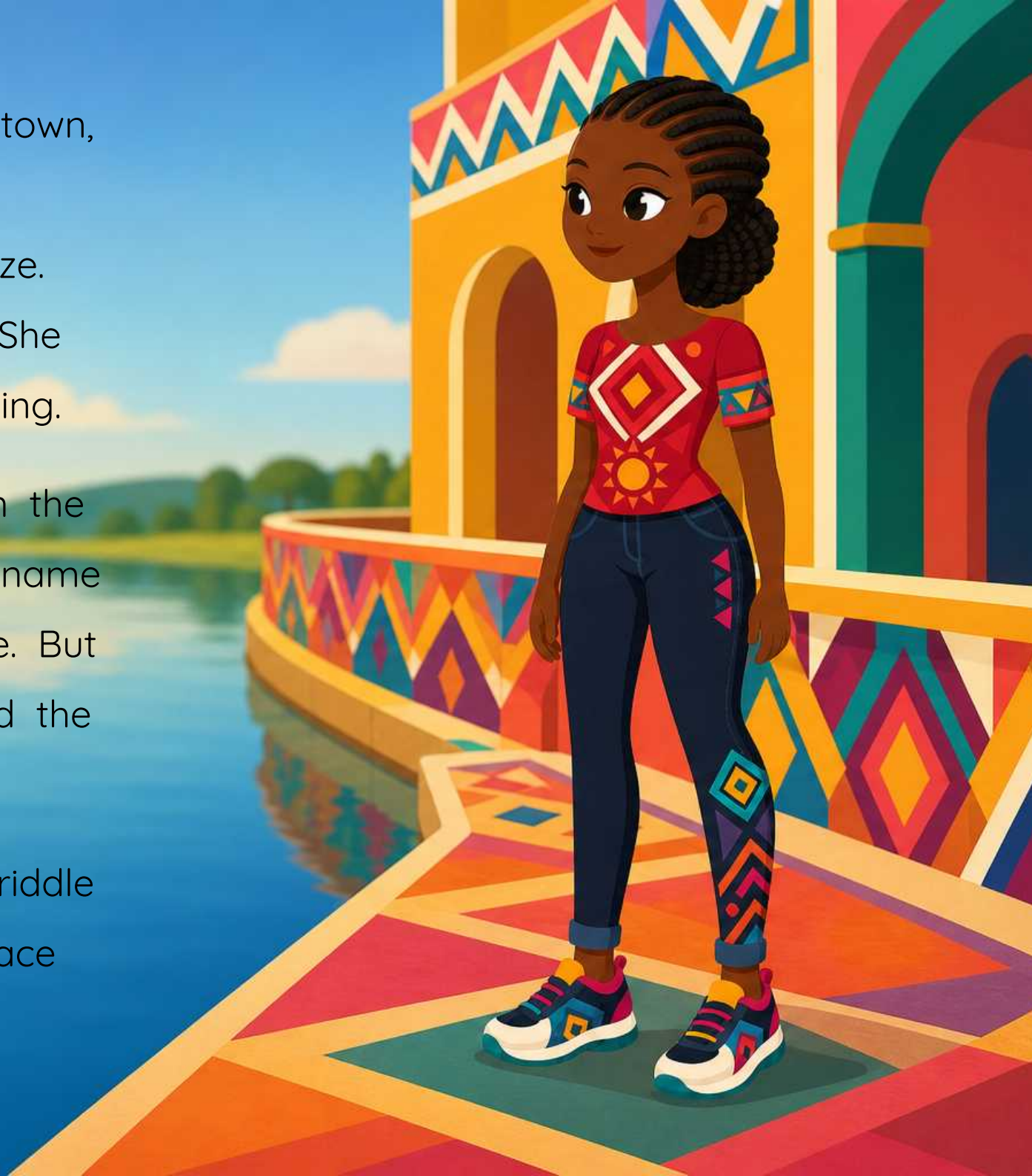
The Strange Suitor

By the wide lake, in a lake town, there lived a king with one daughter. Her name is Adaeze. Adaeze is clever like water. She finds a way through everything.

She can read the weather in the colour of the lake. She can name every tree by its smell alone. But most of all, she loves to find the **solution** to a good riddle.

That spring, a strange new riddle came walking up to the palace gate.



A suitor comes to ask for her hand. He is tall. He has a smooth voice. He wears a sharp dark suit with a narrow green pocket square. Each time he moves, there is a soft sound, like scales on dry grass. He says it is only his fine fabric.

The king is amazed. The court is amazed. Everyone is amazed but Adaeze. She gives him her full **attention** and watches him the way a cat watches a hole in the wall. Something is not right, though she cannot yet say what.

That night Adaeze sits by the lake with her feet in the cool water. An old woman comes from the reeds. It is Mama Nnaji, who lives alone at the lake's edge and is said to know things. 'You feel it too,' says Mama Nnaji. 'A great serpent can wear a human face, child. But he cannot change everything.'

She presses a small disc into Adaeze's hand. It is white ash, dried hard, thin as paper, solid as truth. 'Ash remembers what fire touched,' she says. 'Set it where he must walk. Watch with care. Trust what you find.'

The next morning Adaeze wakes early, before the palace stirs. She sets the ash disc flat in the guest room doorway, smooth side up. It is almost invisible on the pale floor. Then she puts on a pleasant smile and joins the family, for it is **tradition** to greet a suitor each morning.

The suitor slides out of the guest room in his sharp dark suit, that soft sound following him. He steps right over the ash disc and does not notice it. He smiles his smooth smile. Adaeze looks at the floor. Her heart goes cold, and then steady.

Where a shoe would leave a clear print, the ash shows two long lines. One is the press of a great belly. One is a wide sweep dragging behind. No shoe. No fabric. Something that moves low to the ground when no human eyes are on it.

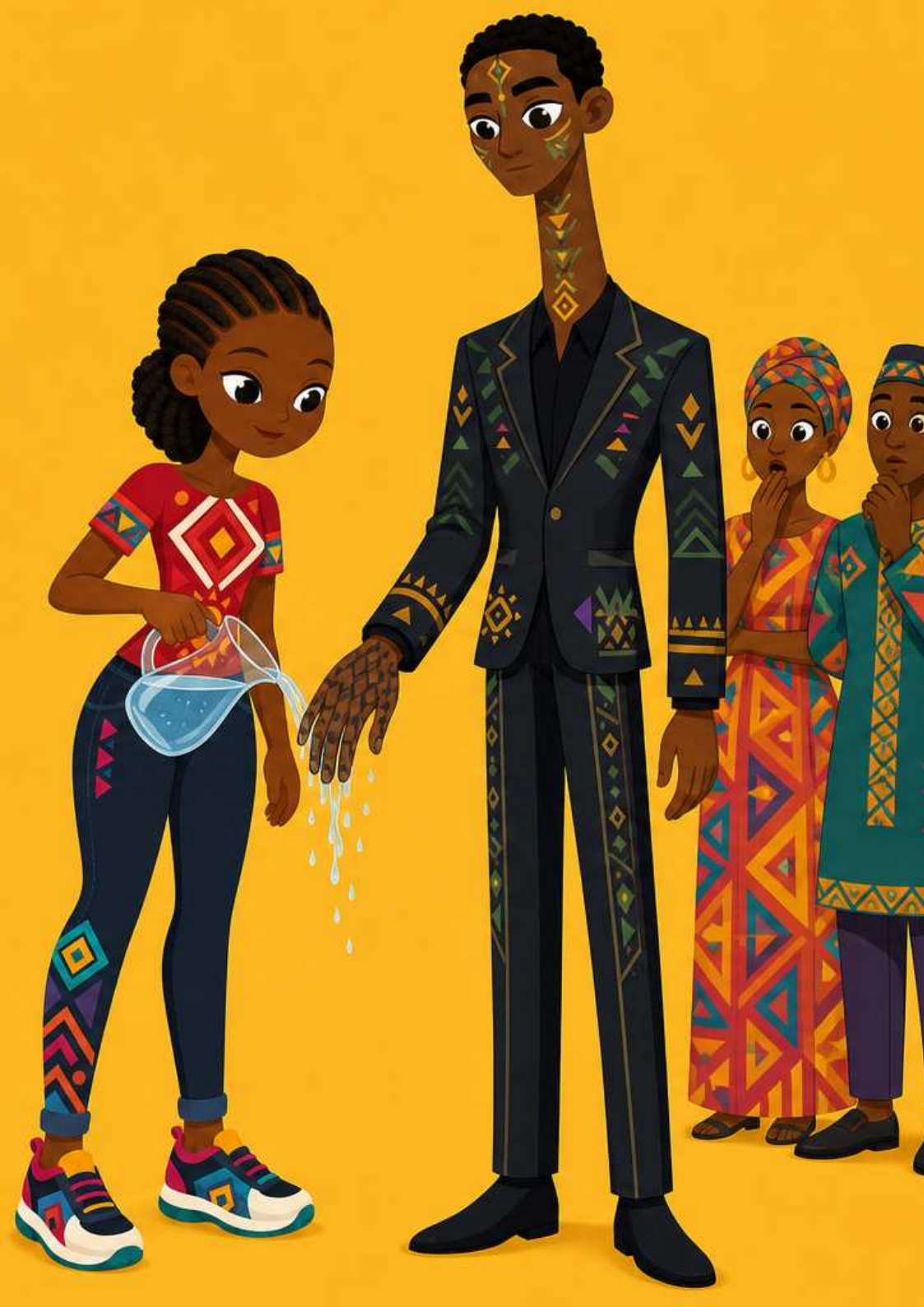
Adaeze's mind is already working. She must show him to everyone: the king, the court, the whole village. A secret **accusation** would be her word against a charming stranger, and charm almost always wins.

'Dear guest,' says Adaeze at the morning gathering, 'here at the lake, **tradition** asks that a suitor show his ease with water, for we are lake people.' The suitor spreads his hands. 'Of course.'

'We pour water on the hands before a big meal,' she says. 'But we pour from the left, and both palms must stay flat and still. Open hands show an open heart.' She made this custom up on the spot. But she says it so confidently that three elders are already nodding along.

A young cousin brings the water pitcher. Adaeze pours a thin stream over the suitor's left hand, then his right. At the touch of the water, something happens. His right hand, just for a moment, starts to change. The fingers get thin and join. The skin marks itself in dark diamonds. Then he stops it, and the hand is a hand again.

But the whole court has seen the **aberration.** The room goes silent.

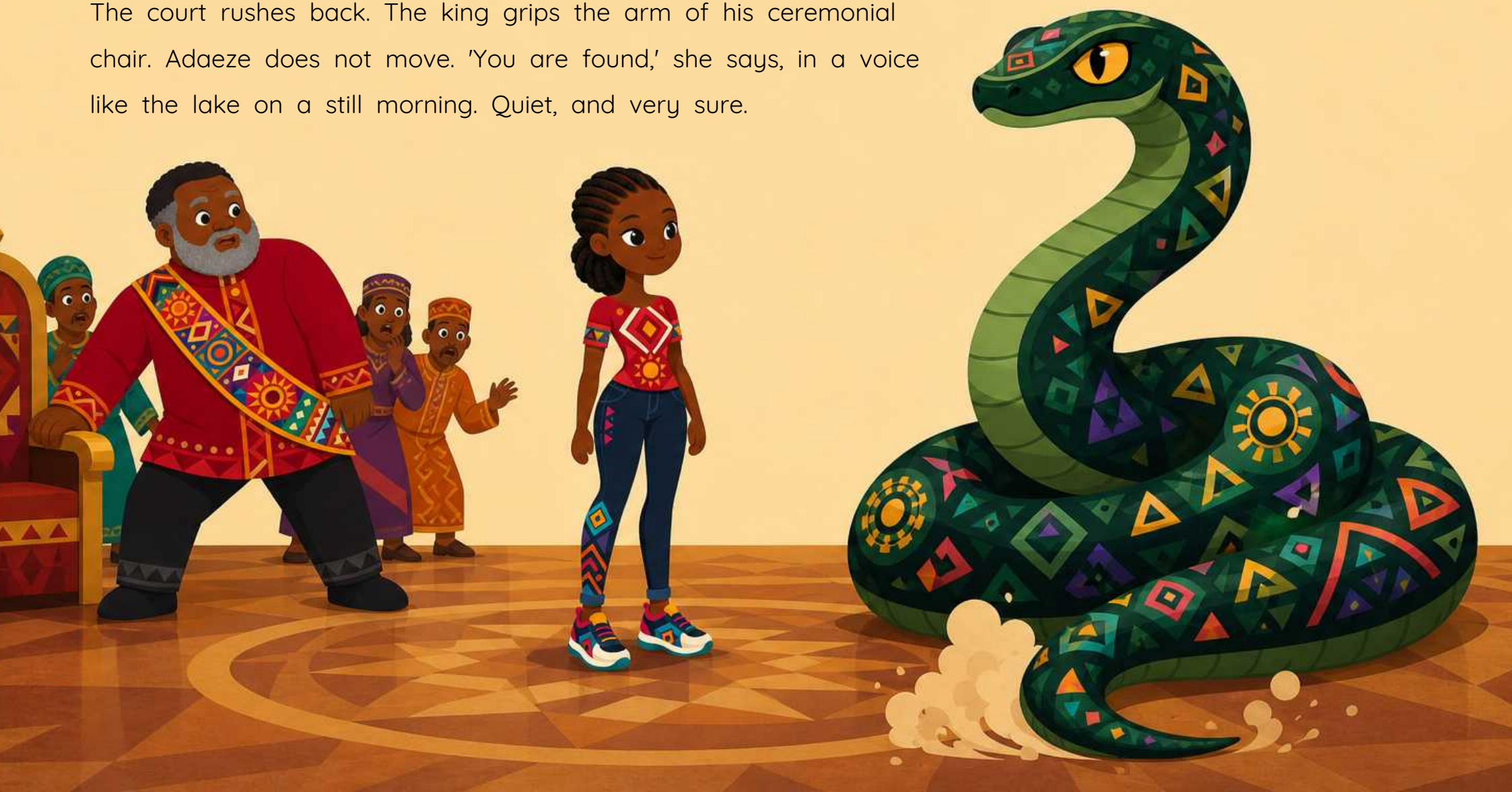


'You saw nothing,' says the suitor. His smooth voice is not so smooth now. 'You are a foolish girl who reads too much into shadows.'

'I read tracks,' says Adaeze. She picks up the ash disc and holds it high, so the whole court can see the two lines pressed into it. 'And I read this.' She sets it on the floor in front of him. The **accusation** hangs in the air. He looks at it for a long moment. Then he rises to his full height, and keeps rising.

The sharp dark suit falls away. What stands before the court is huge: a great serpent with scales the colour of deep water. Its eyes are like yellow lamps. Its body is as wide as a man's chest. It fills the room, and its tail sweeps the floor with a sound like rain.

The court rushes back. The king grips the arm of his ceremonial chair. Adaeze does not move. 'You are found,' she says, in a voice like the lake on a still morning. Quiet, and very sure.



The great snake stares at her for a long moment. In old **tradition,** a spirit that is named and seen must speak the truth. He cannot pretend anymore. And he cannot harm the one who showed him fairly.

'You are more clever than the last three villages,' he says. His voice is **ancient** now, and heavy. 'I will go.' 'You will go,' says Adaeze. 'And you will not return.' 'And if I do?' She holds up the ash disc. 'I will make more of these.'

He leaves through the lake, a great sliding form that barely stirs the water. He is gone in a blink, between one moment and the next. The water settles. The village breathes.

That evening the king holds his daughter's hand for a long time, saying nothing at all, and it says more than a speech. Old Mama Nnaji, at the lake's edge, hears the story from the reeds and nods once, slowly. She gave the disc, yes. But the **action** was Adaeze's: she knew where to set it.

Word spreads. Other villages send **questions.** How did you know? What did you see? Adaeze always gives the same answer. 'Watch with care. Trust what you find.'

She still sits at the lake's edge at dusk, feet in the cool water, reading the colour of the sky. She never stops being the kind of person who notices things. And on the smooth pale floor of the palace doorway, she keeps a faint circle of ash. Not out of fear, but out of habit. A clever mind, like a good trap, is best when it is always ready.

S9

The Strange Suitor

In the lake town of Oguta lives Adaeze, a princess who reads the weather in the water and solves every riddle she meets. So when a smooth-voiced suitor glides up to the palace gate, why does she alone feel that something is wrong? What secret hides beneath his sharp dark suit, and can one clever girl and a small disc of ash unmask him before the whole court? This Bookbot Level S9 story practises the /sh/ phonograms in 'tradition', 'ancient', 'accusation', 'attention', and 'aberration'.

Reading Skills: <ci> <si> <ti>

aberration, accusation, action, ancient, attention, questions, solution, tradition

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