft – each guild is a great family. Each has

its special knowledge and skills – and the secrets of its trade are passed down from father to son. We work for the Ogiso, and the Ogiso keeps us safe, and everything in order.”

“What is the Ogiso like?” whispered Mbe.

“Ah,” replied Amenze, “Our great king of the sky. He is as near to a god as it is possible to be on this earth. And powerful. We respect our Ogiso for though he is stern he keeps us safe. And our enemies fear him...”

And then he turned to Nosa and Ada.

“You know why Chief Obiro has been hunting for you, I take it?”

Ada replied and recounted everything that she knew – about how Papa Eze had found her and Nosa as babies – about how their mother had died.

Nosa listened, hearing the story again.

He looked at Amenze.

“I did not know any of this until my sister found me – and rescued me.”

Amenze nodded.

“You have lived your life as a slave Nosa,” he

said. “But you are the son of the king.”

Nosa looked back at him.

“But what does this mean? For my sister and me?”

“It means you must be careful. You have powerful enemies.”

Amenze suddenly stopped and turned aside from the path.

The children followed him into a clearing, barely wide enough for them to stand in. It was neatly kept though, with the ground clear of growth.

A large rock stood at the far side, and there was an iron rod in the middle of the clearing and a metal-tipped short spear.

Amenze and the tall warrior knelt in front of it. The children watched – sensing a watchfulness in the hushed air around them – as Amenze reached into his bag and scattered some kola nuts.

“Children,” he whispered. “This is a shrine of Ogun, who is worshipped by warriors and metal workers. I have thanked him for

bringing us together.”

Then Amenze explained.

“We metal workers have always been great travellers. We venture far and share our skills with others of our trade. But we always stop at that shrine before we leave the forest – or when we come back – to ask for Ogun’s protection.”

“Is that why you were at Chief Iwe’s compound?” asked Nosa.

“Yes. Chief Iwe can be useful. Your father, the Ogiso, controls the trade with him; Iwe is useful for the metals and ores that we need in our work. And he pays tribute to the Ogiso.”

Then he looked at Ada.

“But this time, I believe mighty Ogun also had a purpose of his own. He led me to find you.”

He stopped and lowered his voice.

“A few weeks ago, we began to hear reports – Chief Obiro was sending armed men out, hunting for some children.”

“The men who came to our village,” said

Mbe.

“Yes,” nodded Amenze. “We guildsmen learned of this. We have our spies too.”

He looked at Ada.

“Remember when I spoke to you at Chief Iwe’s feast? I had a faint hope in my heart that you might be Queen Akele’s daughter – you reminded me so much of her.”

“If only I’d told you the truth then!” exclaimed Ada.

“You were right to be wary,” he replied. “You did not know me. And anyway, Ogun brought us together again soon enough. When I next saw you, at the forest edge, I knew for sure who you were.”

“How?”

“Ah, that is the most remarkable thing of all –”

But before he could answer, there was a call from the path ahead. It was the tall warrior.

“We should go now. It will soon be night.”

Amenze turned to the children. “Chief Osawe is right. He is a great warrior and a

great friend. We will go on now and finish our story later. We must reach safe shelter before the leopard awakes.”

They hurried on in silence now, walking, running, and the forest light began to fade. The air shifted, the sounds of the birds and animals changed, and the trees with their dense, shiny leaves seemed to take on a new life. The slow moving chameleons, and the darting lizards, were now hard to spot. The bright feathered birds no longer swooped and flitted across their path.

Madu held Ada’s hand. Where the path was wide enough Mbe walked beside Nosa, helping him on.

At last, Ada was relieved to see firelight dancing through the trees ahead.