

Chapter Twenty-Two



A brave decision

“ **W**elcome Nosa and Ada – and your young friends – ” an old man gestured towards the children “ – rarely do we meet in the darkness like this. But tonight Amenze has called us together for a special reason.”

“Thank you, master of the woodcarvers’ guild,” said Amenze, rising from his seat.

There were many of them, grey haired like Amenze, and the light from the oil lamps, flickering on their faces made them look like stern carvings of gods.

Amenze turned towards the man seated on his other side.

“And greetings to Chief Efe of the Edionisen. We are honoured that you join us.”

The man, who was more finely dressed, did not speak, but raised his hand and nodded

solemnly.

Amenze continued.

“These are the children I told you about, Akele’s lost son and daughter. These are the ones hunted by Chief Obiro. See – this is the very gift made by the head of my own guild, many years ago.”

They all looked towards Ada now – to the armlet.

“Hold it up, Ada,” said Amenze gently. And she did, raising her arm so that the bright metalwork shone in the light of the flames.

“See, Chief Efe? Guildsmen? This charm was blessed by the priestess at the shrine of Ogun on the day it was given to the young queen.”

“I remember it,” said the wood carver. “She looked so beautiful.”

Others around the group nodded.

“And we all know about the sadness that followed,” continued Amenze. “But I believe the sad times are now ending.”

A murmur went around the room, more

nodding.

“It may be so,” said Chief Efe lifting his hand.

Everyone turned to him. His voice was grave.

“But what would you have me do? Our Ogiso trusts Chief Obiro as a great warrior.”

“But who will he accuse next? Who else will be condemned by his lies?” Amenze protested. “No one is safe. This man threatens us all – even as he spins his lies, his eyes threaten anyone who stands in his way.”

The large man at the end – the master ivory carver – suddenly stirred and stamped his foot on the ground.

“Day by day he gets richer – while we obey our Ogiso’s laws and trade only through the proper channels. And no one is safe. Amenze is right!”

A silence settled on the room, as each man looked into his own thoughts. Ada watched them, feeling each breath, and each beat of her pulse. Beside her, she sensed her brother was feeling the same.

Then at last Chief Efe looked up.

“Very well, guildsmen. Tomorrow. Each of you go back to your guilds. Look in your workshops and speak to your people – find the best gifts you have for our Ogiso.”

He stood, gathering the finely woven red shawl around his shoulders.

“It is time to act. Bring all your gifts to the palace. And bring the children too.”

Far out, beyond the streets, the houses and courtyard gardens, the sun dipped below the trees into the forest.

And in that fading moment, between day and night, two weary warriors entered a room in the royal palace and knelt before their chief.

“Well? What news do you bring?”

“The children of Queen Akele – they have vanished, my chief. We almost caught them at the great river but they used some enchantment.”

Chief Obiro snorted and stared down at them.

“Enchantment?”

“Yes, we swear it, great chief. We followed them across the lands until they disappeared. We could find no trail.”

“Fools! Do you think that you are my only spies? I already know what you came here to tell me.”

The warriors glanced nervously at each other.

“Chief?”

Obiro was turning a knife in his hand, testing its edge on his thumb.

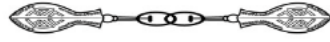
“You failed. The children are already here in the city, with Amenze. And now all the guildsmen are plotting against me.”

Now he was on his feet, gesturing with the blade.

“But no matter. They will fail of course. Tomorrow I will speak to the Ogiso and I will warn him of great danger. I will tell him there can be no more glory in war, no more victories, unless he condemns those children, as he condemned their mother. And when

I tell him that – ” with a sudden jerk he threw the knife at the wall, and it stuck fast, quivering “ – as always, the Ogiso will believe me.”

Chapter Twenty- Three



The sky-king

The sun was rising bright above the city and sweet morning smells of frying bean cakes filled the streets.

Amenze walked ahead, with Nosa and Ada following. Mbe and Madu, who were staying behind, watched them disappear into the crowd.

The city was bustling with life.

The road widened and they were pushing their way through a crowded marketplace, overflowing with traders – women with stacks of new pottery, weavers unfolding bright cloths to display their patterns in the sun, smiling merchants showing off new found treasures from lands beyond the forest, and young farmers with their fresh crops brought

into the city that morning.

Suddenly the buildings became grander. The people they passed were no longer ordinary workers, but wealthy merchants, warriors and chiefs.

And then straight ahead was a high, red wall.
The palace.

“Do not fear,” said Amenze. “Your ancestors will be watching over you when you meet your father. This will be a glad day.”

And he led them in through the gate.

“**T**oday, many gifts have been laid at the sky-king’s feet. But I am told that you have brought something strange Master of Iron.”

The Ogiso sat on low rectangular stool. And beside him, on their smaller seats, sat Chief Efe and the other four men of the Edionisen
Amenze bowed.

“I have been blessed my chief. I have found the sky-king’s lost children.”

Kneeling behind him, Ada hardly dared raise her eyes to where her father sat. On either side, guards stood holding the symbols of royal power, the leaf-shaped eben and the curve-bladed ada.

Ada had an impression of quiet power and it reminded her faintly of Chief Iwe.

But whereas Chief Iwe had sprawled on his stool, fanned by feathers and waited on by servants, the Ogiso sat upright and unmoving, as silent as the men at his side.

And the Ogiso seemed more powerful for it. His presence filled the space.

“Are these the children?” he asked, his voice steady and deep.

“Yes, great king,” replied Amenze. “They were saved from death when Queen Akele was condemned. They were born in the forest and survived. And when Chief Obiro sent his men to hunt them down, they were saved again. They are only children as you see – but they are the flesh and blood of their great father, and they ran for many days with

hunters on their heels, and survived great dangers – ”

Now Amenze gestured for the two of them to step forward. Nosa went first, kneeling before the king and Ada followed.

The Ogiso leaned forward slightly, his red necklace shifting but his expression impassive.

“And they survived,” continued Amenze. “Until at the edge of our great forest, the god delivered them safe to me. See, this is the armlet that was blessed at Ogun’s shrine, made for Queen Akele – it has protected them.”

For a long while nobody spoke and Ada felt the stillness of the room bearing down.

Then, daring to raise her eyes, she saw the Ogiso make a small gesture with his hand – at which Chief Efe, who was beside him, leaned in close to hear his words, softly spoken.

After a moment the chief straightened.

“The sky-king wonders: if Ogun’s armlet protected the children, why did it not protect

their mother?”

Amenze bowed again, searching for words.

“I am a simple craftsman great king... I cannot know the will of all the gods... but when evil is done...”

The Ogiso held up his hand.

“Enough.”

And he suddenly stood. Without another glance at the children, he left the room, his guard following.

When they had gone, the chief turned to Amenze.

“The sky-king will now hear what Chief Obiro has to say. You have made serious accusations against him Amenze, and we the Edionisen must discuss this. Judgement will be passed at sunset. For if one side is innocent, then another must be guilty. Follow me. I will show you where to wait.”

They were led through the palace in silence.

Ada's mind was racing, trying to make sense of what had just happened. She hardly noticed the rooms they were passing through.

Beyond the court room was an enclosed garden, with more openings leading from it. The chief took them through one room, then another.

Then he stopped beside a doorway.

“Children, you wait in here. Amenze, come with me.”

Ada followed Nosa into the room.

And it was a moment before she realised they were not alone. There was somebody else waiting too, looking out through an opening to gardens beyond.

It was the Ogiso.