

A princess returns home to her cursed tribe after three years of banishment. Traveling with her is an Afro European student from London, England who bargains with her to make an exchange for an ancient artifact stolen from her tribe for gold to pay off his student loans.

KONGO

The Greatest Love Part 1

by Dadiene Davis

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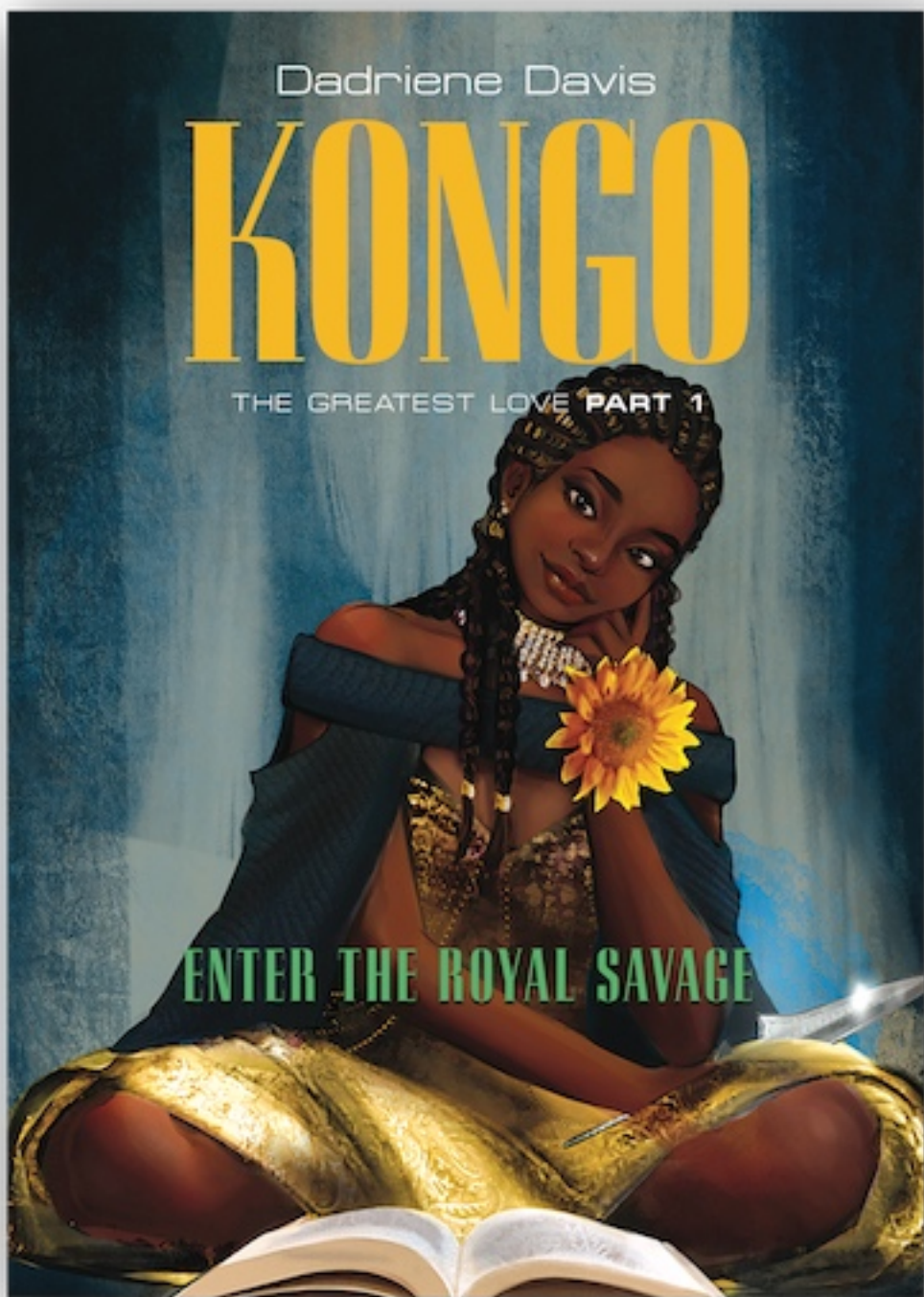
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Dadriene Davis

KONGO

THE GREATEST LOVE PART 1

ENTER THE ROYAL SAVAGE



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Chapter II - Judgement Day

The next day, in the Lohembe household, Ekanga, Beni, Nene and Elizabeth are in the living room, opening dozens of gifts from the villagers. “There’s gotta be like a thousand gifts in this house,” Beni says.

“And there are still people telling me that they’re getting me something,” Ekanga replies.

“You are loved, Tina,” Elizabeth says. “Aren’t you happy? Tomorrow you’ll be a married woman.”

“Tina, are we only keeping the cards that have money in them, or all of them?” Nene asks.

“Just the...” Ekanga pauses and looks at her mother. “All of them, Nene,” she says with a fake smile. Beni and Nene look at each other.

“Oh, it’ll be just like how you keep all of your birthday cards, right?” Beni says, jokingly

“*Just* like that,” Ekanga replies.

Joshua enters the house with a gift in his hand. “Ladies, greetings,” he says.

“Joshua, where have you been?” Elizabeth asks.

“You have a gift for Tina?!” Beni asks.

“Of course, I never thought I’d see the day Tina got married!” Joshua says.

“Me either,” Nene replies.

Joshua hands the gift to Ekanga as she rolls her eyes at Nene. “Okay, Joshua,” she says. “It’s good to know that out of all six of my siblings, four of them love me enough to get me a gift for my wedding day.”

“It’s not *my* wedding,” says Nene.

Ekanga opens the gift and grins, “Oh my gosh, Joshua!” she yells, pulling a silver charm bracelet out of the small box. “It’s a charm bracelet...and it’s beautiful!”

Beni agrees. “It is beautiful. It looks just like the one you bought a few months ago!”

“Wait,” Ekanga says, examining the bracelet closely, “This *is* mine.” She glances at Joshua, confused as he looks away from her with a bleak expression on his face.

“Joshua, I know you didn’t,” Beni says.

“I... I... uhh” Joshua stutters, “Nene told me to do it!” he yells.

Nene gasps, “Joshua!”

“She’s the one who stole the bracelet for me! How else would I have known where to find it?! Joshua yells. Beni and Elizabeth are laughing

“What’s the point of us being twins if you’re just gonna snitch on me all the time!” Nene yells.

“It’s okay, Nene, it’s the thought that counts,” Elizabeth says.

“Why is Tina getting so many gifts?” Nene cries, “I never get this much stuff on my birthday because I always have to split everything with Joshua. Mommy, this isn’t fair!” She storms out of the living room as Elizabeth stands up to follow her.

“She’s having another one of her moments,” she says. “I’ll go check on her, don’t go anywhere, Tina. I have a gift to give you as well.” Elizabeth leaves the room.

“For God’s sake, Nene,” Beni says.

Ekanga puts her charm bracelet on and picks up her bookbag. “I guess I appreciate my gift, Joshua...literally *my* gift,” she says, walking towards the door.

“Tina, where are you going? Mommy said she has something to give you,” Beni says.

“You know Nene’s breakdowns can last for hours. I’ll be back soon,” Ekanga replies as Joshua steps in front of the door. He is glaring at her with a serious look in his eyes.

“Joshua,” Ekanga says, “You good?”

“Tina.” Joshua says, “I don’t know what it is, or why you’re so concerned about it ...but whatever you’re looking for outside of this village, it’s time you let it go.” Ekanga is stunned as Beni gasps, covering her mouth.

“I didn’t wanna bring it up,” Joshua continues, “but I thought you had learned your lesson when Amir was exiled. You know there are consequences for your actions, right? So why do you defy father's orders? As a member of the royal family, this type of behavior is totally unacceptable.”

Ekanga grips her bookbag strap as she becomes angry. “Joshua,” she says, “I appreciate your concerns.” “No, you don’t,”

Joshua interrupts. “You don’t appreciate anything. Nothing that this tribe or this family has ever done for you has been good enough. For once, can you say ‘thank you’ and actually mean it?”

“Why does it matter?” Ekanga says. “If I wasn’t a princess, I wouldn’t be receiving all of these gifts. No one in this tribe knows anything about being genuine. If they did, then they wouldn’t put up with these stupid traditions.”

Joshua is quiet.

“Right,” Ekanga says, “these are the same laws that cut Amir off from the tribe like he meant nothing. We don’t even know if he’s alive, Joshua!”

“Exactly. Because we don’t know what’s beyond that border,” Joshua says, “You think you have the world figured out just because you read about it in them old-ass books that Muraty brings you! They don’t account for anything!”

“You won’t make me feel guilty for wanting to know about things that don’t involve weaving baskets, building copper mines and breaking a stupid curse that’s never gonna go away!” Ekanga yells.

“So, what? You’re embarrassed by your tribe now? Joshua asks, angrily.

“Joshua, move from in front of the door,” Ekanga responds. Beni is frightened as Joshua glares hopelessly at Ekanga.

“Tina, you know the rules of the royal family, he says. We can’t say “no” to any punishment for any crime. Don’t put us in that situation, please...that’s all I ask.”

He leaves the house as Ekanga stands silently, contemplating on what he said.

About an hour later, she is in her room, folding clothes. She picks up her spear and looks at her reflection in its blade.

“Tina?” Elizabeth calls from down the hall.

Ekanga quickly places the spear under the bed then sits down as if nothing happened. Elizabeth enters the room, holding a blouse. “Hi, mommy,” Ekanga says.

“Tina, my baby,” Elizabeth replies, “I can’t believe I’m finally presenting this to you. I have to keep it in the family tradition.” She hands Ekanga a blouse comprised of the colors of the Kimoni tribe, which are blue, black and yellow.

“Uhh, nice, mommy,” Ekanga says. “Is this like the ones that you gave Ya Cecile, Carine and Christelle when they got married?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth responds, “all of your aunties and grandmothers have one. It’s good for a housewife to be comfortable at all times.”

Ekanga gives another fake smile. “Right, well...It’s beautiful.” She accompanies the smile with a fake hug as well.

“You’ve been a gem since the day you were born,” Elizabeth says.

“Mommy, usually you say I’m a hard rock,” Ekanga responds. “Well that too,” Elizabeth says, “but deep down, you have a spirit purer than the sacred stones themselves, and I can’t believe that on tonight, you’re finally going to do it.”

“Mommy, I get it, no one thought I’d ever get married,” Ekanga says.

“That’s not it,” Elizabeth says. “Tonight, we expect the curse to be broken—finally! This is the first time in our history that someone of the Kimoni Tribe has wed someone from the Asha Tribe.”

Ekanga begins to think.

“Oh, yea...the founders of both tribes were married at one point before the village people stressed them out...gosh, marriage sounds fun,” she says.

“Tina, you’re doing a brave deed for your people. After tonight, you won’t just be a wife. You’ll be a hero,” Elizabeth says.

Ekanga frowns and looks away from her mother. “You guys...you have too much hope,” she says.

“Well, that’s who we are,” Elizabeth responds. “The Kimoni tribe...and even the Asha Tribe live by three principals: to have hope, to have faith and to love each other no matter what. If you can live by those three things, then you’ll always be happy.”

Elizabeth gets up to leave the room. “Oh and, Nene feels bad about how she acted earlier,” she says as she pauses, “Y’know it’s funny that she and Joshua are twins but you and her favor so much. She really admires you but won’t ever admit it.”

Ekanga begins to think. “Mommy,” she says as Elizabeth turns around at the door.

“Yes?” she responds.

Ekanga pauses. “You said you want me to be happy...and I do too. Are you in happy with dad?”

Elizabeth is startled as she ponders on her daughter’s question. “Well of course,” she says, “regardless of what this curse says, I know your father is the one for me.”

Elizabeth exits as Ekanga stands up in deep thought. She turns to pick up the blouse her mother gave her and lifts it into the air to observe it. She puts it down and grabs her spear from under her bed then hurries out of the door.

In the courtyard’s reception hall, many villagers work to set up the wedding. Marcel and Sultan are discussing the details of the event. Beni and Joshua are also present. Sefu and many of his family members have just arrived.

Joshua is seated in a corner opening jars of paint.

“Well,” Sultan says. “I look forward to tonight. The wedding will start at 7 pm sharp. We *do* intend to start on time. Is that correct, Chief Marcel?”

“Of course,” Marcel says. “Besides, Tina is my most punctual child...she doesn’t go by African time anyway.”

Sultan adds, “She doesn’t go by majority of the things we do.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Marcel asks.

“Nothing, I’m sorry...eh anyway...have you met your daughter’s in-laws?” Sultan asks. He motions to Sefu’s family, who all surround him hyping him up for his big day.

Marcel notices one girl seated at the table, not interacting with anyone. He is slightly confused but chooses to ignore it. Beni has noticed the girl too but breaks her focus to see what Joshua is doing. Still upset about his argument with Ekanga, Joshua has pouted the whole time. Beni walks over to check on him.

“Joshua--” she says before suddenly pausing. Beni gasps frantically to see that Joshua has painted the marks of dishonor on the floor. Her memory immediately flashes back to Amir’s trial where his face was painted with those same symbols before he was banished. She thinks about Ekanga’s rampage, which led to her solitary confinement. Beni begins walking backward out of the door where she bumps into Nene.

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“Ow, Beni,” Nene says, “you stepped on my feet. Watch where you’re going!”

Surprised, Beni exclaims, “Nene! What are you doing here?!”

Nene pauses. “I’m helping set up for the wedding,” she says.

“It’s okay,” Beni says, “They don’t need help...let’s go get dressed.”

Nene is confused. “Are you okay?”

“Yea, come on!” Beni says with a smile as she pulls Nene by the hand.

Right outside of the village, Matthew has set up a tent in the forest. He polishes his gold detector before turning it on. He walks around in the grass when suddenly the detector starts beeping. Excited, Matthew runs over to the spot from which signals transmit to his device. Then it shuts off. Angrily, he smashes it against the ground, breaking it.

“Damn it!!!” he yells, causing the birds in the forest to fly away.

Ekanga and Ishui are at her hiding spot sitting by the river. Ekanga is using a rock to sharpen the blade of her spear. She suddenly has a flashback of Amir’s trial.

In the flashback, Ekanga and her six siblings stand on stage in a line next to Elizabeth and Chief Marcel, who is seated. Amir stands before them. Two guards have shackled him with platinum handcuffs. Chief Sultan is present and leads the trial.

“Nwachukwu, Amir” Sultan says in a threatening voice. “Today you stand before the chiefs of both the Kimoni and Asha tribes because you have committed an act of treason against your people. The laws strictly forbid us from having contact with the outside world, and you do know why that is, correct?”

All members of the royal family look directly at Amir. Ekanga is already tearing up at the thought of his response. Amir looks up at Chief Sultan.

“Yes, I am well aware of the rules and customs of our tribe,” he says. “I’ve known since the day I first opened my eyes, your majesty.”

“Then tell me,” Sultan says. “Tell me exactly why we have tried to keep the existence of our villages a secret from the rest of the world for the last two hundred years?”

Marcel sits up in his chair, preparing to hear Amir’s answer. Amir closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “It is...to keep love on the outside,” he says.

Everyone in the courtyard gasps. Sultan begins biting down on his teeth.

“What ...what did you say?!” He asks, infuriated.

“I am a poor child who lives here in the village,” Amir responds. “My mother died from an unknown illness shortly after I was born. My father was killed in a work accident at the copper mine when I was a boy. For many years, I have never received the affection that a child longs for from their parents. You tell me you want me to marry a stranger when I come of age, but my heart is telling me to follow it...and it led me outside of the village several times. I sneak out and come back because this is my home. But I don’t intend to stop trying until I find the one I love.”

Everyone in the courtroom is dumbfounded. Ekanga’s eyes are watering as she smiles joyfully. Sultan has become even more furious.

One of the guards speaks. “Your honor, he has confessed to committing this crime more than once. Should he not be sentenced to death?”

Ekanga interrupts. “No!” she says. “You can’t do that!”

“Tina!” Elizabeth says.

Christelle grabs Ekanga and pulls her towards her. Sultan walks towards Amir and slaps him.

“Wrong answer,” he says. “We cut ourselves off from the rest of the world because there have been people in the past who have tried to destroy us. They

conquered most of Africa, and it took centuries for us to regain our freedom. If that's what you want to call it."

He takes a step back.

"Now, the world outside of this village is dangerous. Mt. Amri blessed us with a landscape that has kept us hidden for all these years, and you would dare put our lives at risk because your *heart* tells you to do it? You are selfish, and there will be consequences for your actions."

Sultan begins walking towards the stage.

"Chief Marcel, what do you propose we do with the traitor?"

Marcel looks at Amir. "Well, he didn't bring any harm upon our tribe...yet," he says. "So, we must punish him accordingly...maybe, community service."

Sultan looks upset. "He could have potentially had everyone in this village killed, and you think community service is a suitable punishment? Chief Marcel, where is your backbone?"

"I agree, daddy!" Ekanga says.

All members of the royal family gasp.

"Tina!" Christelle says, "You know you're not supposed to speak without permission from the chief." Ekanga frowns.

“Chief Marcel...it seems like your middle daughter isn't fully in sync with the rules herself yet,” Chief Sultan says.

“Tina,” Marcel says in a stern voice.

Ekanga continues to frown as she looks away from her father. Amir begins to laugh, and everyone directs their attention towards him again. “Ekanga...you are one of a kind,” he says.

“Do you wish to have this criminal decapitated or what, Chief Marcel?! I'm sick of his ignorance.” Sultan says angrily.

The members of the royal family gasp again as Marcel begins to think.

“Decapitated...for what? He says, “no one was hurt.”

“But he broke the law!” Sultan yells, “May I remind you that the village is cursed! It is our civic duty to protect our treasures, especially the sacred stones. If someone gets their hands on them, Mt. Amri will annihilate both of our tribes! Don't you understand the severity of this?! Think about your family!”

Marcel looks over to see his kids standing silently. They are all frightened.

“May I speak?” Amir asks.

“Yes,” Marcel answers rather quickly.

Amir has become more serious. “For thousands of years, this tribe has struggled to fight the curse cast upon us by Mt. Amri. We know that only true love will set us free from bondage. But the laws won’t allow us to practice love in its purest form. Instead, we make guesses. It was our own ignorance that caused Mt. Amri’s wrath, and it is our ignorance that keeps us oppressed.”

“And I suppose you think you could run this tribe better than your chief, Marcel?”

Sultan says, turning to Marcel with a clever look. Marcel is silent.

“You are a strange man, chief Sultan,” Amir says. “You try to guide your people with a heart full of hatred, and you use your influence over Chief Marcel to your advantage. Don’t you see the actual issue here?”

Sultan turns to face Amir. “No, tell me, Amir...but choose your words carefully, they may be your last.”

Amir swallows his saliva then smiles. “No one who misinterprets the concept of love is worthy of calling themselves a ruler,” he says.

Everyone in the courtroom is shocked.

“Alright, it’s time we put this boy to rest,” says one guard.

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“You will learn to respect your elders, you orphan!” says the other guard. They push Amir to the ground and begin kicking him.

Ekanga slowly begins to lose control. “Hey, leave him alone!” she says as she breaks free of Christelle’s grip.

“Tina, stop it!” Christelle yells as she tries to restrain her sister.

Elizabeth enters the conflict and tries to calm Ekanga. “Tina, you can’t behave like this!”

“Enough!” Marcel yells, “Tina, contain yourself, now!” Marcel looks at Amir then to Chief Sultan. “Chief Sultan, are you ready to determine the verdict?!” he says.

“I’ve *been* ready,” Sultan says, “We’ll make this quick.”

Sultan walks to the center of the stage as the guards stand Amir to his feet.

“Nwachukwu Amir,” he says. “You are being held accountable for betraying your tribe and all of its customs. Going outside of the village walls is against the law, and you broke it deliberately. For your act of treason, I hereby declare you banished from the Kimoni and Asha tribes forever!”

Ya Cecile and Carine gasp.

“Ushers, please present him with marks of dishonor,” Sultan says.

The ushers go to Amir and paint his face with the marks of dishonor while Ekanga watches in disbelief. Amir receives his marks with pride, however. As the ushers finish painting, Sultan turns to the royal family. “Do the members of the royal family support this verdict? If so, confirm your decision by saying, “I.”

“I!” Marcel says quickly. Ekanga looks at her father in shock.

Elizabeth pulls Ekanga closer to her. “I!” she says.

Ya Cecile follows, then Carine, Christelle, Joshua, Nene and more reluctantly, Beni.

Sultan glares at Ekanga with a look of disgrace. “Has *everyone* spoken?!” he asks sarcastically.

“Tina, please,” Christelle says. “Please don’t do this.”

Ekanga ignores Christelle and looks directly at her father, then to Amir. “Tina,” Marcel says, “you know what you have to do.”

Ekanga closes her eyes, angrily. “I... I can’t,” she says. “I can’t do it.” Her siblings and mother are all frustrated.

“Tina,” says Elizabeth.

Marcel begins walking towards Ekanga before Sultan begins to speak again.

“Is that your final answer, Princess Ekanga? You do understand that you’re obligated to speak against a criminal. Any other gesture is a charge against you. So, I’ll ask again, will you confirm your approval of Amir’s banishment for treason?!”

Ekanga opens her eyes. “No!” she says, “No, I don’t approve of it or any of your stupid laws!” Her siblings are all shocked as Chief Sultan smiles deviously.

“Tina,” Marcel says in sadness.”

“Take the boy away,” Sultan commands the guards.

The guards begin to roughly escort Amir out of the courtroom as Ekanga finally loses her mind. “Amir!!! Wait!” she says as she begins to run from the stage.

Marcel stops her and traps her in his arms. “Danga, Carine, take her out of here,” he yells.

The siblings grab Ekanga, who is still watching the guards take Amir away. Amir turns to Ekanga and smiles, causing her to calm down.

As the flashback comes to an end, Ekanga reflects on her ten days in solitary where she sat in a small jail cell. The memory is interrupted by the sound of something breaking in the forest far away. Ekanga stands up and looks across the grassland at the

southern part of the forest beyond the village's borders. All she hears are birds chirping in the trees. She picks up her copper spear and turns to leave the river, but then she pauses. She turns around to look across the grassland again.

"No, Ekanga ...No, you're not gonna do it. You can't do it!" She turns to walk away again. After taking a few steps, she turns back around.

"But what was that noise coming out of the forest, though?" she asks herself. "You know what, Ekanga, it's none of your business, that's what it is." She turns around and takes a few more steps then she stops again.

Ekanga begins an internal debate. "Okay but ...but what if it's an intruder ...or it could be a wild bear. I don't know...maybe I should let the warriors handle it...but I am a warrior...at least I think I am. Am I? No, Ekanga, you are a princess, and you are NOT going into that part of the forest because it's past the border and against the law!" She takes one more step then pauses.

"Ishui, stay here."

In the forest, Matthew is packing up his things. "Stupid device, how dare you not work when I'm so...so frickin close to being rich!" He picks up his walkie talkie.

“Calling in from Unit 2, yea, the mission is over! Have my flight here by midnight, please!” he says. He hits the end button and begins to look around. “Where’s my toiletry bag?” he says angrily.

Matthew gets up and heads to his tent. Ekanga is watching him from a bush around his camp.

“Is that...a white man?” she asks. She looks around at all of Matthew’s technology.

“I wonder where he went,” she says to herself. “I have to report this back to the village ASAP.”

She observes the camp some more and notices a stack of books on the ground.

“Woah, he can read too?”

Ekanga emerges from the bush and looks around to be sure that no one is watching. She walks over to the machines and examines them before picking up a book. “*Dawn of a New Age*,” she reads the title.

Ekanga begins flipping through the pages and becomes interested in the photos of machines. While she is looking through the book, Matthew comes out of his tent and notices her.

“What the...,” he whispers to himself.

Ekanga jumps, dropping the book upon hearing him and turns to him with her spear.

“Don’t be scared. You’re okay!” Matthew says with his hands up. “I won’t hurt you...I’m hoping you won’t hurt me.”

Ekanga sizes him up with her eyes. Matthew has become nervous. “Are you from around here?” he asks.

Ekanga does not answer.

Matthew examines her clothes.

“You’re a countryside girl, I can see that...I’m guessing you like to read? *Can* you read?”

Ekanga’s cold stare begins to ease up as he mentions reading.

Matthew becomes less nervous now. “What’s...what’s your name?” he asks.

Ekanga continues to stare at him while he still has his hands up. Matthew closes his eyes, still a tad bit nervous.

“What are you doing here?” Ekanga asks.

Matthew opens his eyes in shock. “Wait, so you speak English...Well, hi, I’m Matthew. It’s nice to meet you uhh...little Congolese girl,” he says. “... you mind putting that weapon down for me so we can uhh...use our words?”

“I want you out of this forest now, or I’ll kill you,” Ekanga says with a deadly stare.

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“No, no. No need for that” Matthew says. “Violence is never the answer.”

“Really?” Ekanga says. “Then explain all of these weapons here.”

Matthew looks around. “Okay...these are for research purposes...what’s your excuse?”

“Colonization,” Ekanga responds quickly.

“I’m...I’m sorry to hear that,” Matthew says. “But I promise, I’m not here to hurt anyone. I’m on a mission.”

“A mission?” Ekanga asks. “What kind?”

Matthew looks around to stall for his lie. “Uhh, I’m looking for uhh...things...shiny things...ya know like...” He thinks for a moment. “Light bulbs,” he says.

“Light bulbs,” Ekanga replies, “what’s that?”

Matthew is surprised. “You don’t know what a light bulb is? They don’t have those in your village?” “No,” Ekanga says.

Matthew has an idea. “Oh well, cool. I’ll just show y-” He takes a step towards Ekanga, accidentally provoking her into slicing through his shirt with her spear. “Woahhh!!” he yells. “What do you think you’re doing?!” Ekanga replies. “Geez, I’m just grabbing the book for you to look at!” Matthew says while covering himself up.

“I’ll get it myself, European man.” Ekanga moves while still holding the spear towards him.

“European?” Matthew responds, “What makes you think I’m European?” “What else would you be?” Ekanga replies. “Your skin may not be as white as your ancestors, but you have their evil eyes of deceit.”

“Hey, watch it, Aunt Jemima, okay...I’m actually from Portugal,” Matthew admits.

“Aunt J-who?” Ekanga asks.

Matthew sighs, “Do you wanna look at the books or not?” Ekanga sits down and picks up the book as Matthew turns to walk away.

“Hey!” Ekanga yells.

“I’m just going to get you something that will help you read better,” Matthew says, a bit annoyed.

“Don’t try anything, ‘Christopher,’ cause I’m not the one, I can promise you that,” Ekanga says sternly.

“I know, I know,” he responds, not acknowledging her Columbus dig.

Ekanga begins to read through the pages as Matthew discreetly pulls his walkie talkie out. “Hi, this is Unit 2 again,” he whispers through the mic, “cancel that flight until dawn. I have another plan.”

He puts the device in his shirt pocket and pulls out a highlighter then takes it to Ekanga. “Here,” he says, holding it out in front of her.

“What is this?” she asks.

“C’mon, surely you know what a highlighter is,” Matthew says, “You use it to ...brighten up the words on the page...like the words you’ve never seen before.”

Ekanga stares at him strangely.

“You know what, let me do it,” Matthew says while rolling his eyes. He sits down and takes the book from her then highlights the word “exuberant.”

“Exuberant,” he reads, “egg-zoo-bear-hunt, exuberant.” That gets her attention.

“What does that mean?” she asks.

“Ahh...it’s like when you’re happy,” Matthew explains. “Don’t the kids in Africa like dancing in the streets and stuff? Y’know? That’s an example of what it means to be exuberant.”

“Ohh,” Ekanga says, “Let’s do another one.”

Matthew begins to look through the book, “Okay, how about ‘enamored.’ he says, “Ee-nam-ored. It means t-”

“It means to be in love,” Ekanga says. “Or maybe to have feelings of love...I wouldn’t know.”

Matthew wants clarification. “You wouldn’t know what? The definition or the feeling?”

Ekanga pauses. “I don’t know. I guess neither,” she says.

Matthew pauses and looks at her. He blushes as he is slightly mesmerized by her beauty. "Let's try another word," he says.

About two hours later, Matthew is still sitting next to Ekanga, showing her things inside different books. He is having the time of his life. "And that's when the Roman Empire fell," Matthew says.

"Wow, and you've actually been to Rome?" Ekanga asks.

"Seven times," Matthew replies. "Italy is one beautiful country. Venice actually reminds me of Belgium with their boats."

"Belgium..." Ekanga says in a serious tone.

"Yes, you have not had breakfast until you've had a Belgian waffle," Matthews says with a smile.

Ekanga frowns. "I'm sure my people have had enough of everything from Belgium," she says while closing the book.

"Huh, what do you m---Ohh," Matthew says. "That's right. They're the ones who colonized this part of Africa. Sorry."

Ekanga softens, "Don't be. It won't change anything. Besides, you're from Portugal...your beef is with Angola, not Congo."

Matthew stares at Ekanga as she looks away from him. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small

chip. “I don’t want problems with anyone,” he says while placing his hand over Ekanga’s. “I was actually hoping we could be friends.” He discreetly places the chip on the end of her spear.

Ekanga becomes nervous as Matthew leans in towards her for a kiss. She turns away. “Thanks, but I’m not really good at making friends,” she says. “I never have been.”

Matthew laughs. “Well, you could’ve fooled me, he says. Then, he interrogates. “You came here for a reason, right? Were you looking for something?”

Ekanga has the flashback of Amir telling the jury that he had been searching for something outside of the village. She returns to reality and begins to think. “Yes,” she says while sitting up straight, “I am...”

“What is it,” Matthew asks, “what are you looking for?”

Ekanga looks at him. “I’m looking for...,” she says. Matthew leans in towards her and stares deeply into her eyes.

“My wedding!” Ekanga says.

Matthew is shocked. “What?” he says.

Ekanga stands up and begins to look around. “My wedding starts soon. I have to get back home.”

Matthew stands up. “Wait, you’re getting married? But I thought you said you weren’t in love with anyone!”

Ekanga hurriedly picks up her spear. “It’s complicated!”

Matthew is confused as he turns to pick something up. Ekanga has moved a few feet away towards the bushes. She pauses and begins to think again.

“But what was I *really* looking for?” she whispers to herself.

“Hey!” Matthew says. Ekanga turns to him and sees him holding a device. She gasps and points her spear towards him again.

“Don’t worry,” Matthew laughs. “It’s just a camera.”

Ekanga lowers her spear. “A camera? I’ve seen one of those before.”

Matthew raises the camera. “Then smile. You have a beautiful smile.”

Ekanga poses for the picture, although she has no idea of what is actually going on.

“Perfect,” Matthew says after taking the photo.

Ekanga turns towards the bushes. “I have to go now...” she says.

“Wait!” Matthew says, “Uh...did you wanna take the books with you, you can have them if you want!”

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Ekanga declines as she prepares to leave again. “No, thanks!” She pauses one last time. “Oh, and Matthew, don’t follow me back home...or I’ll kill you.”

She runs through the bushes as Matthew blushes. “I won’t be following you,” he says while taking out a tracking device. “But you’ll be seeing me soon, little Congolese girl.” The device shows a red dot moving through the forest. Seconds later, the photo of Ekanga prints out of the camera. Matthew takes it and observes it. “Man, what a beauty...I wonder how old she is?”

Later on, that night, the festivities of Founder’s Day have begun. Nearly a thousand people have gathered at the venue at the base of Mt. Amri to celebrate the special occasion. Many of the attendants are dancing to African pop music. The members of the Asha tribe are present in their tribal colors: dark pink, orange, and black. They stand on the left side of the venue.

“I can’t believe this actually started on time,” says one of the guests at a table.

“Me either,” another guest responds.

On the Asha Tribe’s side, the same girl from earlier that day who had not been interacting with anyone is standing quietly, still not socializing with anyone. Beni

is dancing with one of her smaller cousins. She looks up to see her friend, Neema from the Asha tribe.

“Neema!” she says as she and Neema run to greet each other. “I’m so glad you came!”

“Beni, you look amazing,” Neema says. “Where is Joshua...and where is Nene?”

“They’re around here somewhere,” Beni says. “Of course, you know where Tina is.”

“Yes! I’m so happy for her!” Neema says. “Although it has to be hard to break up a happy home just because of the stupid law.”

Beni pauses. “Huh?” she says, “what do you mean, “break up a happy home?”

Neema looks at Beni in confusion. “Wait, you don’t know about Sefu?” she asks. He was engaged to someone before he was told to marry Princess Ekanga.”

Beni is surprised. “What,” she responds, “to who?”

Neema explains. “To Kia,”

She motions towards the girl who has been anti-social the entire night. Beni stares in confusion. “So, he had planned to marry someone else?” she asks, “I mean ...I guess that won’t be too big of a deal...I’m sure this isn’t the first time something like this has happened.”

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“He hadn’t just planned to marry her, Beni,” Neema continues, “they were already living together.”

“Well, that’s why they say, “Don’t shack up,” Beni replies.

“Well, what else would you expect?” Neema responds. “She *is* carrying his child.”

Beni freezes in place. She then turns to look at Kia and she screams, “Nene!!!!”

Nene is on the dance floor with her cousins dancing as Beni rushes over to her. “Nene, we have to find Tina!” she says.

“She’s upstairs getting dressed,” Nene responds, “what’s going on?!”

Beni is frantic. “Just come on!”

Upstairs in the dressing room, Christelle and Carine are helping Ekanga get dressed. “Okay, come out,” Christelle says. Ekanga comes out of the bathroom wearing a golden fishtail dress. Her hair is braided into several cornrows and she is wearing a sparkling headband.

“Tina, you did your thing on that dress,” Carine says, “it’s beautiful!”

Ekanga is proud. “I’m just glad I got it done in time!” she says as she turns to examine her body in the mirror.

“Yass, my sister is a fashionista...but, are you sure this dress won’t slide off of you?” Christelle asks.

“Christelle, I made it to fit me perfectly, it’s fine.” Ekanga responds.

“Why would you ask that?” Carine says, “it’s probably too tight if you ask me.”

Christelle teases her sister. “Ugh! See, there you go, Ms. Modesty.”

“You need to take notes,” Carine says. “You know we’re not allowed to show but so much skin. We went through 37 dresses before Daddy approved of one for your wedding.”

“The good times,” Christelle responds while sipping her wine. “Tina, who braided your hair? You went to the salon?”

Ekanga responds. “Nene did it.”

Carine offers faint praise. “Aw, your little twin. I swear that girl can be an angel when she wants to be.”

“So, are you ready for tonight?” Christelle asks.

“As ready as I’ll ever be at this point,” Ekanga says. “I don’t know how Sefu is feeling but ...I swear, when he proposed to me ...it just...it didn’t feel right. It wasn’t genuine.”

“Well, how do you feel about him after 24 hours?” Christelle asks.

“...I feel like...I’m just settling,” Ekanga responds.

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“Welcome to the family curse,” Carine says.

“Well, either way, Tina ...you can’t let anyone ruin your happiness for tonight!” Christelle says.

Moments later, Beni and Nene knock harshly on the door.

“Tina, Tina!” they call out as Christelle opens the door.

“What is wrong with y'all?!” she says. The two of them are out of breath.

“We need...to talk...to Tina,” Beni says while trying to catch her breath. Ekanga is standing in confusion.

Moments later, after Beni and Nene tell her the news, Ekanga lets out a shocking cry. “Mommy!!!!”

About ten minutes later, Elizabeth, Marcel, and Chief Sultan are all in the room. “Do we really have time for this?” Sultan asks. “The wedding starts in five minutes!”

“There is no wedding!” Ekanga says, “I’m not doing it ...I’m not ...a homewrecker!” She begins to cry in her mother’s arms.

“It’s okay, Tina,” Elizabeth says, trying to comfort her distraught daughter.

“Please, handle this,” Sultan says to Marcel as he walks out of the room. Marcel walks over to Ekanga.

“Tina, why are you messing up the makeup we spent so much money on?”

Ekanga fires back. “You knew, didn’t you, daddy?! You knew Sefu was somebody else’s man...and somebody’s baby daddy! What does that make me, daddy? The side chick?!”

“No, Tina, you’re not the side chick, you’re the bride,” Marcel responds.

“Yeah, she’s the stepmom,” Nene adds.

“Shh!” Beni says, trying to diffuse the situation.

“Listen, we can talk about this later,” Marcel says. “In the meantime, there are over a thousand people here to see you get married and break the curse...you’re gonna be everyone’s hero, Tina.”

Ekanga looks at Marcel with teary eyes. “Their hero?” she says. “But I’m nothing but trouble...”

“Yes, you are,” Marcel says with a smile, “but you’ll change everything after today.”

Ekanga thinks for a moment then looks at her father. “If it will make you happy, dad, then I’ll do it.” Marcel continues to smile as he hugs Ekanga, but Ekanga begins to frown.

Outside the village, a team of about a hundred military troops and a few inventors are standing at the giant main entrance door to the village.

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“So, this is it?” one soldier asks. “This is where the gold is?”

Another voices his excitement. “Ooh man! When we leave here, we’re gonna be rich!”

“Yes, but remember,” says Matthew. “You guys are here for protection, leave the gold-finding to us inventors. You’ll get your share when we get back to the corporation.”

“Forget that, I’m trying to go to Santorini with my girl!” another soldier says.

Matthew gasps. “I hope you guys are better fighters than you seem.” He turns towards the doors and pulls a device from his shoulder bag. At the press of a button, the device releases a rope that ascends above the giant door and latches onto the other side. “Tether ropes,” he says to his crew, “makes mounting walls a breeze! Alright Unit 2, let’s move out...or in!”

“Yeah!” they say as they begin climbing the wall with their devices as well.

The wind provides a refreshing breeze as the ceremony progresses. The large audience of about a thousand people at the base of the mountain watches as Mama and Yaya, who are the flower girls, reach the top of the cliff. They happily toss sunflower petals into

the air while wearing the customized dresses Ekanga has made for them.

“Shouldn’t the maid of honor be behind them?” someone asks.

“I don’t think Princess Ekanga has any female friends,” another villager responds.

An elderly man quiets them. “Shh, the bride is here!”

The crowd turns to watch as Ekanga and Marcel come down the aisle. Marcel smiles triumphantly and Ekanga tries to fake a smile as they head towards the stairs of the mountain. The people in the audience are amazed by Ekanga’s beauty and her customized dress. Sefu happily watches from atop the mountain.

As they reach the top, Marcel whispers to Ekanga. “*Tu es belle, Tina*” (You are beautiful). “Thank you, Daddy,” Ekanga says as Marcel lets go of her hand.

She is now standing in front of Sefu, who is gently smiling at her. Because he is faking his happiness so well, Ekanga cannot help but smile too.

Sultan begins to speak. “Greetings, people of the Kimoni and Asha tribes. Tonight, I am honored to wed this significant young man and woman who hail from two of the best tribes in the entire country. As you know, this is the first joint wedding in our history, and

tonight, we intend to break the curse that has haunted our villages for long enough!”

His voice echoes throughout the venue as the audience begins to cheer. Ekanga looks through the crowd to find Kia, and after spotting her, she glances at Sefu. She is irritated. Sefu notices her attitude and becomes concerned. Chief Sultan continues to speak, now reading verses from the Bible. Beni and Nene watch from the wedding party lineup as Sefu grabs Ekanga’s hands. “Princess,” he whispers, “you’re okay, I promise.”

“No, I’m not...” Ekanga whispers back. She motions her eyes towards the area where Kia is standing.

Sefu inhales and exhales heavily as he tries not to turn around. He squeezes Ekanga’s hands tightly. “Don’t worry,” he says, “I love you.”

Christelle turns to Carine and Ya Cecile. “What did he say?” she whispers.

“Alright,” Chief Sultan says. “Now is the time for this beloved couple to say their vows to one another. As tradition requires, the bride will go first.” Sultan swallows with apprehension. “Princess Ekanga...please, say your vows to the groom.”

Ekanga’s family watches on edge, afraid of what she might say. Ekanga glances at Kia in the audience

again, then at Sefu. She closes her eyes and breathes. Opening her eyes, she says, “Sefu ...after all these years of dreaming ...those nights I felt like this day would never come, you came into my life and you ...you asked me to be yours. I’ve never had a clear image of what love is, but throughout the years that we’ll spend together, I hope...” she begins to choke on her words, “I hope that you can teach me...and I hope that I can be everything you ever wanted in this life. Just please, give me the chance to show you that I can.” She squeezes his hands and begins to cry. Sefu also tears up, trying not to break down.

“And now, we will hear from the groom,” Sultan says.

Sefu takes Ekanga’s face into his hands and smiles at her. “Princess Ekanga...we haven’t had much time to spend together...but even now at this moment I know that you are a girl that every man dreams of. You’re beautiful, smart, and talented in so many things...but most importantly, you have a heart bigger than this village itself. I don’t know if I’m worthy enough to be your husband, but if not, please help me to understand you more...so this feeling of unworthiness can go away. Please...I just want to make you happy.”

Ekanga’s heart drops at hearing Sefu mention happiness. Kia is in the audience, still silent. “I’m

ready to save the tribe with you,” Sefu says with a smile and tears streaming down his face.

The audience is in awe as they begin to clap.

“Then it is settled,” Sultan says. “Princess Ekanga Maltina Yungo Lohembe, do you take Sefu of the Asha Tribe to be your husband?”

Ekanga pauses for a moment. “I... I do,” she says with a more genuine smile.

“And Sefu Adebayo,” Sultan continues, “do you take Princess Ekanga, of the Kimoni Tribe to be your beloved wife?”

Sefu grips Ekanga’s hands. “I do.”

“Well then, I now pronounce you, husband and wife!” Sultan yells. “Sefu, you may kiss the bride!” The warriors begin to beat their drums as all of the attendees sit up to witness the breaking of the curse. Ekanga’s siblings are nervous. Marcel is nearly sweating. Ekanga and Sefu are hesitant for a moment until Sefu pulls her towards him.

“We’re gonna do this,” he says. Ekanga smiles as the two of them kiss. The villagers begin looking around, waiting for something magical to happen. A few moments pass. Nothing happens. Marcel looks to Sultan in frustration. Sultan tries to avoid making eye contact with him as he is nervous himself. A few seconds later, a loud noise is heard from another part

of the village, far away. The villagers all look around in confusion. Seconds later, smoke begins to rise from the area where the noise occurred.

“They did it! They broke the curse,” someone in the audience yells. The crowd begins to shout in victory, hugging each other, dancing and playing tambourines.

Many in the audience exclaim excitedly, “We are free!”

Ekanga is shocked as Sefu sweeps her off her feet. “Look at what we’ve done!” he says, “I just knew you were someone special!”

Ekanga, trying her best to be happy in the exciting moment, agrees, “Yea.”

As Sefu puts her down, Ekanga begins taking steps towards the cliff, observing the smoke rising into the air. “Smoke?” she says.

“Everyone, to the reception hall!” one villager says, happily. The crowd marches jubilantly towards the reception hall next to the venue.

“I hope they know they all can’t fit in there,” Nene says. Beni and Ekanga glance at each other and smile. Ekanga then makes awkward eye contact with Joshua, who nods at her, happily. She smiles at him as well.

In the reception hall, the villagers are singing and dancing harder than ever before. Muraty approaches

Ekanga and Sefu with a camera in his hand. “Congrats, princess!” he says.

“Muraty, you came!” Ekanga says, joyfully. “Look what I’ve got, your highness,” he says, “I got it from a yard sale in another village! Smile!”

Muraty takes several photos of the married couple as well as pictures of the royal family. Ekanga can hardly focus as she looks out among the crowd, trying to find Kia.

“Are you alright, your highness?” Sefu says.

“I’m fine,” Ekanga responds.

“She left,” Sefu informs her. “It’s okay.”

Ekanga looks at him, extremely frustrated, “Sefu had you said something before, we could have-”

Sefu calms her, placing his hands around her face. “Don’t worry about it. That’s my responsibility.” He says. Ekanga sighs softly as her nerves begin to calm. Seconds later, the odor of smoke begins to seep into the room.

“Hey, you smell that?” one of the villagers says. Moments later, another loud noise is heard from outside as a random villager enters the building. His clothes are ripped, and he has several visible bruises on his body. There is blood running down his face from his left eye. The wedding guests are horrified.

“They’re here,” he says, “they have come back for us!”

“What are you talking about?!” someone in the crowd says. Marcel and Sultan stand together, completely confused.

“It is...the white man,” the villager says, “they have found the village!”

The villagers look around, confused on what the man is saying. Ekanga’s eyes grow wide, and she begins to feel as if her soul has left her body. “Oh no!” she says as she runs towards the entrance doors.

“Where are you going?!” Sefu yells.

Ekanga opens the door to the building and sees that many huts in the village are on fire. Marcel and Sultan come next to her.

“No...,” Marcel says, “this can’t be right...Tell me. This can’t be right.”

“How the hell did they find us?!” Sultan yells.

A few seconds later, Matthew appears with his gold detector. He spots Ekanga and is joyful. “Hey, little Congolese girl! Long-time, no see!” he says sarcastically.

“Matthew,” Ekanga yells, “what are you doing?!”

“I told you, I’m on a mission!” he says, “And I’m doing a hell of a job!” Matthew holds out a bag of gold and shows her.

“You thief!” Ekanga says. “I swore that I’d kill you!”

“Sorry, but I can’t let that happen,” Matthew says. “After we wipe you all clean, we’ll burn this village to the ground. You’re free to come with me, though.”

“How did you even find me?!” Ekanga asks.

“Why don’t you check that weapon of yours,” Matthew says. “It led me straight here! Now, if you don’t mind, I’m gonna get going! Oh, and congratulations on your wedding, you look stunning!”

Matthew sprays a can of smoke into the air, blinding them for a moment and allowing him to escape. The three of them are left gagging for air.

“I’ll go prepare the warriors for battle!” Sultan says. “We have to protect our villages!” He runs back into the reception hall.

“Tina ...what have you done?!” Marcel asks in fury.

Ekanga begins to think. “I’ll be back!” She takes off running as Marcel watches her in deep thought.

Ekanga runs through the village as many buildings around her go up in flames. She makes it back to her home and grabs her spear from her room. At the base of the spear, she spots the tracking device. Infuriated, she snatches the device off, throws it to the ground and

crushes it with the spear. “Damn it!” she yells. “Damn it, Ekanga, what did you do?!”

Ekanga backs into a mirror and turns to look at her reflection. Frustrated, she punches and shatters the glass then proceeds to rip her wedding dress off her body.

Ishui is in the barn when the door slides open. Ekanga is standing in her distorted dress. She and Ishui ride back into the main village. She sees many families trying to escape their burning homes. Ekanga turns to see a troop about to set a house ablaze while children are trying to escape from the porch. She leaps off of Ishui and hits the troop across the head with the stick of her spear. The troop falls to the ground and the children run down from the porch as Ekanga covers them.

“Tina!” a voice says. Ekanga turns to see Beni and Nene standing a few feet away from her.

“Nene, Beni, why are y’all here?! You should be at the reception hall so you’ll be safe!” Ekanga yells.

“We came to find you!” Beni cries.

The troop stands and appears behind Ekanga. Nene and Beni gasp but before they can warn her, Ekanga has already turned around and flipped the troop onto his back with the end of her spear. She penetrates his

right arm with the blade and places her foot on his chest. The man screams out in pain.

“Who’s your leader?!” she asks. “Is it Matthew?!” The troop does not respond as he is groaning in pain. “Answer me!” Ekanga demands. The troop begins to cough up blood.

“Why does it matter?” he asks. “When we’re done with this village, there’ll be nothing left. You’ll all be dead!” He reaches for his gun. Irritated, Ekanga pulls the spear from the troop’s arm, raises it into the air and then plunges it into his kidney. The troop yells in pain again as Nene and Beni watch in horror.

“Save as many families as you can and get to safety!” Ekanga orders her sisters as she pulls the blade out of the troop’s lifeless body. She hops on Ishui’s back and rides off throughout the village. Beni and Nene are left standing in shock.

“Beni,” Nene asks, “how did she know the name of their leader?”

Beni looks away from Nene. “Let’s go,” she says as she and Nene run off to help other families.

In the courthouse, Marcel, Sultan, Tabia, and Joshua are discussing battle strategies.

“How many invaders are we dealing with?” Marcel asks.

“I don’t know, they ambushed us...so we don’t have a definite number,” Tabia responds.

“Damn this!” Sultan yells. “Where were the border patrol guards! It was their job to prevent something like this!”

Tabia explains. “We were short on security for the wedding, so we had to pull some of our border guards, your highness. Besides, no one thought that today would be *the day*.”

“None of that matters now!” Marcel laments. “The white devils are here, and we need to defend our people. We need a strategy! And since I don’t know how many men they came with, I’m afraid I’ll have to.... I’ll have to send all of my troops into battle!”

Tabia agrees, “I second that notion.”

Sultan groans. “I would hate for us to lose more lives than we need to because we were unprepared...this is sickening...I don’t know how we’ll counter this.”

Joshua nervously raises his hand. “Chief Sultan, may I speak?” Marcel, Sultan, and Tabia are all confused.

“Prince Osako...” Sultan says, “Go on.”

Joshua stands up. “I don’t think that confronting this situation head-on is the smartest idea,” he says. “The men we’re dealing with have weapons...weapons

that are more advanced than our village itself. The best way to fight these intruders is through long-range attacks.”

Marcel and Sultan look at each other.

“That’s...smart,” Tabia says. “I hadn’t even thought about that...their guns versus our...sticks and clubs...it’s not a fair fight!”

“I understand,” Sultan adds. “We can’t promise that no one will die, but this will definitely decrease the number of deaths.”

“What we need to do now is help villagers escape to safety,” Tabia says.

Sultan looks at Joshua, “Thank you, Prince Osako, for your insight. You’ll make a fine leader one day.”

Sultan and Tabia leave the room. Marcel stands and glares at a nervous Joshua.

In the village, the troops are breaking into homes, bullying families around, and interrogating them to find out where most of the gold is hidden. Some of them stand outside in the streets as they wait for their comrades to come out of the ransacked homes. Suddenly, they are shot down by arrows flying from the air. The Kimoni and Asha warriors are hidden among the rock columns above the village, aiming and killing as many of the intruders as possible. Matthew and his coworker, Saigo have used some invention to

mine into the catacombs of the courthouse. They have found and entered a stairwell.

“Well if I wasn’t sure before...I know for a fact that this thing is leading me straight to the prize,” Matthew says. He and Saigo walk down the stairs and come to a large wooden door.

“What’s up with this village and these big-ass doors?” Saigo asks as he pulls his device out again.

“They wanna keep people like us out,” Matthew laughs.

Saigo uses his mining device to break down the door. They enter a huge room filled with glowing crystals, diamonds, pearls, gems, and gold. Their eyes begin to water at the beauty of the sight.

“Saigo,” Matthew says, “we made it.” They begin touching the gems and closely examining them. Then something catches Matthew’s eye.

“Wait a minute,” he says as he stands in shock. “Saigo, do you see what I see?”

Saigo turns in the direction Matthew is facing. “Nah, what do you s--” Saigo enters a state of shock as well as he sees three glowing orbs sitting among a stone pillar.

They are the Sacred Stones: one of them is purple, one is green, and the other is red. They all are in front

of a painted portrait of Mt. Amri, the revered spiritual being.

“What the heck ...are those?” Saigo says with widened eyes. “I’m almost too afraid to get close to them.”

Matthew runs over to the pillar to get a closer look of the stones. “I’ve never seen anything like ‘em before!” he says. “That Congolese girl was holding back on me.”

“Why would she tell you that they have all this merchandise down here?” Saigo asks.

“Merchandise...I like the sound of that,” Matthew says, “I wonder how much we’ll get paid for these babies.” He picks up the purple stone, and the ground begins to shake a little.

“What the--” Saigo says. “Either that was a coincidence, or maybe we shouldn’t touch those.” Matthew stares at his reflection in the stone with a greedy grin.

In the village, the fires have spread and intensified. Beni and Nene help families escape their homes. Suddenly, the earth begins to shake and quake causing Nene to fall into a crevice. Beni grabs her hand just as she is falling. Nene is screaming for her life as she hangs from the crater, and lava begins to rise from the

earth's core. Seconds later, Joshua grabs Beni and pulls her and Nene up from the crevice. Sefu is with him. The girls hug their brother with joy.

“Joshua!” Nene says in relief.

“Where’s Tina?!” Joshua asks.

“We don’t know. She told us to help the families evacuate,” Beni says.

“I’ll find her,” Sefu says. “You three get somewhere safe. We’re in the middle of a war!” Sefu takes off his dress shirt and runs off through the burning village.

Ekanga is riding Ishui through the village when she spots three of the enemies walking around with their guns. They see her just as quickly as she sees them, and they all begin loading their guns. Ekanga leaps from Ishui just as they begin shooting. Ishui turns down an alley as Ekanga pounces onto the wall of a building and launches a knife at one of the troops. The knife penetrates his chest as his comrades watch in shock. Ekanga then takes the end of her spear and breaks the nose of one of the two remaining troops and uses the blade to stab the other in his stomach. She then turns to finish the first troop off by slicing through his chest. He falls to the ground in agony.

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Towards the entrance of the village, Saigo is seen running with a bag full of jewels. He is confronted by Marcel just before he is able to exit.

“White devil...where do you think you’re going?!” Marcel asks in anger. Saigo begins to look irritated. “Move out the way, old man! I was assigned to take this merchandise with me back to my job! I don’t have much time left!” he yells.

The clouds begin to turn gray, and thunder roars. Marcel looks up at the sky in fear. “That is no merchandise you are carrying,” he says, “and I’m afraid you’re right, none of us have much time left. You and your people have upset the spirits. Now they will rain down on us with their wrath! Did you take away the sacred stones?!”

“I don’t give a damn about your spiritual folklore,” Saigo says as he reaches into his bag. “Matter of fact, why don’t I kill you now and s--”

Marcel has already subdued him and began punching him in the gut. He then throws Saigo into a nearby home. Saigo crashes through the door of the house and lays there. Marcel steps over Saigo’s dead body and finds the bag of jewels on the floor almost empty. The gems are scattered across the floor. The sacred green and purple stones are there with them.

Marcel is shocked as he picks them up. “Where is the third one?” He demands.

A thunderstorm has formed, and the villagers who were at the wedding are still in the reception hall scared for their lives. Carine tends to the wounded victims who have sought shelter in the building. Joshua, Nene, and Beni have made it there safely. Beni stands by the window glaring out, worried about Ekanga. “Please...wherever you are, Tina, be careful,” she says.

Ekanga is now in the deserted part of the village close to where her hiding spot is. She climbs up the side of a building. Reaching its rooftop, she turns to see that much of the village is on fire. She has entered a trance as she watches the homes, businesses, and trees ascend into flames. Seconds later, Matthew runs by her with a duffle bag filled with jewels. The two are surprised to see each other.

“Little Congolese girl?!” Matthew says. Ekanga frowns as Matthew shakes in fear. He checks his surroundings and realizes that there is nowhere for him to escape. Ekanga begins to walk towards him, filled with anger.

“Wait a minute!” Matthew says as he begins taking off his duffle bag. “We can just talk!”

Ekanga gives him a terrifying glare. “I swore to you that I’d kill you.”

Matthew is looking at the distance from the ground to the top of the building where they are. He quickly takes the red stone out of the bag and throws the bag to the ground. “Here!” he says, holding the stone up to Ekanga, “Is this what you want?! You can have it!”

Ekanga stares in shock. “YOU,” she says with fear. “That’s why....” She looks up to see that a fierce thunderstorm has descended upon the village.

“You need this, don’t you?!” Matthew says. “It looks like bad things will happen to your village without these jewels, so just let me keep what I have, and I’ll give this one back to you.”

Ekanga thinks for a moment, then she speaks with what little calmness she can muster.

“Matthew,” she says, “earlier you were my teacher...you helped me learn so much about the world...so why are you doing this? Why are you attacking my village and killing my people? Why are you stealing from us?” Her eyes are tearing up as she grips her spear.

Matthew stares in confusion, and he pulls the Love Stone back towards him. “Congolese girl, you had no business being where you were earlier, did you? You had no reason to trust me the way you did. I can tell

just by our first encounter that you are a troubled child. Now, look at what you've done to your people. How are you gonna live with yourself after this?"

Ekanga's eyes widen as Matthew pulls a gun out on her.

"But I'll help you," he says as he places his finger on the trigger. "You won't have to live with your guilt and shame."

Just before Matthew pulls the trigger, a spear flies towards him and penetrates his body. He falls from the building straight to his death. Ekanga turns to see Sefu behind her. She walks to the edge of the building to look over at Matthew's body. Sefu places his arms around her.

"Ekanga..." he says.

Rain begins to fall and extinguish the fires that have destroyed the village as the citizens watch in sadness. Bodies of the enemy troops and the tribal warriors lie lifeless in the streets. The villagers begin to mourn for their deceased loved ones who have been killed in battle. Marcel has returned the Faith and Hope Stones to the stone pillar. He looks at the empty spot where the Love Stone is supposed to be. "Tina...my child..." he says, "What have you done?" His heart is heavy with his acceptance of the obvious.

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One of the enemy troops who has survived the battle finds Matthew's dead body. A few feet away from him inside the grass is the Love Stone. He picks up the stone and runs into the forest.

In the courthouse, the royal family is seated on stage, preparing for Ekanga's trial. Joshua, Beni, and Nene are all shaking with fear.

"You knew this whole time, didn't you?" Joshua says to Beni. "You knew what Tina was up to...and you didn't say anything, Beni ...why?"

Tears are streaming down Joshua's face as he breaks down. Sultan, Tabia, and Imarisha enter the room and see the distressed children weeping. "You see now; this is gonna be unbearable," Tabia says.

"Can we please just get this over with?" Imarisha says to Sultan.

Sultan walks to the center of the stage. Marcel is seated and looking at the face of the table. He has not fully wrapped his mind around what is about to happen. Two guards escort Ekanga into the room in handcuffs. At the sight of her sister's situation, Beni begins to cry harder. "They're already treating her like a criminal," she cries.

Ekanga stands in her tattered clothes with her head hanging down. Her mother and all of her siblings are

staring at her with tear-filled eyes as Chief Sultan begins to speak.

“Greetings, royal family. We are here tonight to set the verdict for a fellow citizen.” Sultan nearly loses his breath. He takes a moment to think then proceeds with the speech.

“We recognize a fellow criminal who broke the law and led the enemy into our territory. Ekanga Maltina Yungo Lohembe, you have betrayed our tribe’s trust and brought devastation among your people. As the law states, you must make atonement for your sins by sacrificing your own life for all the lives we lost tonight.”

Christelle’s eyes widen. “Noo!”

Beni begins to scream at the top of her lungs, “Nooo!!! This isn’t fair. It was an accident. I swear it was!”

She turns to Marcel and begins to cry harder. “Daddy, I swear...you can’t let them do this...you can’t let them do this to Tina!”

Elizabeth grabs Beni and hugs her tightly. “Beni,” she says, “don’t lose your temper, baby, it’ll be okay.”

Elizabeth looks at Marcel, who is sweating heavily. Marcel looks at Sultan, who is also nervous. Finally, Sultan speaks again.

“Princess Ekanga, do you wish to explain why you felt the need to go beyond our tribe’s border even though you were aware that it is against the law?”

Ekanga is still standing silently with her head down. Her siblings are becoming more frustrated. “Come on, Tina,” Carine says.

Sultan walks down from the stage to Ekanga. “Listen, child, I know you’ve always been a rebel, but you’ve put you and your family into an impossible position. I suggest you swallow your pride and show some respect so we can handle this the best way we can,” he says in a threatening tone.

Ekanga still does not respond. Sultan is becoming more nervous. He leans in towards Ekanga’s ear and whispers. “Don’t you realize that I have the power to set you free. I can make this entire incident go away as if it never happened. You *can* go unpunished, but I need you to stop being a brat and pull yourself together.”

Ekanga slowly raises her head. “You would have no power over me if it wasn’t given to you from above. My sin is final, and there’s no going back from it. So, if the punishment is death, then I give you full permission to kill me now. I’d rather be dead than live another day pretending that I’m happy here.”

Sultan smiles. "I don't need your permission," he says. "If I wanted you dead I would've had you killed before now. You should be thanking me for trying to help you but, that's right, you don't say 'thank you' for anything, do you?" He walks back towards the stage.

"The convict has agreed to accept the death penalty," he announces. The royal family gasps in horror. Marcel stares at Ekanga, his mouth shaking.

Sultan speaks again. "However, because I am a gracious man, I've decided to switch her verdict into something more lighthearted even if she is an extremist," he says.

Beni bites her lip. Joshua is clenching his shaking fist. Nene, still traumatized from earlier, stands with her eyes closed.

"From this day forward, I hereby declare Princess Ekanga..." Sultan takes a dramatic pause, "...banished from the Kimoni and Asha tribes!"

The royal family members all let out a gasp and begin to cry. Sultan tries his best to speak over them.

"If the members of the royal family support this verdict? Confirm your decision by saying 'I,'" he says.

Marcel stands up quickly. "I," he says. His wife and children look at him in shock.

"Dad?" says Ya Cecile.

Kongo: The Greatest Love Part 1

“Don’t waste my time,” Marcel yells, “you know what you have to do! Say it...damn it, say it for your sister’s sake!”

Elizabeth nods. “I,” she says.

Ya Cecile and Carine reluctantly say “I.” Christelle is crying as she says it as well.

Nene hides her face in her mother’s garment, whimpering a soft “I.”

Joshua is standing in a trance, staring at Ekanga with his eyes wide open.

“Osako!” Marcel says, “Are you a man?! If you’re to be my successor, you won’t back down from anything! Do you hear me?!”

Joshua stares into Ekanga’s eyes then looks away in relief. “I,” he says quietly.

Beni is resilient. She grips her mother’s clothes with a look of distraught. “I won’t.... I won’t say it,” she says. “Tina is not a criminal...she’s my sister!”

Marcel, Elizabeth, and all of their children look at Beni in shock. Ekanga’s mouth drops as she watches Beni look away from everyone else. Ekanga smiles.

“Don’t do this!” Sultan says, “This is already hard enough as it is! Just say “I,” so we can end this already!”

“You won’t send Tina away!” Beni says, “I won’t!
I-”

“Beni!” Ekanga yells.

Beni looks at Ekanga who is smiling at her. Beni begins to smile as well as Chief Sultan approaches her. “Do you wish to confirm your decision?” he asks.

Irritated, Beni looks away from him with a frown. “I,” she says, with a broken heart.

Sultan quickly turns around. “Then it is settled! No longer shall you live by the name Princess Ekanga of the Kimoni,” he says to Ekanga, “from here on out, you are dead to this tribe as we send you off to whatever waits for you outside of this village.”

He walks up to Ekanga and whispers sincerely, “And it is my prayer that you find your happiness beyond these walls.”

The ushers enter and begin painting Ekanga’s face with the marks of dishonor. Elizabeth begins to weep louder than before. After she receives her marks, Ekanga looks up at her family to observe them for the last time. She then turns and exits the courtroom. Joshua stands on the stage and hangs his head down in shame.

In the barn, Ekanga prepares Ishui’s saddle. As she leads him out of the barn and to her hiding spot, she is approached by Beni and Nene who are carrying two

baskets, one with food and the other with blankets. Ekanga is shocked.

“Beni, Nene, what are y'all doing?” she whispers, “you know you're not supposed to be here!”

“I don't care,” Beni says. “We brought you food and warm blankets for your journey.”

“I don't think I'll be able to carry that,” Ekanga pauses then looks around and sees that it is just the two of them who came.

“Joshua wouldn't come,” Beni says. “He didn't wanna watch you leave the village. He feels that there is something he could've done to stop this.”

“Joshua knows there's no stopping me,” Ekanga says with a smile.

“So where are you gonna go?” Nene asks.

“Don't go far,” Beni says. “Maybe one day Chief Sultan will change his mind and let you come back to the village!”

“Beni,” Nene says. They both know that is an impossibility.

“I wouldn't count on it,” Ekanga says. “That man never goes back on his word.”

Beni looks upset.

“Well, since you're leaving, can I keep your waist beads?” Nene asks.

“Nene, you can make your own waist beads,” Beni says.

“Yes, but Tina’s are the best,” Nene replies.

“You’re so selfish!” Beni yells in frustration.

“Shh, you guys,” Ekanga says, “you’re gonna get in trouble.”

“Well, Tina...it’s been real,” Nene says. “Love you, bunches!” Nene runs back toward the village.

“Tina,” Beni says, “before you go, there’s something I wanna give you.” She holds out a diamond necklace. It is the same diamond from the day before.

“I made this for you as a wedding gift,” she says, “I told you that it connects to the heart of the person wearing it. I wanted to see if you and Sefu were a perfect match for each other.”

Ekanga is confused. “But how would you have known?” she asks.

“I read in that old book that the diamonds that come from the Spirit Grove will glow once you fall in love with someone,” Beni explains. “If everyone in the village had one of these, then we would have known for sure who was meant to be with who and the curse would have broken a long time ago.” She hands the necklace to Ekanga.

“But what’s strange is that after I researched the Spirit Grove, I wanted to experience it again,” she

says. “I went back, but I couldn’t find it. It was so...supernatural.”

“Yea...,” Ekanga says while putting the necklace in her shirt pocket, “I believe you.”

She climbs on top of Ishui.

Nene calls out from the village. “Beni, we have to go now,” she says. Beni looks up at Ekanga who is pulling the veil over her head. Ekanga turns Ishui to face the grassland, preparing to leave.

“Tina...,” Beni says with tearful eyes. Ekanga turns to her. Beni smiles. “I just want you to remember that no matter what the law says, this will always be your home and... I’ll always be your sister.”

Ekanga smiles back at her. “That’s right, always. Goodbye, Beni.” Ekanga pulls Ishui’s rein, and the two of them take off into the night.

Beni’s smile fades as she watches them ride across the grassland and into the moonlight.

“Please be safe, Tina,” she says, turning back to the village.

Ekanga and Ishui are riding onto the horizon as the sun begins to rise. The day passes as they ride through many plains, savannas, and wetlands. They stop by a river so Ekanga can feed Ishui. She squats at the riverbank to wash the paint off of her face then stands

to look at her reflection in the water. Flashbacks from the wedding, the battle, and her trial pass through her mind.

A cool breeze refreshes her as she clutches her diamond necklace and inhales. She turns to walk into the forest and begins tearing the bark off of trees. Hours have passed, and Ekanga has built a boat out of tree bark and branches. She and Ishui board the boat and sail across the river. The next day has come, and the tree-boat has finally reached land. Ekanga gives Ishui an apple before she climbs onto him and the two of them take off down a long pathway within a forest.

Over the next few weeks, Ekanga and Ishui withstand a treacherous journey. She builds several boats to get them across rivers, creates campfires at night, and uses large leaves from the forest to shelter them from the rain. After the third week of traveling, Ekanga cuts her hair and throws it into the flowing river along with her wedding ring. Days have passed, and she and Ishui are now asleep under a hickory tree in the forest. Suddenly, someone begins to poke her as she sleeps. Ekanga opens her eyes to see a teenaged girl standing in front of her.

“Oh, so you *are* alive,” the girl says.

Ekanga gasps. “Wait. What?”

Kongo: The Greatest Love Part 1

“Oh, I’m sorry, it’s just so many people are dying around here, I just thought you were dead too,” the girl says with a bleak expression. “But since you’re not, can you tell me if I should wear this dress to the Glamboree show on Saturday.” She spins around in circles. “I wanna be ‘Gone with the Wind’ fabulous,” she says with a determined face.

Ekanga is confused. “I-”

“Oh, and I’m Shacoria by the way, but you can call me Cori,” the girl says as she approaches Ekanga. “What’s your name?”

Ekanga backs up into Ishui. “I’m sorry, I really should get going ...I have a long journey ahead of me.”

“Ooh girl, me too!” Cori says. “I gotta go back to work. I’m on break. I was supposed to have been back an hour ago, but I’m probably gon’ end up staying over anyway so the time runs over. You should come by and sit down since you’ve been laying around in this heat.”

Cori escorts Ekanga through the forest.

“I’m suppose-” Ekanga says.

“Oh my gosh, where did you get this sundress?!” Cori asks in amazement.

“Wait, where am I?” Ekanga asks in confusion.

“You’re in a jungle, can’t you see that?” Cori says. “How are you traveling, but you don’t know where you’re going?”

Ekanga looks around. “Well...I-”

“And you never told me your name!” Cori says with her arms folded.

“My name....” Ekanga says, “my name is ...Ishui!”

“Ishui?” Cori says. “That don’t really fit you, but okay.”

Cori is interrupted by Ishui who rushes by her while Ekanga leaps to his back. Ekanga and Ishui begin riding through the forest as she looks back with a smile of relief. Suddenly, Cori climbs from under Ishui.

“Ugh, well just run me over then,” Cori says while trying to fix her dress. “Oh, this is a nice view! But I ain’t used to riding these animals.”

“What are you doing?!” Ekanga yells.

“I’m tryna get my life together cause I’m stress--oh my gosh, duck!” Cori exclaims.

The two of them duck below a tree branch as Ishui continues to gallop through the forest.

“You need to get off. Are you crazy?!” Ekanga says while pulling on Cori’s dress.

“I might be but it don’t matter cause we both ‘bout to die!” Cori yells back.

They have to duck below several tree branches. Up ahead is a small cliff and the two of them brace for cover. Ishui comes to a halt at the cliff, sending Ekanga and Cori flying through the air and into a store of rice. They pop out of mini hills of rice and shake it from their clothes.

“Ugh, I’m in distress, you got me out here doing all this work,” Cori says as she waits for Ekanga to finish shaking rice from her blouse. She takes Ekanga by the hand. “Come on!”

“Where are you taking me?” Ekanga asks.

“I need you to tell my boss that I was helping you find your way to the city and that’s why I’m late,” Cori says.

“Your boss?” Ekanga says.

“Yea, Ms. Anderson, she has her own boutique right here in Bukavu.” Cori leads Ekanga through the town. “She’s really cool and professional...really professional, which is why I need a good excuse for why I went over my time...again”

Ekanga looks around the city. “Bukavu?”

“Yep, this is my summer job. If you’re looking for a place to work, we just opened up a position in customer service,” Cori says. “I’m sure Ms. Anderson will hire you.”

“You have a j-” Ekanga says before being interrupted by Cori again.

“What did you say your name was?” she asks.

Ekanga looks nervous.

“Still working on it?” Cori asks. “It’s fine, just smile and look pretty.”

Cori and Ekanga have reached the boutique named “Ms. Ann’s Fashion Galore.” The store is very organized with clothes on racks and shelves. A lady in pink is assisting a customer as Cori and Ekanga enter.

“Ms. Anderson!!!” Cori enters with a smile. Ms. Anderson looks up at Cori and then over to Ekanga.

“Cori...did you get caught up in another political campaign today? Or is this someone you met at jury duty? Ms. Anderson asks.

“Oh no, Ms. Anderson, this is somebody I met in the forest, she’s traveling somewhere and got lost,” Cori explains.

“Oh, really?” says Ms. Anderson. “Just like the elderly woman you brought from the nursing home yesterday?”

Cori stands nervously. “Okay THAT was a mistake, but I’m actually serious this time. She really is traveling. She just don’t know where to!”

Ms. Anderson laughs. “Your stories become more and more interesting every day, Cori.”

But the young lady defends herself. “I’m like...so serious,” Cori says. “I just met her...she won’t tell me her name. I guess she don’t know that either...but she’s looking for a job!”

Ekanga looks at Cori in shock.

“Yep,” Cori continues, “she’s into fashion, she made this dress she’s wearing.” She lifts Ekanga’s hand into the air to showcase her outfit. “She’s got what it takes to be your protege.”

Ms. Anderson glances at Ekanga, who is now embarrassed. “Did you make that sundress?” She asks. Ekanga nods.

“Very nice,” Ms. Anderson says. She is observing Ekanga’s mood and can see that she is tired. “You looking for a job?” she asks.

Ekanga looks up. “I’m just gonna be on my way.” She turns and walks out of the store. Cori looks at Ms. Anderson in concern.

In the city, Ishui is tormenting the owner of a fish stand. The owner is struggling to run the giant deer away. “Ishui!” Ekanga yells as she runs to stop him.

Cori has come outside to watch as Ekanga begins to pull Ishui away from the fish stand and apologize to the store owner. The owner is yelling at Ekanga as Ishui makes his way over to Cori. He sniffs her and

then licks her face. Ekanga runs over to him and is shocked.

“Ishui!” she says, “You licked her?”

“Yes, all over my face...I’m all sticky and we-” Cori stops herself, “I’m just gonna let it go.”

“That just means he likes you,” Ekanga says nervously.

The store owner has approached Ekanga and began yelling at her again. “You owe me money!” he says.

Ms. Anderson comes out of the store and walks over to them. “What’s the issue?” she asks.

“I don’t know if it’s an issue, but it can be one if he don’t stop yelling at my friend,” Cori says while staring at the enraged man.

“She owe me money!” the store owner yells.

“I’ll take care of it.” Ms. Anderson says. “Take our guest here inside the store. She’s obviously had a long day.”

Cori turns to obey, but says, “Okay, but let me know if he tries to get rowdy with you ‘cause I *can* come back.” She escorts Ekanga back to the store.

In the boutique, Cori marks down all the items that have been shipped to the store. Ekanga is sitting down, drinking water.

“So how long have you been working here?” Ekanga asks.

“I actually just started here like a month ago,” Cori responds. “But like I said, this is just gonna be my summer job. I’m going back home in August.”

“So, you’ll only be here during the summertime?” Ekanga asks. “Where are you from?”

“Born in Staten Island, New York and raised in Greensboro, North Carolina,” Cori replies.

“Greensboro,” Ekanga says. “I’ve heard about that place, there’s an HBCU there, right? A historically black college?”

“You could be talking about A&T or Bennett College,” Cori responds. “A&T is a party school, my type of place. Speaking of, someone is having a block party on the south side today. You should come with me!”

“I’ve never been to a block party before,” Ekanga says, “what is it like?”

Cori is encouraged. “You’ll find out when you get there! Just throw on some skinny jeans, and we in there!”

“Skinny jeans?” Ekanga says, confused, “What are those?”

Cori pauses, “You don’t know what--? Okay, we’ll talk about that later. In the meantime, I gotta finish up my work. Smile for the camera,” she says, holding her phone into the air.

Ekanga displays an awkward smile as Cori takes the photo. “Gotta show the world my new friend with no name,” Cori says, examining the photo, “But like I was saying, Ms. Anderson will most definitely need someone who can work full time if you’re interested.”

A customer walks over to Cori while she is using her phone. “Excuse me, ma’am, but this blouse has a tear in it,” the customer says.

Cori looks irritated, “And what do you want me to do about it?” she asks.

“Can't you get me another one?” the customer asks, holding the blouse up in the air.

“Ugh, y'all want so much from me. That dress is out of season, that's probably why it's ripped,” Cori says while examining the blouse. “But I'm gonna go check in the back.”

The customer is doubtful. “Are you actually gonna come back?” she asks.

“Don't do that, cause I *do* my job,” Cori says as she walks away to the storage room.

Ekanga takes the blouse from the customer and looks around the room to find a needle and thread. She sits down and sews up the tear then hands the blouse back to the customer.

“You did that in under a minute,” the customer says, “now *you* were made for this job!”

Kongo: The Greatest Love Part 1

Ms. Anderson is standing in the distance watching the satisfied customer walk away. She walks up to Ekanga. “Your deer is at the animal shelter. They’re gonna take care of him while you get some rest,” she says.

“Me and Ishui need to get back on the road,” Ekanga replies,

“I’m sorry.” Ms. Anderson interrupts. “The road to where? He was hungry. You’ve been traveling for quite some time, haven’t you?”

Ekanga looks away.

“It’s okay,” Ms. Anderson says, “I’m about to go on my break next. I hope you like seafood.” Ekanga is confused.

Later that day, Ms. Anderson takes Ekanga to a seafood restaurant. Their plates are full of crab legs, baked potatoes, shrimp and corn. Ekanga tries to figure out how to eat the unfamiliar food before her.

“You just break it,” Ms. Anderson says while demonstrating it with her crab leg. Ekanga snaps the leg in half and sees the juicy meat inside.

“Oh...I didn’t know people in other places ate with their hands,” she says.

“Other places,” Ms. Anderson says, “where are you from?”

“Somewhere far away,” Ekanga replies.

The waitress comes to the table. “Ms. Anderson, as usual, your meal is on the house today,” she says. “Who is your friend, here?”

Ms. Anderson glances at Ekanga. “This is ...Congo,” she says. Ekanga looks at Ms. Anderson, confused.

“Congo? You were named after the country?” the waitress asks. Ekanga nods shyly, “Yes.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Congo, I’m Nadira. If you ever need anything, just let me know. A friend of Ms. Anderson is a friend of mine.”

Nadira turns and walks away.

“Congo?” Ekanga says.

“Well, you don’t know where you’re traveling to, and all I know is that you’re in this country, so I’ll just call you Congo until you decide to tell me your real name.” Ms. Anderson explains while breaking her crab leg. Ekanga quietly begins to eat her food. The day has passed, and now Ekanga and Ms. Anderson are at Ms. Anderson’s home. Ekanga has entered the house carrying a box.

“Thank you, baby. You can just sit it on the floor.” Ms. Anderson directs Ekanga while entering the house with more boxes.

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Ekanga puts the box down and looks around the room in amazement. “This is your house? It looks so.... modernized.”

“Well this is the city, most of the houses look alike,” Ms. Anderson says as she walks into the hallway. “Come check it out.” She leads Ekanga to a room with nothing but a bed, a dresser, and a mirror inside.

“You live alone?” Ekanga asks as she steps into the empty room and begins to observe it.

“Always have,” Ms. Anderson replies. “I never wanted kids because I’m always so busy.”

“Everyone in the city seems to love you,” Ekanga says. “They really respect you.”

“Yeah, well, love is all I have to give,” Ms. Anderson says with a smile, “and I see that same quality in you. The way you helped that customer without even second-guessing it. I knew when you walked into the store that you’re going through something right now in your life. You don’t have to tell me what it is, but I’m gonna help you get through it, okay, sweetheart?”

Ekanga glances at Ms. Anderson in shock. “You’re gonna help me?”

“Yep, you’re welcome to stay here and work at my store if you’d like,” Ms. Anderson replies. “Monday

through Thursday and you can have the weekends off. Sound good?"

Ekanga begins to think. "Well that sounds great actually but see.... I've never had a job before."

"That's fine," Ms. Anderson laughs, "you'll learn 'cause me and Cori are gonna teach you everything. Believe it or not, she's a great teacher. So, you can go ahead and get settled in. Tomorrow we have to get things together for the Glamboree."

"Cori mentioned that earlier," Ekanga says, "What is that?"

Ms. Anderson explains. "Ohh it's a fashion convention where designers from all over the East Coast come to show off their original pieces. You should sign up to do it next year," Ms. Anderson says as she heads back down the hall.

Ekanga has grown nervous while observing the room. "Ms. Anderson," she says.

Ms. Anderson walks back to the door. "Yes, Congo?"

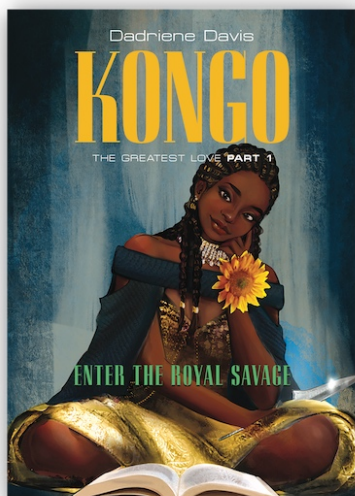
Ekanga is nervous. "Are you sure this is fine?"

Ms. Anderson smiles, "You're safe here, don't worry...get some rest!"

Ms. Anderson heads down the hall as Ekanga turns to observe the room again. Walking up to the mirror, she clutches her diamond necklace and closes her eyes.

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She opens them to look at her reflection again and sighs. “You can do this Ekan...Congo,” she says. She turns and walks away from the mirror.



A princess returns home to her cursed tribe after three years of banishment. Traveling with her is an Afro European student from London, England who bargains with her to make an exchange for an ancient artifact stolen from her tribe for gold to pay off his student loans.

KONGO

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