

FADE IN:

EXT. KENYAN VILLAGE-TWILIGHT

OVER BLACK: NAIROBI, KENYA, 1898

Fire consumes a village of huts. In the distance, miles of banana plantations are aflame. Soot rains down like snow, VILLAGERS run in chaos. SCREAMS of terror sound from the huts followed by the sound of GUNSHOTS.

BRITISH SOLDIERS patrol the streets, SHOOTING anyone who protests. Soldiers run from huts, jewels and valuables in hand. A VILLAGE MAN and SOLDIER struggle over a statue, the man falls in the dirt, the soldier shoots him. A YOUNG MOTHER is bayoneted by a SOLDIER, her CHILD wailing in the dirt next to her body. Pools of blood darken the dirt.

An ANONYMOUS YOUNG SOLDIER, face concealed from the camera, shakes as he holds a torch in front of an unlit hut. SOLDIERS pour out with jewels and religious artifacts. A BURLY SOLDIER waves an elaborate jeweled necklace as he runs out.

BURLY SOLDIER
This would pay a pretty penny,
wouldn't it?

Another SOLDIER follows waving a woman's torn dress.

SOLDIER
Far easier than a corset.

Inside, a young Kenyan boy (8), KIT MWANGI, stands in the center of the hut. KIT'S MOTHER trembles, naked and bloodied on the floor, concealing her breasts with her arm. The only thing that remains on her body are gold armlets and wristlets.

KIT'S FATHER holds a crying BABY. Kit stares at the anonymous young soldier. A chest has been torn to pieces, the walls stripped bare, everything ransacked and ruined.

ANONYMOUS YOUNG SOLDIER
Get out.

KIT'S MOTHER
Tulizaliwa hapa, tunakufa hapa. (We
were born here, we die here)

BURLY SOLDIER
What was that?

KIT'S FATHER

We would rather die than leave our home.

BURLY SOLDIER

English? I didn't know your kind could speak all civilized.

Kit's father crawls to Kit's mother and shields her with his arms.

KIT'S FATHER

Usiangalie, Kibwe. Usiwape kuridhika kwa kuona hofu yetu. (Don't look, Kibwe. Don't give them the satisfaction of seeing our fear)

KIT'S MOTHER

Tunakufa kwa heshima. Hakuna mtoto wangu atakayefungwa minyororo nje ya nchi (We die with honor. No child of mine will be chained overseas)

A MASKED MAN approaches the anonymous young soldier and grips him by the shoulders from behind.

MASKED MAN

Look at what I found. Fascinating, isn't it?

Anonymous young solider turns to examine the mask. The masked man tilts his head lion-like.

MASKED MAN (CONT'D)

Trying to imitate animals as if they are a step above. We know the truth. We are doing them a favor.

The anonymous young soldier holds his torch up with trembling hands.

MASKED MAN (CONT'D)

What future is this? Depravity? Worship to idols and a false God? Never enough food, living among the dirt. Here, I'll make it easier for you.

The masked man pulls his revolver from his holster, walks forward and SHOOTS Kit's mother and father in the head with a single bullet. The baby's cry intensify, Kit freezes.

MASKED MAN (CONT'D)
Children is where I draw the line.
You may proceed.

The ANONYMOUS YOUNG SOLDIER turns his face away as he launches the torch to the hut. Kit stands still, the hut igniting around him.

MASKED MAN (CONT'D)
(calling to the soldiers)
Finish your business, and lets go.

Soldiers scurry back to the army vehicles stationed at the front of the village. The anonymous young soldier stays, staring at Kit who stares back.

BURLY SOLDIER
Lawrence, let's go.

The soldiers begin loading the trucks, the anonymous young soldier stays, watching the flames consume the hut. The trucks HONK. He sprints quickly into the hut, grabs Kit and drags him out of the hut just as it collapses. Kit's skin is searing on one side of his body. He runs with Kit draped over his back and throws their momentum onto a truck as it begins driving away.

The soldiers ogle at Kit and the anonymous young soldier. The masked man pulls his mask up to examine Kit and pulls it back down to conceal his face. The anonymous young soldier's chest heaves and his head hangs. Kit shakes. All eyes are on the pair, hands lingering on holsters.

MASKED MAN
Well, if this isn't a turn of events. Lawrence, I didn't know you were apt for plot twist. I take it you are quite a fan of Shakespeare?

The anonymous young soldier shakes his head. The masked man dances his fingers across his gun.

BURLY SOLDIER
Shouldn't we just kill him before we get back to base?

SOLDIER
Who, Lawrence or the negro boy?

The soldiers faintly chuckle, but the air has turned blood-thirsty.

MASKED MAN

No, no, let's not be rash. This is merely a boy, and an intriguing study, hmm? I think we can make use of him.

One soldier lunges and the masked man holds up a hand.

MASKED MAN (CONT'D)

I said we can use him. But don't worry, there will be plenty more where that came from.

The soldiers shuffle, backing away from Kit.

MASKED MAN (CONT'D)

Cheerio, then. Onto the next.

Cheers arise as the truck rumbles into the moonlit horizon, blood-streaked tire prints left in its wake.

INT. HELP COTTAGE-MORNING

The sun is shining, the birds are chirping, and sunshine pours into the dilapidated cottage where grown Kit Mwangi, (22), stirs in bed. His eyes flick open. His feet hang off the bed, the room is merely the size of a closet, tidy and organized.

INSERT: LONDON, ENGLAND, 1912

He tosses the covers aside, revealing faded burn scars on the right side of his torso downward, extending to his feet. He swings off the bed, feet landing into loafers. He reaches underneath the mattress and retrieves an old cigarette case and slips the plain gold band from his finger inside and hides it back under the mattress. He neatly makes the bed, tucking the corners and re-straightening the single pillow several times.

He dresses in an old suit, too baggy and fraying, never made for him, throws a coat over the ensemble, grabs a stack of folders and notebooks from his desk, and exits.

EXT. CHERRY RESIDENCE-CONTINUOUS

Kit strolls through a huge estate, cobblestone paths, ivy-ridden buildings, various HELP passing him as he walks toward a castle-like mansion before him. His breath fogs the air. Snow blankets the rolling countryside.

A carriage approaches in the distance.

KIT
Bloody hell.

He starts jogging, struggling to hold his belongings.

GRETA (40s), the housekeeper, exits the house with a pile of laundry in her arms as Kit reaches the stairs.

GRETA
She's back.

KIT
She shouldn't be due for another week.

GRETA
And tonight of all nights she chooses to come. The Professor is going to throw a fit. Scheiße.

KIT
Better start brewing some tea if you want to keep your head.

Greta CHUCKLES, shakes her head and disappears down the road.

Kit does the sign of the cross across his chest and enters.

INT. PROFESSOR CHERRY'S STUDY

Kit creaks open the door and peaks inside.

KIT
Professor?

He steps in, walks to the desk, and sets his stack of notebook and folders down. On the desk, anatomical sketches, photographs of young children of different races (many of them black), Encyclopedia pages flagged of animals, and scribbled notes are strewn across its surface.

In a typewriter, the title page to a thesis paper lays half-finished: THE BIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN RACIAL GROUPS AND WHAT THEY MEAN: My years as Father to a Kenyan Negro by DR. HENRY CHERRY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, 1912. Kit stacks the pages together as the door CREAKS open.

Kit leans over to read the thesis.

PROFESSOR CHERRY
Kit!

Kit jerks away.

Professor Cherry, 50s, hobbling on a cane, thick-bearded and clouded with neurosis, enters. His leg is twisted from the knee downward. Walking is difficult.

PROFESSOR CHERRY (CONT'D)
What've I told you about snooping
around, hmmm?

KIT
Just here--

PROFESSOR CHERRY
Hush.

Professor Cherry sits at the desk and scours through his material.

KIT
Phoebe is--

PROFESSOR CHERRY
I don't need to hear anything about Phoebe, I need to focus. You know how important this evening is for me. Kit, can you recall our conversation regarding physical attributes? I can't seem to find my notes.

KIT
The folder, sir. I've been transcribing our chats.

Professor Cherry searches but can't see the stack in front of his eyes. Kit points to it.

PROFESSOR CHERRY
Ah. Did we decide whether canine or animalistic was the better choice of words?

KIT
We didn't end at a conclusion.

PROFESSOR CHERRY
Have not reached, have not reached a conclusion. Education and complex thought don't have a definitive ending. Well, what do you think about the matter?

KIT

That's not for me to say, sir.
Anything I say would surely reveal
my unconscious biases.

There is rage, however small, behind these words--mockery, even. Professor Cherry chews on his pen.

PROFESSOR CHERRY

Animalistic may polarize our
listeners, hm? I think canine has a
more sophisticated ring to it.

He scribbles down his thought on a stray scrap of paper.

PROFESSOR CHERRY (CONT'D)

I need to make sure I'm absolutely
clear for tonight, tabula rasa.
Blank slate. Clear headed, to speak
simply.

Kit clearly knows what this phrase means, shifts his weight to avoid appearing annoyed. Professor Cherry appears to have an arresting thought out of nowhere and searches his desk frantically, tearing through all the paper.

PROFESSOR CHERRY (CONT'D)

Blast, it should be in here.

KIT

Sir--

PROFESSOR CHERRY

Make yourself useful and help me
find the key--

KIT

Professor--

PROFESSOR CHERRY

Kit, I told you to--

KIT

She's back, sir.

Professor Cherry tears his gaze away.

PROFESSOR CHERRY

What are you--

KIT

Phoebe, sir. She's back.

Professor Cherry frowns.

PROFESSOR CHERRY

Already?

KIT

I saw her carriage begin to approach the estate.

PROFESSOR CHERRY

Blast.

Kit sighs, shoulders loosening. Professor Cherry storms out of the office, flinging the door backward which blows paper off the desk. As Kit collects them, a photograph catches his eye. Gold jewelry identical to the kind his mother was wearing at her death. FOR AUCTION is barely visible in the corner of the photo. Kit jumps back and drops the photo.

INT. CARRIAGE-MORNING

PHOEBE CHERRY (19), the picture of bright-eyed and bushy-tailed youth, is wrapped tightly in winter clothing, her pink cheeks peaking out from her hat and scarf as she bumps along, staring out the window. She chews on her cheek. She doodles on the fogged up glass. GEORGE, (80s), her grandfather, sits across from her, studying her.

GEORGE

I hope your story is tip-top, Miss Phoebe.

PHOEBE

The one perk of being a writer is that my stories tend to be tightly-woven, Grandfather.

EXT. CHERRY RESIDENCE-CONTINUOUS

AASIR, the driver, haults the horses in front of the house.

AASIR

Woah.

Aasir leaps from his platform and hurries to the carriage door to open it for Phoebe and George.

PHOEBE

Thank you, Aasir.

AASIR

Of course, Miss Cherry, welcome home.

George grunts as Aasir gives him a hand to the ground. George retrieves sugar cubes from his coat pocket and feeds them to the horses.

Aasir mounts the platform and leaves.

INT. CHERRY RESIDENCE-CONTINUOUS

Phoebe and George walk through the grand foyer. Phoebe derobes and Greta rushes down the hall to retrieve them.

GRETA

Quite unexpected timing, Miss Cherry.

PHOEBE

I suppose the papers don't run in London?

GRETA

Pardon?

PHOEBE

We both know it shouldn't be a surprise.

Greta is puzzled but grabs Phoebe's hat, coat and gloves.

GRETA

Morning, Mr. Younger, how was your journey?

GEORGE

My back aches, my feet ache. Overnight trips are not as they used to be.

GRETA

Some tea then, both of you?

PHOEBE

Where are my parents? May I go bother them before I escort myself to my bedroom?

GRETA

Oh, no, Miss Cherry, there are still getting ready. Here, come, I have peppermint tea and biscuits waiting.

PHOEBE

With apple--

GRETA
With apple butter, yes.

PHOEBE
And--

GRETA
And cucumber sandwiches, no
crusts.

Phoebe smiles.

PHOEBE
You know me better than my own
mother.

Greta forces a smile but glances around to ensure no
wandering ears.

PHOEBE (CONT'D)
Don't bother, I'll be shocked to
see her face before sundown.

Phoebe puts a loving hand on Greta's shoulder.

PHOEBE (CONT'D)
It feels right to be home. Maybe my
mistake was in leaving in the first
place.

Phoebe leads the way through the house.

INT. PROFESSOR CHERRY'S OFFICE

Kit picks up the photo, studies it.

INSERT: Brief flashes, no more than a second, of the FIRE,
HIS MOTHER, BLOOD. His father pressing the gold ring into his
palm. FLASHBACK of his mother, adorned in jewelry, walking
with young Kit, hand in hand.

MUFFLED CHATTER sends him into a panic, and he takes the
photo, folds it and slides it into his jacket pocket.

INT. CHERRY RESIDENCE-CONTINUOUS

Kit rushes to the bathroom and throws himself inside.

INT. CHERRY BATHROOM-CONTINUOUS

FELICITY (17), the youngest Cherry, SCREAMS and Kit stumbles back.

KIT
I'm sorry, I--

FELICITY
Get out!

Kit scrambles for the handle and exits just as...

INT. CHERRY RESIDENCE-CONTINUOUS

Phoebe, clutching a glass of tea, crashes straight into Kit.

INT. BALLROOM - NIGHT - 1912

MEN and WOMEN mingle in a large ballroom clad in formal evening wear, champagne glasses in hand. A banner hangs over the catering station that reads "UNIVERSITY OF LONDON ANNUAL NEW YEARS GALA".

We follow a young black man in a butler's outfit, KIT MWANGI, from behind as he winds his way through the crowd, holding a tray of shrimp. PARTY GUESTS pluck them from his tray. A MAN and WOMAN gawk at Kit as he walks by.

MAN
Isn't that the Cherry boy?

WOMAN
Why would Dr. Cherry have a negro boy?

PHOEBE CHERRY, 19 and all angst, nearly suffocating from her corset, pulls his arm when he approaches. A YOUNG SUITOR stops talking mid-sentence.

YOUNG SUITOR
Haven't you already had the shrimp?

PHOEBE
Kit, I have an urgent matter I need to speak to you about.

Phoebe begins pulling Kit away.

YOUNG SUITOR
You know him?

PHOEBE
My brother.

Phoebe leads them both to the bathroom entrance and releases Kit's arm.

KIT
Everything okay?

PHOEBE
I simply could not stand another
moment in his presence. I also
happen to be starving.

Phoebe shovels shrimp into her mouth.

KIT
No urgent matter I take it?

PHOEBE
My appetite is a very urgent
matter.

A toilet flushes from OS. HENRY CHERRY, a middle-aged, uppity
professor, walks out of the men's room.

PROFESSOR CHERRY
Ah, fancy seeing you here.

PHOEBE
Dad--

PROFESSOR CHERRY
Leaving Mr. Abney by himself, hmm?

PAN TO

Phoebe's suitor glancing around the crowd for her.

PROFESSOR CHERRY (CONT'D)

Kit, I need you to press my jacket before my speech. It's
nearly midnight.

INT. AUDITORIUM-CONTINUOUS

PROFESSOR CHERRY
12 years in the making.

The crowd claps.

PROFESSOR CHERRY (CONT'D)
The British army brought me young
Kibwe

