

Dreams are today's answers for tomorrow's questions

Eleven-year-old Kofi Offin has dreams of water, of its urgent whisper that beckons with promises and secrets. He has heard the call on the banks of Upper Kwanta, where he lives. He loves these things above all else: his family, the fireside tales of his father's father, a girl named Ama, and, of course, swimming. But when the unthinkable – a sudden death – occurs during a festival between rival villages, Kofi ends up in a fight for his life. What happens next will send him on a harrowing journey across land and sea, and away from everything he loves. Yet Kofi's dreams may be the key to his freedom . . .

#TheDoorofNoReturn @kwamealexander @AndersenPress

First in an epic trilogy of verse novels set in 19th century Ghana, following a boy who is sold into slavery

- Major publicity and marketing campaign including proofs and advance copy sendouts
- Kwame Alexander is the winner of the Newbery Medal for the million-copy bestseller *The Crossover*, which will be a major Disney+ TV series from early 2023

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**THE
DOOR
OF
NO
RETURN**

KWAME ALEXANDER



ANDERSEN PRESS

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FOR MY MAAME,
BARBARA ELAINE JOHNSON ALEXANDER,
WHO TOLD THE BEST STORIES

MY CHILDREN GLIDED ON THE GREAT RIVER

OVER THE DEPTHS OF DEATH...

THEN, ONE DAY, SILENCE . . .

—DAVID DIOP



ASANTE

BONWIRE

KUMASI

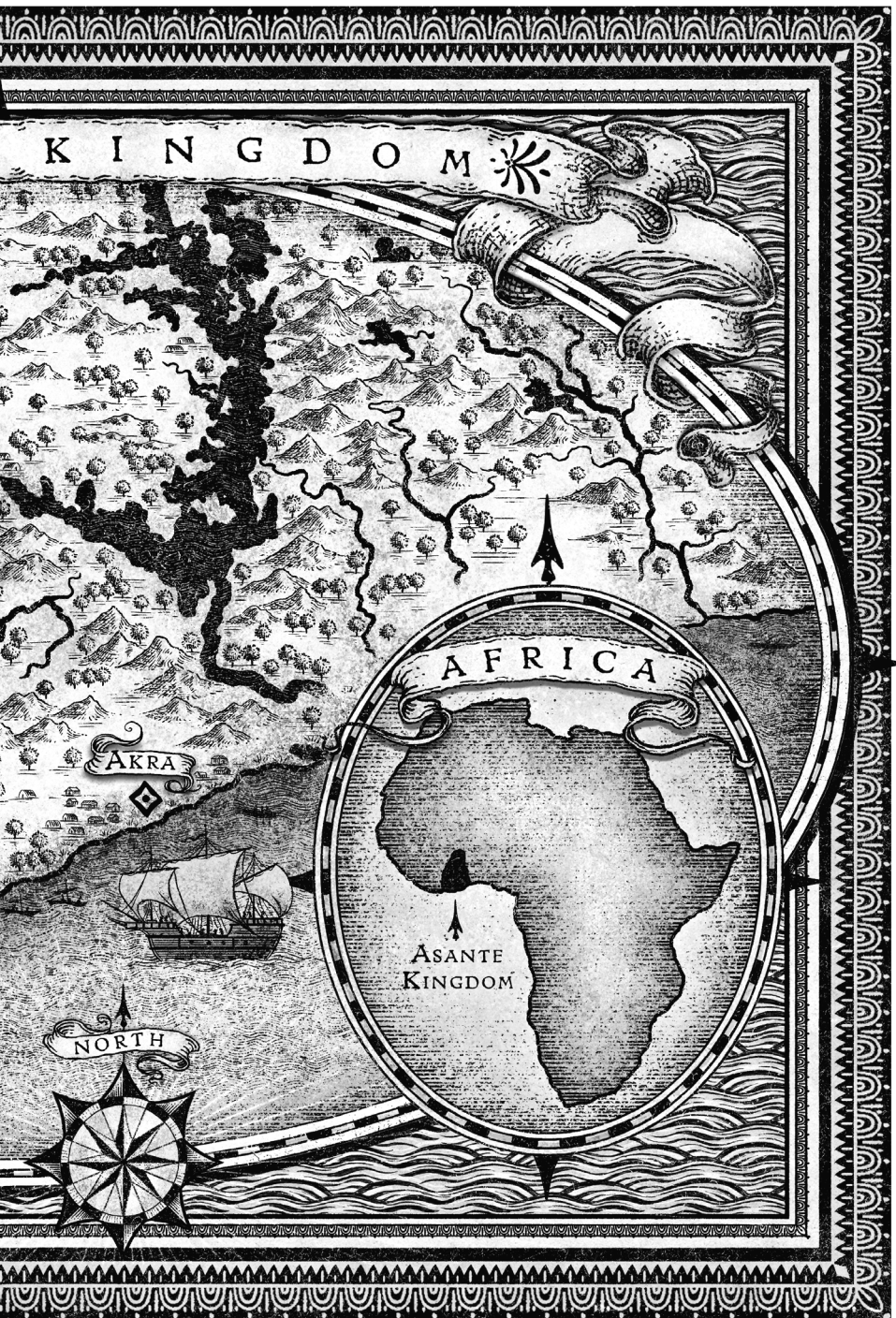
UPPER KWANTA

LOWER KWANTA

PRA RIVER

CAPE COAST CASTLE

CAPE COAST



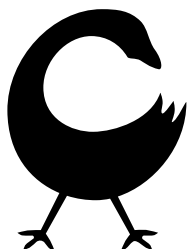
A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This is historical fiction. It is a novel inspired by history, based on the real lives of the Asante (*A·shan·ti*) people, who are native to a region of West Africa now known as Ghana. It was a hard story to write, but it was one that needed to be told. I wrote it for the me nobody knows. For the you who is still becoming. For the possibility that is in *us*. The great poet, philosopher, and abolitionist Ralph Waldo Emerson said, *Be an opener of doors*. I've tried to be that here. Now you must walk through. With your eyes unshut. With your heart unlocked. And your mind as free as the mighty sea . . . *Akwaaba!*



ASANTE KINGDOM

SEPTEMBER 1860



CHAPTER ONE

THE STORY OF OFFIN

There was even a time...many seasons ago...when our people were the sole supplier of the purest and most valuable gold in the world...The river was bedded with enough gold to make a century of royal stools for the Asante kings...A thousand shiny bracelets for their wives...Then came the foreigners...Invaders disguised as friends...pretending to be students of our way...with only one lesson to learn...how to steal our fortunes...But we fought them off...protected our rich land, our river...the Offin River...It flows to the east, into the mighty Pra, which travels

over one hundred and fifty miles down to the Coast, where it drains into a vast blue unknown that we call the Big Sea... On the rolling sides of Offin are deep forests and farmlands and villages and a boy of the same name... You see, on the morning of your birth, eleven years ago, your maame squatted at the edge of the water, and... Offin carried her fifth child on its shoulders at first breath... It is true, I was there, that you stopped crying as you floated off like a ship inching toward the horizon... The river Offin grabbed you with an invisible cord wrapped around each moment of your day... held you like a mother cradles a baby... pulled you like the moon does the earth... Ever since, you and the water have been bound... river and son, wave and flutter... That is how you got your name, my grandson...

THE STORYTELLER

There was even a time
is how my papa's father,
Nana Mosi, the village storyteller,
begins most of his
fireside tales

always starting
in the middle
of a thought
like we were to know
what *even* came before

always speaking
in slow,
deliberate spurts
about the past
like it lives
in him,
like it still matters

always repeating some things
and pausing at other times,
with a toothy smile

that raises one eyebrow,
right before
the thing he knows
we cannot wait
to hear.

Though he is nearly eighty now
and seldom speaks,
when he does,
I hang on to all his words,
the lulls in between,
and I remember
the stories
like a pigeon remembers
its way home.

IN THE DREAM

I sprint across
the clearing,
past a leopard
teaching her cubs
how to count to ten.

After I grade them,
I dart between the maze
of forest trees
and discover a pot
of boiling plantains
by the river.

Picture me running
over rocks and grass
swept up in the cool breeze
rushing to the water
diving off the back
of a—

SCHOOLED

*Offin, how old was
beloved Queen Victoria
when she became heir
to the throne?* Mr. Goodluck Phillip, our teacher,
asks,
startling me
out of my dream.

My cousin,
who thinks he is better
than me at everything,
giggles, then shoots
his hand up fast,
but Mr. Phillip is talking
to me, staring
at me, daring
me
to answer incorrectly.
*I will like Kofi Offin
to answer the question, please,* he says.

Dunwōtwe, I proudly answer,
standing among

my classmates, smiling
like I just bit into
the sweetest mango.

I do not see
the lightning
almost slice
the skin
from my palm,
but I do feel the scorch
of the rod
across my hand
and in my bones.
I even taste its sting
in my mouth.

Queen's English, please, Mr. Phillip says,
as calm as rain, like
he did not just attack me
with his jagged cane.

Eighteen, I say quickly.
That is correct. The Queen was eighteen, he adds,
looking at the whole class,
when her uncle died

*of pneumonia,
making her the rightful heir.*

*I am not teaching you
to count in English for nothing.*

Sorry, Mr. Goodluck Phillip, I say,
looking down at the purplish welt
burning my sable skin,
and trying not to cry
in front of everyone,
especially Ama,
and my cousin,
who now looks like
he is happily eating
my mango.

OUR TEACHER

Kwaku Ansah
was sent
many, many seasons ago
to Akra
to attend
*The Queen's Missionary School
at Osu for the Propagation
of Better Education
and Improved Language,*
and when he returned
he had “improved” his name to
Goodluck Kwaku Phillip,
and insisted
to the Council of Elders
that we needed
to be propagated
as well.

ON A MISSION

Mr. Phillip seldom smiles,
is lanky and tall,
wears wire-rimmed glasses
and big-collared shirts
with strange bows
around his neck,
frowns when he speaks our Twi,
insists that we call him
by his new names,
does not like
riddles or bean stew
or most things
we are used to
in our village,
and swears
that he has been anointed
to rescue us
from our old selves
and help us discover
our true ones.

MY OLDER BROTHER

Kwasi once told me
that Mr. Phillip informed
his class that
*English is regularly spoken
in Akra and on the Coast,
and if we want to become better,
learned men and women,
we must learn
to speak
this mother tongue,*
and when a boy responded,

*I do not know about your mother, sir,
but my maame speaks Twi*

the entire class erupted
in laughter,
including the boy,
*until Mr. Phillip's cane
slashed his buttocks
so hard
he was unable to sit
for three days*

*and it left
a long, thin gruesome bruise
that swelled
across his buttocks,
making it look
like he was smiling
from behind.*

LIGHT SENTENCE

The punishment
for my crime,
for answering
in my own Twi
instead of talking
in the stale, foreign language
that Mr. Goodluck Phillip
makes us speak
in school,
is to stay
after school
so that he can teach me
to read
from *The Dramatic Works*
of William Shakespeare,
which I enjoy—though
I cannot let him know—but
which I can barely focus on
because I want to be in the river
and my forearm is throbbing
and I cannot stop thinking
about the end of the day
when Ama came up to me

and whispered,
But you knew the correct answer, Kofi,
so do not feel so bad,
and her breath smelled
like honey
and pine
and possibility.

AMA

I have known her
since we were
giggling babies
swathed in cloth
on our maames' backs
while they sold yams
and cassava
at the market.

We played together,
learned together,
swam together,
even dreamed together
about our futures
until hers was nearly ruined
when her parents died,
leaving her homeless
and alone.

So, now I mainly get
to see her in school,
since she spends
the rest of her time

cleaning
and being the house girl
for her uncle's family
in exchange for food
and a roof.