

# Chapter Twenty-Four



## A second meeting

“**S**eeing you is both a joy and a pain,” the Ogiso said. “Your faces remind me of your mother.”

He beckoned them forward.

“Come. Do not be afraid. I am the sky-king. But in this room, I am also your father.”

Nosa bowed.

“Thank you sir.”

“Sit with me. Both of you.”

As they did, palace workers entered with bowls of fruit, and laid them out before the king.

“Now we will eat together,” said the Ogiso. “And you will tell me your stories.”

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**N**osa spoke first. The Ogiso listened, nodding from time to time, as the boy described his life at Chief Iwe's, growing up, not knowing his real family.

"I always dreamed of escaping to the forest," he said. "But I did not know where I would go."

"Your strength and courage does you credit."

"Thank you sir."

He turned to Ada.

"And now my daughter, what of you? Is this the charm of which I have heard?"

"Yes sir."

He looked thoughtfully at the armlet, as if remembering his past life.

"It is a great treasure indeed. And I hear it was kept safe for you – by a herbalist?"

"Yes. His name is Papa Eze. He raised me as his daughter."

The Ogiso nodded.

"Was he a good father? Did he treat you well?"

“Yes sir.”

“Then he shall have my thanks.”

He paused for a moment, as if gathering his thoughts.

“So what is to happen next, my son and daughter?”

He sighed.

“You have seen that I have great power. But perhaps there is something that you do not see – I also carry a great burden. Many burdens, in truth.”

He stood now, looking out at his city.

“I have ruled for many years and fought off many enemies. I have sacrificed to the gods to keep our land fertile. My city has grown and my people have prospered.

“And I am blessed with many wives, and many children.

“But there are always disputes to settle, arguments between powerful people. Always, I have to watch for new dangers.

“A king must listen to his chiefs. This man – Chief Obiro – he is a great hunter and

warrior. He has many wives and sons. And many times he has been proven right and won battles for our people.”

He turned back to them and laid his hands gently on both their shoulders.

“So I must hear what Chief Obiro has to say again today. It is my hope that you can stay here with me and help to build our city. But the will of the gods must be heard. I cannot let my feelings as a father cloud my judgement as a king.”

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**H**e walked to the door, and with each step it seemed to Ada as if he were becoming more remote, becoming the sky-king again and ceasing to be their father.

And as he reached the door, Ada looked down.

She looked at the armband on her wrist, and she felt it again – that sudden sense of urgency.

A thought came to her.

It was the memory of a story told to her by Papa Eze, long ago.

She remembered it, the tale of a girl who was trapped by a hungry leopard. Papa had even laughed and said that her name was Ada – she had escaped, not by speed or power, but by outwitting the hunter.

“Sir,” she called out suddenly. “May I make a request?”

The Ogiso turned, puzzled.

“A request? What is it child?”

And pausing at the doorway he listened – half as king, half as father – as she explained her idea.

# Chapter Twenty-Five



## A test of truth

Chief Obiro arrived last.

The five king-makers of the Edionisen had already taken their seats at the front of the king's hall, with all the elders and the head guildsmen gathered behind, talking in low voices.

Then Amenze and the children were led in, and everyone turned to look at them. Space was made in front of the sky-king's seat, and Ada felt their curious gazes – *who were they, this girl and boy?*

“Don't be afraid,” Amenze whispered.  
“Stand straight.”

Then the Ogiso himself entered, followed by four of the tallest warriors Ada had ever seen. Silence settled

And Chief Obiro arrived.

As he pushed his way through the crowd

Ada felt her heart pounding.

Here he was, the man who had been hunting her, the man who had condemned her mother.

He looked strong, his body lean and battle scarred.

And now he was just a few steps away, bowing before the king.

He straightened, raising his arms. And she saw that he was holding something in his clenched fist.

Everyone waited.

“Gods protect you, great sky king,” Chief Obiro said, kneeling.

The Ogiso nodded.

“What news do you bring, trusted war-chief?”

“That your enemies tremble beyond the forest, great king,” he replied. “That your crops will grow, your people will prosper and wealth will flow into your land.”

A satisfied murmur ran around the hall.

The Ogiso nodded.

“Then we are pleased.”

Chief Obiro raised his voice.

“But my king, beware! A great evil has tried to come into our city – even here, among us!”

The hall was silent suddenly and the elders began to look at each other.

“A great evil? What evil do you speak of?”

Chief Obiro stood and pointed at the children.

“Great king – the gods are warning me again, just as they did in the past. These two are the children of the cursed Queen Akele! Amenze has brought them here in secret. He wants to gain power over your kingdom – and bad luck will befall your land again!”

An angry protest erupted, until the Ogiso raised his hand for silence.

“The gods warned you of this?”

“Yes, in a dream great king. I do not claim to be a diviner. But still I have many gifts which I have often used to keep the kingdom safe. And the same power that has guided me to victory so many times has told me what to do – to keep your land safe, to ensure future

victories, the children must be sacrificed. And Amenze must be condemned too, for his treachery. He must die with them.”

He unclenched his fist, to reveal a gourd, stained with black dye.

“They must take the poison!”

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**T**he Ogiso gestured, and two of his guards stepped forward.

Then he nodded to Chief Efe, who exclaimed:

“Chief Obiro – before he passes judgement, the sky-king wishes to know, are you sure this is really true? Are the gods speaking?”

“Yes my lord, and not just speaking – they are showing me the sign of death on these wicked children.”

He glared down, and Ada shivered under the intensity of his gaze.

“The god Ogiuwu is calling their names. Nosa and Ada, cursed son and daughter of a cursed mother – ” his voice became a growl.

“I see the arms of Ogiuwu reaching for them – the underworld claims them!”

And nobody in the hall moved – nobody breathed – as he grabbed the two children and forced them to their knees.

“You are wrong. And you lie!” a voice shouted.

The crowd parted suddenly at the back of the hall, and a tall boy pushed forward, his eyes blazing.

“That is not Nosa, the sky-king’s son. I am Nosa! The boy you hold is called Mbe. He is a farmer’s son.”

“What?”

“Are you surprised Chief Obiro? Did the gods not tell you?”

Chief Obiro stared, astonished – and the hall erupted in a riot of protest.

“What trickery is this?” Chief Obiro demanded. “What wickedness?” but his words were lost in the noise.

And then the Ogiso himself was standing.

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“ **C**hief Obiro. Why did you not recognise my son? You claimed the gods themselves were guiding you.”

The hall fell silent.

“Speak.”

Chief Obiro blustered, searching for words.

“Great king this...this is a mistake. This is trickery...”

“No trickery. Simply a test. And you failed.”

He nodded. Now his men seized the warrior’s arms – he was strong, but they were younger and stronger.

“Wait, great king! The god Ogiuwu is my protector! He will demand a sacrifice...”

The king seized the curve-bladed ada from his herald, pointing it now at Chief Obiro.

“Then Ogiuwu shall have what he demands. Guards! Take him.”

Chief Obiro was dragged from the hall, his protests fading – and in the stunned silence that followed the Ogiiso turned and stretched out his arms.

“My children. Come forward.”

Then Nosa and Ada were pushed forward together.

And around them the elders signalled their approval, as they were embraced by the sky-king.

Amenze stepped back, to stand with the other guildsmen.

And in the crowd, little Madu squeezed through to reach Mbe and hug him.

“You did it,” he said. “You tricked him! Were you scared?”

“Yes,” Mbe replied. “Very scared. Were you?”

“No. I thought it was fun.”

And they both started laughing.

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**T**hen suddenly, a change came over the room. Men were rushing about, orders were being shouted and the king himself swept out, followed by his guards with their swords drawn.

A warrior led Nosa out, with Mbe.

Ada felt a hand wrapping around hers – it was Madu – and then Chief Efe called them both to follow him.

He took them through the palace to a hidden garden.

“One of my wives will stay with you. You must keep out of sight.”

“Why? What’s happening?” asked Ada.

“This is a moment of great danger,” the chief replied. “Obiro was a powerful man with many sons. Our king must act swiftly to prevent trouble.”

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**M**uch later, Ada learnt what happened.

Her father, the Ogiso, led his guards across the city, straight to Obiro’s compound. The chief’s high-walled building had almost as many rooms as the royal palace itself.

A great crowd had already gathered there,

and now the people backed away as the Ogiso approached – most of them knelt to him, but not all. In front of the compound gates, Chief Obiro's own sons and brothers stood together, fully armed.

Beside them, grey haired veterans were watching on. They had followed Chief Obiro into many battles.

But still, the greater numbers were with the Ogiso.

His own guards lined up either side of him, swords drawn and shields raised, and all the time more men were hurrying in from their posts at the great defensive bank.

For a moment it seemed as if the whole city and even the rainforest was holding its breath.

Then the sky-king stepped into open the space.

He raised his ada, and when he spoke, his voice carried through the crowd to the very back.

“Warriors of Edo – word has reached me. Our forest border is threatened. Today I go

myself to drive back our enemies. Come! The ancestors are watching!”

And without waiting for a reply, he walked through the crowd and out of the city – and men from both sides followed. Obiro was forgotten.

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**A**da learnt of all this from Chief Efe’s first wife.  
“The danger has passed,” she said.  
“You can stay with my family tonight.”  
“But what about the enemies at the border?”  
But the woman just chuckled.  
“Do not fear them. The sky-king knows what he is doing.”

# Chapter Twenty-Six



## The young warriors

**F**or Mbe, the next days raced by like a strange, vivid dream. He was running beside Nosa through the rainforest again, following the twisting paths – but now it felt nothing like the journey of before. Then, they had been fleeing for their lives, now they were part of a fast moving army, being swept along as if on a flood.

He had never run so fast, or felt so full of life.

The youngest warriors were racing ahead of them now, keen to clear the way for the Ogiso and his great chiefs.

Nosa had been given a fine umozo sword of his own, and he was sprinting in full Edo war gear – but when he was called to join with all the king's sons in the royal guard, he grabbed Mbe's arm.

“Come with me Mbe,” he whispered. “You are as much my brother as they are.”

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**S**o Mbe found himself right near the front of the Edo army, when the warriors lined up at the forest edge, swords raised, to look out across the savannah.

In the heat of midday, Chief Iwe and his followers were approaching – at first nothing but shimmering dots, but soon resolving into men.

Iwe did not look so grand now and, among all his people, none carried any weapons. They had come to offer tribute. Iwe watched on anxiously as his men laid many gifts on the ground and waited.

After a long pause, the Ogiso himself emerged from the trees. And it seemed to Mbe that Iwe was trembling as he knelt down to pledge his loyalty.

“Never dare to enter our forest again,” said

the sky-king, his voice soft. “The next time I appear before you, I will not be merciful.”

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**A**nd then it was over, and Mbe was following the army back towards the city, jogging now not sprinting.

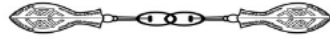
Beside him, Nosa was talking excitedly, going over again and again what had just happened, and making plans for the future.

“We will be great warriors,” he laughed, putting his arm on Mbe’s shoulder. “Hey, and you must get an Edo sword...”

Mbe laughed too – but he was thinking about Ada, and how far the two of them had come since leaving their village.

And he was wondering what would happen next.

# Chapter Twenty- Seven



## The ancestors

**A**da watched the Ogiso's army return. From first light, crowds had gathered at the great defensive earth bank – the ironsmiths, the potters, the market traders, the farmers, the white-haired elders, the merchants, the children with their mothers and aunts – all jostling on top of the bank and lining the road into the city.

And when the sky-king appeared at last, ahead of his warriors, a great cheer went up. It reverberated through the forest and echoed back with the shrieks of startled birds.

And drum beats rose up in the city.

News of the Ogiso's triumph spread through the crowd – how the enemy had cowered before him! – and the people flowed behind

his army into the city. Ada was swept along with them.

But in all that joyous throng she felt alone.

She had spent days in the palace, looked after by Chief Efe's wives.

But there was little for her to do, and she only felt cheerful when Madu visited her each day to tell her about the new things he had discovered. He was staying with Amenze in the metalworkers' quarter, and he was allowed to come and see her each evening.

"Don't worry Ada," he said. "Your brother and Mbe will be back soon."

But two days after the army returned, there was still no sign of them.

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**O**n the third day, Ada was invited to join some of the palace women who were weaving.

"It will be good for you to learn," said Chief Efe's wife.

"Yes Ma, thank you," Ada replied – and she

did not say that Mama Ginika had already taught her everything she needed to know about cloth making.

She settled down with a loom in one of the gardens – and looked up startled when she saw the women around her bowing.

The Ogiso was standing over her, holding out his hand.

“Come daughter.”

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“ **T**he last time we spoke, your wisdom surprised me,” he said.

He was leading her through a passage that wound through to the back of the palace.

“For some time I had been troubled by my war chief, Obiro – he was a good servant once, but his power was growing too great. Your plan to test him was a wise one.”

“Thank you my Ogiso...”

“But now – ” he stopped and looked down at her. “What do you wish daughter? For your

life?”

“Sir...?”

“When you were growing up, far from our forest, you wondered about your ancestors I believe. There was no shrine to them in your village.”

She shook her head.

“The shrine is here,” he said, pointing towards a doorway. “Here you may speak to your mother’s spirit – I think she will answer you now...”

Ada looked uncertainly at the doorway. The room beyond was in shadow.

“Do not be troubled daughter. She will be proud of you.”

The Ogiso stepped back.

“And then, when you are ready, you can decide.”

“Decide?”

“Yes – what life will you live? If you wish, you can stay here in the palace, the daughter of the sky-king. You have many sisters and brothers here and you will never have want

for anything. Or perhaps – perhaps you would prefer another life, the life you had before. The herbalist was kind, I have been told...”

He gestured towards the doorway.

“There is no hurry to decide. I will wait.”

Ada felt herself trembling as she walked forward, into the half-darkness.

And once more, she felt the armlet smooth and warm against her skin.

She knelt and closed her eyes. And in that moment it seemed that she felt her mother’s blessing – her pride in her daughter and her joy, despite sorrow at their life together lost.

Long moments passed before Ada stood again, wiping tears.

She had decided.

She knew what she wanted.

She turned to speak to the sky-king. But he was gone.

It was Mbe waiting there.

And leaning on his arm was an old traveller, wrapped in a shawl – Papa Eze had found her again, just as he’d promised.