

The Sweet Man



Adaeze is the king's girl. She lives by a big, **deep** lake.

Adaeze is clever and **keen**.

She can **see** the **green trees** and name **each** one.

She can **read** the sky in the lake's shade.

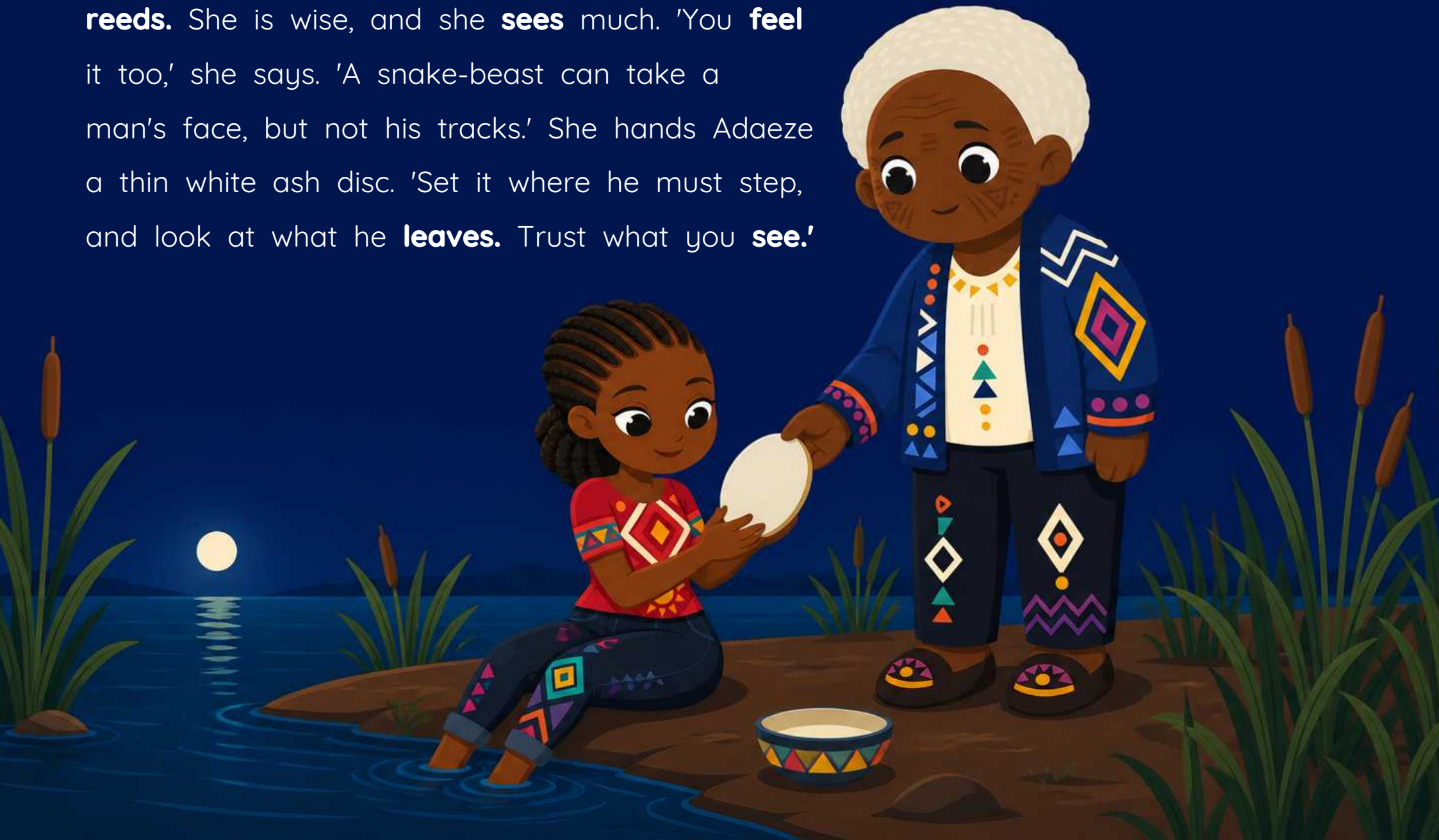
But best by far, Adaeze likes a game. And this spring, a big game is at the gate.





A tall man comes to **seek** her hand. His voice is soft and **sweet**. He has a dark coat and a **green** cloth. When he moves, a soft hiss trails him, like a snake in dry grass. The man says it is just his coat. The king is glad. All are glad but Adaeze. She **sees** the man like a cat **sees** a crack in the wall. A thing **feels** off, but what?

That night Adaeze sits by the lake, her **feet** in the cool water. Old Mama Nnaji comes from the **reeds**. She is wise, and she **sees** much. 'You **feel** it too,' she says. 'A snake-beast can take a man's face, but not his tracks.' She hands Adaeze a thin white ash disc. 'Set it where he must step, and look at what he **leaves**. Trust what you **see**.'



Next morning Adaeze wakes with the sun. She sets the ash disc flat at the way in, smooth side up. It is hard to **see** on the pale floor. Then Adaeze smiles and **meets** the man with her kin. The man glides out in his dark coat and **green** cloth, and that soft hiss trails him. He steps over the ash disc. He does not **see** it. He smiles his **sweet** smile. Adaeze looks down, and she goes cold, then steady.





No boot print is in the ash.
The ash has long twin lines.
It shows a big belly, and a
wide tail that drags back.
No boot. No coat. Just a
thing that **creeps** low when
no one **sees**. Adaeze has a
keen brain. She **needs** to
show the king, the elders, all
the town what the man is. If
not, it is just her tale, and a
sweet man's charm can win.

At the **meeting**, Adaeze **speaks** to the man. 'Here by the lake, **each** man who asks for my hand must show he is at **ease** with water.' The man holds out his hands. 'With **ease**.' 'We tip water on the hands at **each** big **meal**,' says Adaeze. 'But we tip from the left, and **each** hand must be flat and still. Flat hands **mean** a man is true.' Adaeze makes up this rite on the spot, but she **speaks** so well that **three** old men nod along.



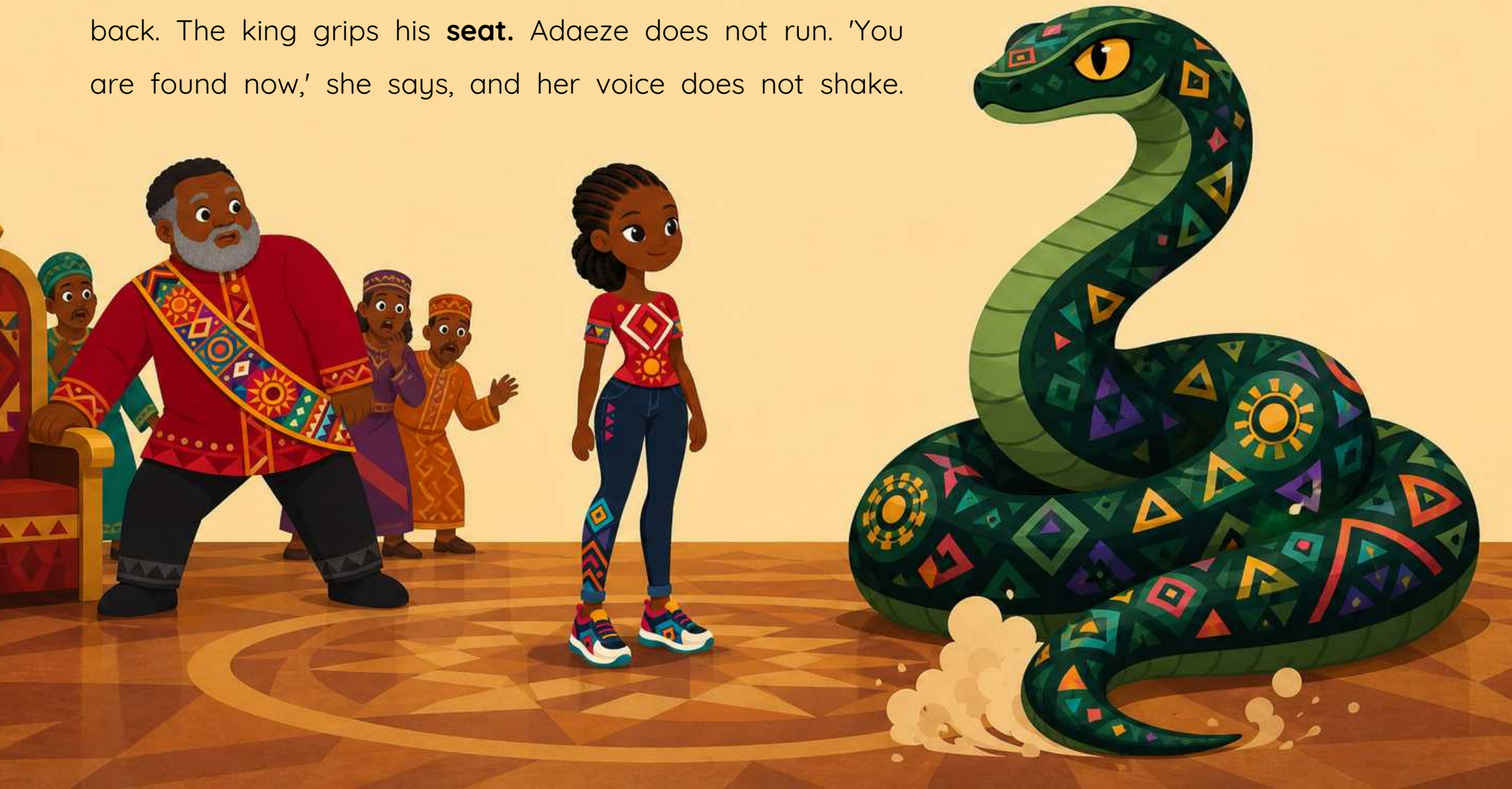
A small lad brings a pitcher.
Adaeze tips a thin **stream**
on the man's left hand, then
his other. As the **stream** hits,
a thing shifts. That hand, just
for a **beat**, starts to change.
The fingers get thin and join.
The skin gets dark marks.
Then the man stops it, and
the hand is just a hand. But
all in the room **see** it. The
room goes still, so still.





'No one saw a thing,' says the man, and his **sweet** voice is not **sweet** now. 'Look well, Adaeze. There is not a thing to **see**. You are a silly girl who **reads** too much.' 'I **read** tracks,' says Adaeze. She lifts the ash disc so all can **see** the twin lines pressed in it. 'And I **read** this.' She sets it on the floor by his **feet**. The man looks at it a long **beat**. Then he stands tall, and **keeps** on rising.

The dark coat falls away. There stands a huge snake, skin dark as the lake, a body wide as a man's chest. His gaze **gleams** like yellow lamps. He fills the room, and his tail **sweeps** the floor with a sound like rain. All the elders **leap** back. The king grips his **seat**. Adaeze does not run. 'You are found now,' she says, and her voice does not shake.



The big snake looks at Adaeze a long **beat**. A **beast** that is named and **seen** must **speak** true. It can not hide now. It can not harm the one who **sees** it. 'You are more clever than the last **three** lands,' it says. Its voice is old and low now. 'I will go.' Adaeze **agrees**. 'You will go. And you will not come back.' 'And if I do?' Adaeze lifts the ash disc. 'Then I will make more.'





The snake slips off into the lake. It hardly stirs the water, and then it fades. The lake goes still. The land is at **peace**. That night the king sits with Adaeze and holds her hand a long time, and says not a thing, and that says a lot. Old Mama Nnaji, by the **reeds, sees** it all and gives a slow nod. The disc is her gift, yes. But Adaeze can tell where to set it.

The tale goes far. Other clans come to ask Adaeze. How can she tell? What does she **see**? Adaeze says the same thing **each** time. 'Look well. Trust what you **see**.' She still sits at dusk, **feet** in the cool water, **reading** the sky's shade. And at the way in, on the smooth floor, Adaeze **keeps** a faint ash ring. Not from dread. It is just a habit. A **keen** brain, like a good trap, is best when it is set to spring.





The Sweet Man

Adaeze is clever and keen, reading the lake's moods and naming every tree by sight. When a smooth-voiced suitor arrives at the palace gate, everyone is dazzled but her. She senses something is wrong the moment she sees him, but what could a girl possibly prove against a charming stranger's word? Written for Jolly Phonics classrooms (Step 3, Unit 5: /ee/ mixed), this book practices words like 'see', 'sweet', 'feet', 'speak' and 'green'.

Phonics Focus: <mixed>

agree, agrees, beast, beat, creep, creeps, deep, each, ease, feel, feels, feet, gleams, green, keen, keep, keeps, leap, leaves, meal, mean, meet, meeting, meets, needs, peace, read, reading, reads, reed, reeds, seat, see, seek, seen, sees, speak, speaks, stream, sweep, sweeps, sweet, three, trees

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