

Adaeze and the Dark Suit



By the wide, still water of Oguta Lake lives a king. He has one daughter. Her name is Adaeze.

Adaeze is clever the way water is clever. She finds a way through all things. She reads the shade of the lake, and she can name each tree by its smell. Her **cleverness** is always at work.

Most of all, Adaeze loves to solve things. And this spring, a very strange thing comes to the gate.





A guest comes to ask for her hand. He is tall. His voice is all **smoothness**. He wears a sharp dark suit, and when he moves there is a faint sound, like scales on dry grass. He says it is just his fine fabric.

The King is charmed. All the hall is charmed. All but Adaeze. She watches The Suitor the way a cat watches a hole in the wall. A thing is wrong, but she can't yet say what.

That night Adaeze sits at the edge of the lake with her feet in the cool water. In the **darkness**, Mama Nnaji comes from the reeds. 'Adaeze, child, I feel it too,' says Mama Nnaji. 'A great snake can wear a man's face, child. But he can't change it all.' She presses a small disc of white ash into Adaeze's hand, thin as paper and hard as truth. 'Ash recalls what fire has touched. Set it where he must walk. Watch with care, and trust what the ash shows.'



The next morning Adaeze wakes early, before the hall stirs. She sets the ash disc flat on the floor of the guest room doorway, right where the guest must walk. Its **whiteness** melts into the pale floor. It is very hard to see. Then she puts on a nice smile and joins the morning rites. The suitor glides out in his sharp dark suit. That faint sound comes with him, like fine fabric, or like scales. He steps right over the disc. He smiles his smooth smile. Adaeze looks at the floor. Her heart goes cold. Then her heart goes steady.





A man's shoe would leave a clear print. But the ash shows two long lines, side by side: the press of a great belly, and the drag of a wide tail.

No shoe sole. No brush of fabric. A thing that moves low on the ground when no eyes watch it. Such **slyness!**

Adaeze's mind is quick. She must make him show what he is, so all see. If she just tells the crowd, it is her word against his charm. And charm almost always wins.

'Dear guest,' says Adaeze in the grand hall, 'we are lake people. A suitor must show he is at ease with water. We let water run over the hands, and both hands must stay flat and still. Open hands show an open heart.' She makes up this rite on the spot, but she says it with such **boldness** that the old men nod along.



A young kid brings the water pitcher. Adaeze lets a thin stream run over the suitor's left hand, then his right. At the touch of the water, something happens. For just one blink, his right hand starts to change. The skin shows dark scales. Then it is a hand again. But all the hall sees it. A deep **stillness** fills the room.





'There was nothing to see,' says the suitor. His smooth voice loses all its **smoothness**. 'Adaeze is a silly child who sees things in shadows.' 'I read tracks,' says Adaeze. She holds up the ash disc so all can see the twin lines pressed into it. 'And I read this.' She sets the disc on the floor by his feet. He stares at it for a long minute. Then he rises to his full height, and he keeps on rising.

The sharp dark suit falls away. A vast snake stands where the man was, scales the shade of deep water, eyes like yellow lamps, a body as wide as a man's chest. His **bigness** fills the hall. His tail brushes the floor with a sound like rain. The crowd falls back. The King grips his chair. Adaeze does not move. 'The truth is out,' she says, her voice as still as the lake at dawn, and very sure.



The great snake stares at Adaeze. A snake, once seen for what he is, must speak the truth. And he can't harm the one who won with **fairness**. 'I have fooled many,' he says. His voice is old and heavy now. 'I can not fool this one. I will go.' 'And do not come back,' says Adaeze. 'And if I do?' She holds up the disc. 'I will make more of these.'





The snake leaves through the lake, a huge gliding form, gone between one blink and the next. The water settles. The people can rest again. At dusk the King holds his daughter's hand for a long time and says nothing at all. His **gladness** needs no words. At the lake's edge, old Mama Nnaji hears it all from the reeds and nods once, slowly. The disc is from Mama Nnaji, yes. But it is Adaeze who knows where to set it.

Word spreads. People ask, 'How did Adaeze know? What did she see?' She always says the same thing. 'Watch with care, and trust what the eyes find.' She still sits at the lake's edge at dusk, feet in the cool water, reading the shade of the sky. And in the doorway of her home she keeps a faint circle of ash. Not from fear. From **alertness**. A clever mind, like a good trap, is most useful when it is always ready.





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Adaeze watches the smooth-voiced suitor with quiet suspicion, sure something hides beneath his sharp dark suit. A wise woman by the lake presses ash into her hand, promising it will show the truth of anyone who steps upon it. Will Adaeze catch the secret her charming guest is hiding? Created to align with the UFLI Foundations scope and sequence (Lesson 124: -ness), this book practices words like 'boldness', 'stillness', 'slyness', 'gladness'.

Phonics Focus: -ness

alertness, bigness, boldness, cleverness, darkness, fairness, gladness, slyness, smoothness, stillness, whiteness

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