

Kindness

Kindness had only ever seen white in eyeballs and teeth, sometimes in the occasional lazy wisp of a cloud. Water foam could be white, and dayfruit flesh boiled too long often turned a shade of gray very close to white. But this much of it all at once? And on fabric?

The child appeared no older than her, maybe a half sun younger, their gaunt face stained with dirt, old tears, and mucus. Their red-rimmed eyes looked too big for the bony face they had been pressed into.

Why would anyone choose to waste so much fabric on such a color, much less wear it? Maybe the child didn't know.

Kindness tugged on Ama's thick, faded underdress.

'Ama,' she tugged again. Ama didn't respond

Kindness looked up. Ama's eyes appeared focused on a congregation of amas down the road talking excitedly amongst themselves. Kindness frowned, staring back at the child, who continued wandering across the central clearing, towards the concentration of huts where their own home sat unguarded.

'Ama,' she whined, tugging harder.

'Kinna,' Ama murmured, craning her neck.

'Ama,' Kindness raised her voice. 'Who is that? Why do they look like that?'

'Kinna, please,' Ama frowned. "Do you want your ama to be the only ama in the village without a decent offering for the festival?"

'No,' Kindness sulked at the ground.

'Then help me by being quiet for just a little while, I need to know what they're planning.'

Kindness blew a raspberry at the ground and collapsed on her butt. 'But why are they wearing white?'

'Stop looking at the sun, Kinna.' Ama took a step closer to the other amas. 'There's no white in this village.'

Kindness scowled, folding her arms across her chest so hard it hurt a little. 'Yes there is! Their tunic is white! And their underdresses are white too! They're tunic is brownish also but that's just dirt, because they're dirty.'

Ama turned around, a strange expression on her big, dark brown face. 'What are you talking about sunbeam?'

Kindness jabbed her pointer finger in the general direction of the wandering child.

Ama's eyes followed Kindness's finger and her eyes narrowed as if she couldn't see anything at all, but as she turned her head, they widened like the moons.

Earthly Gods, Ama mouthed and her head whipped down to Kindness. Kindness grinned.

'See, I--'

Ama snatched her hand and dragged her to her feet. She glanced at the other Amas and back to where the child walked.

'Ama?' Kindness grasped at Ama's grip on her wrist, trying to wrench away as she lost the feeling in her fingers.

Ama's nostrils flared, her voice fell low. 'Shadefolk, Kinna, didn't Ama-Joy teach you this at forum?'

Kindness whimpered, going limp in Ama's tight grasp. 'Yes.'

'Do you want your color stolen?'

'No,' Kindness frowned at the dirt road, her whole body heavy now. She hadn't done anything wrong. 'Ama-Joy told us Shadefolk lived beyond the waters.' She sobbed as her eyes filled with tears. 'He said Prime Red chased them there to keep us all safe.'

Ama's grip loosened and Kindness snatched her hand back. From under her eyelashes she stole a look at her ama. A small smile lit up her beautiful face. Kindness's heart unclenched.

'I don't mean to scare you Kinna. The council will sort this out.'

Kindness glanced back at where the child had been walking, but they had disappeared.

Kindness stood up and leaned into Ama's side. 'Will they be sent back to the waters?'

Ama's smile widened, showing off a set of pretty white teeth that caught the light, glinting. 'I'm sure of it.'

That night Kindness immersed herself in a thick slice of warm redloaf and the occasional greedy gulp of sunberry juice. Awa sat opposite her, his face dirtier than ever from his day in the field. And beside him sat Ama, mending an old strip of faded yellow fabric. Kindness imagined the yellow had been much more vibrant once, but she knew for a fact that it had been in the family forever, because Awa had inherited it from his own Awa. In contrast, Awa's cold maroon marriage seemed much newer, interlaced with his very long marriage braid.

Kindness paused her voracious devouring and ran a finger over her short curls. Ama would cut her hair for the last time the sun before her marriage. After that she would get her own cloth. All she wanted was to marry someone pretty like Ama, or strong like Awa. Someone who could tend field and give her a cute baby to play with.

Ama leaned forward and brushed her hand across Kindness's very short curls. 'Is everything okay, sunbeam.'

Kindness nodded, stuffing more readloaf into her mouth.

'Ama-Joy tells me you danced in forum today.' Awa said, smiling at Ama, who beamed back at him.

Kindness swallowed and took another sweet bite. 'Delight told me I'm the best dancer in our whole forum and I'm only two suns old and she's almost three so she knows who's the best dancer *and i asked Ama Joy and she agreed that i'm the best dancer—*'

She had to heave in a great big breath and Ama patted her on the back, smiling that funny smile of hers. 'Breathe sunbeam. You might choke.'

Kindness scoffed, sticking out her tongue. 'I can't choke I'm good at eating and talking!'

Awa laughed, the deep rumbling sound of it rang through her chest. 'You *are* very talented Kinna, but no one can eat and talk at the same time.

'Do you think I'm a good dancer Awa? Ama-Joy says I got all my dancing from you!'

'Plain as a clear day anyone can see you're a far better dancer than me.' Awa grinned, and he wasn't even teasing.

Kindness squealed, collapsing on her back like a dead pinebird. Ama burst out laughing.

Kindness laid her head on Ama's arm that night with a full belly and even fuller heart.

But she couldn't sleep.

With her eyes fixed to the thatched roof of their small hut, and her skin aware of every lump of straw beneath her blankets, she imagined how it felt to be clapped for by a whole village. Everyone staring. Enraptured.

When her legs grew long and thick like Awa's, or maybe soft and round like Ama's, would she dance like crimson flame on a crackling log, or like tallfox running in the tall grass outside the village?

Would she have her braid by then— the length of it drawing wild shapes behind her body, tangling around her feet?

Would she marry a dancer?

Would—

Ama's fingers ran through Kindness's hair, pulling on the curls a little. Kindness smiled, imagining Ama watching her from the crowd. Laughing.

Then Ama sighed and Kindness felt her chest expand against Kindness's back. 'Freedom,' she whispered.

Freedom. Awa's Field Day name. The sacredness of it filled the room, pulling the air tight. A name she was forbidden to say, maybe even hear. Could she place her hands over her ears without Ama noticing?

'Freedom,' Ama said again, louder this time. Kindness held her breath.

'Yes, redmoon?' Awa answered, his voice slow with sleep.

Kindness sighed. The air lifted as she could fill her lungs again. Ama wouldn't have cause to say it again.

'We saw another one today.' Ama turned around, away from Kindness so that she could no longer feel Ama's warm breath against her neck. 'Pale, no older than Kindness. Dressed all in white.'

Sounds of shuffling filled the room. 'Another shade?' Awa asked.

'I thought it was just the islands.'

'The council is holding a meeting in the morning. You have to tell them what you saw. In the fields today Light told me her cousin in Copperfruit found a whole family of them hiding in the forests. She said they found camps.'

'Camps?' More shuffling. Ama's body rose as she sat up. 'And what can I say, Freena? I'm a stranger in this village?'

'You're my Ama. They have no choice but to listen,' Awa whispered so quiet Kindness had to strain to hear. 'We haven't heard word from the cities, it must be where they're coming from dressed like that. It's an invasion.'

Ama sighed, shuffling to the edge of their bedding. 'Freena, as long as we have color we'll be fine. We've been fine for twelve hundred suns. If they're coming here it means they're desperate. And there's more of us in this village alone.'

A silence followed, hanging in the air for so long Kindness's eyes started to slide shut.

She never saw the child again.