

Wine for Dinner

Later, all Freck could tell them was that Eenka had gone to market. For a wine to go with dinner to impress Freck's mother, something to show that she was not simply a dusty, country girl. Freck's mother lived in a province so large that you could fit Eenka's village in it four times & still have fields left for planting. Freck & his mother's people were *prox-kin* which meant that someone in their family, at some point in their history, was married to royalty. Therefore they typically married as closely to their bloodline as was medically advisable. But on a leisure trip to the outskirts for savage fashion (they were shopping for a costume party), Freck had seen his lovely Eenka & fallen in love. They were married quickly. Her family embraced him with warmth & sincerity despite the fact that he would be taking their dear one away to begin a new life in a strange place. Freck thought of his chilly compound & his mother's moods. He decided to build their home amongst Eenka's people instead. There was love here.

By Eenka's figuring, Freck's mother would arrive tomorrow evening. Apparently she had been planning the trip for weeks, but the note announcing (not asking) her visit had only arrived this morning. Correspondence came maddeningly slow to the villages. Freck was calm of course, for his mother already loved him, but Eenka was a nervous wreck. Food wasn't the issue- she had scores of meat, & reserves on grain. She had sugar, flour & spices. But she did want to dye more fabrics for the walls & have Freck build several more stools before their den could be called complete. And she desperately wanted something, *anything* that would impress Freck's mother, so that she would stop speaking so poorly of her son's new bride.

And then she remembered the *Whys* wine. Eenka had only been sipping age for ten moons so she'd never personally had a drink, but it was rumored to be exquisite. And expensive. It was made from the *joalu* berries that grew in Eenka's village. It was the pride of their land & would be the perfect thing to prove to Freck's mother that more grew here than babies & weeds. Frenk gave her more than enough money, enough to buy three skins' full. And then, because he could tell she was anxious, before she left he tilted her chin to the sun & kissed the softest part of her throat. *My mother is very lucky to have such a thoughtful daughter*, he said.

Eenka nearly floated to the market. She had taken care to dress older & richer than her years. She did not want to be mistaken for the guzzling, giggling teens who vomit in the bush. She borrowed her older sister's headcloth & six-piece garb; traditionally, the color & style was worn only by mothers with three children at least, or wives ready to add a second husband.

Yet it seemed she spent too long preparing her ruse, for when she arrived at the stall where the wine was sold, she was turned away. She was too late, they were out.

Uncharacteristically, Eenka burst into tears. She'd set her mind on impressing Frenks mother & now she didn't know what to do. Their home would not be enough & neither would her dinner. She was a nobody. She was a fraud. And then, out of thin air, a soft voice to the left of her said, "Don't cry ma'am. We sell wine."

Eenka wiped her eyes quickly. She turned & saw a young girl not much older than herself, although unlike Eenka, the girl looked her age. She wore the cheek markings of a *blem-ya*, a person forced into servitude to pay a relative's debt. Usually the father's. Judging by the print on her *hlan* skirt, the girl was very far from home.

"Where?" Eenka asked. "Where is your master's stall?"

The girl pointed in the general direction of the market. "This way," she said & then turned into the crowd. Eenka had to move quickly or she would lose her. They had walked for twenty minutes, nearly to the outskirts of the market when Eenka grew impatient. "Where is the stall?" she asked. Then, pointing to the last row of vendors, "over there?"

The girl shook her head. "This way," she said again, gesturing beyond the market entirely, to the dirt maze of hill dwellings blending into the horizon. Eenka didn't want to go further than the market, but the girl walked even faster. Eenka had to nearly jog to keep up. Another twenty minutes passed. Eenka realized the girl had brought her around so many twists & turns that she no longer knew how to find her way back. Eenka was just about to demand they turn around, when the girl quickly turned into the outer court of a sand colored *soltra*, stepped to the heavy door & lifted the knocker three times. An even younger girl opened the door, wearing a *hlan* skirt from a distant province.

"What took you so long?" the younger girl whispered.

Rather than answer, the girl looked at Eenka. “This way,” she repeated, & pointed to a turquoise stool in the shade of the inner courtyard. “Sit,” she said. Eenka sat.

To the younger girl, she asked, “Where is he?”

“Where else?” the younger girl said.

The girl walked toward another huge door, made of heavy wood, inlaid with *purla* crystals, intricately carved with a battle scene from the *Bebal*. Eenka realized that she must be in the *soltra* of a very important man. She watched as the girl raised her hand to knock; but before her hand made contact, the door was opened from within. Whoever opened the door remained behind it, but just beyond the frame she spied a desk, clear except for a few piles of paper. The funky sweet smell of the *wodu* herb seeped from the room. Then the girl stepped inside & the door slammed shut. Oblivious to Eenka’s presence, the younger girl rushed over & put her ear to the door. Not that it was necessary, for the voices within echoed through so clearly it was as if there was no wall present.

“What kept you?” the man asked.

“Please forgive, sir,” the girl began, but I saw my sister. She is *blem-ya* now, too, to pay the rest of father’s debt. She was on errand for her master. She brought me news of my mother. We lost track of the time.”

There was silence & then the loud crack of calloused palm on tender skin. Eenka winced & touched her face as if she was the one slapped.

“So you were late to market, then?”

“Yes,” the girl whispered.

“How many customers did you manage to bring?”

The girl did not want to say she'd brought only one, but the man would not accept silence as an answer. He must have raised his hand again for suddenly she shouted, “One, sir! Only one. Please! She is *bei-hama*,” the girl said, referring to Eenka's distinctive garb. She will buy for many, I think.”

“Get her,” he said.

Eenka wanted to leave. She wanted to go outside, leave the courtyard of this *soltra*, walk back to the market, & get back home. Then she remembered she had no idea which way even led back to the market. And that even if she found her way back home, she'd have nothing to show for it. Frenk's mother would arrive in the morning. This was her last chance.

The girl scurried out of her master's office but held the door open for Eenka. "He will see you now," she said. She kept her head down but Eenka saw the blood on her lip. Eenka understood that despite this man's obvious violence, she was expected to go in there alone. She was unaccustomed to being behind closed doors with strange men, & she had never in life met a man who hit. The men in her village refused to raise their hands in anger, not even to retaliate a first strike. This was law in the *Bebal*, the holy book. She wanted to beg off & demand the girl lead her back to market, but even her tongue betrayed her. Her feet moved forward. And yet, the moment she crossed the threshold, astonishment swallowed her fear. She'd never seen a space so resplendent.

Transfixed by the trappings of the room, Eenka momentarily forgot about the man. It wasn't until her eyes finally found her host standing among his riches that she remembered to breathe. Nor was he a monster as his temper might suggest; he was slim, prim & perfectly calm, the picture of composed serenity.

"Please, have a seat," he said, pointing to the custom *weh-nah* chairs. A small table made from the sacred *huma* tree sat between them.

"You have come a long way," he began. "No doubt you'll want to get right down to business.

"Yes," Eenka said. "Thank you."

"How many skins have you brought?" he asked.

“Three,” she answered, laying the skins on the table between them. She counted out the bills Frenk had given her & laid them on the table beside the skins.

“Very good,” the man said. He clapped his hands & the younger girl, the one who listened at the door, rushed to his side.

“Sir?” she asked, with her head bowed.

He handed her the skins. “Fill these,” he said. “And bring refreshment for our guest.” Then he folded the money & tucked it in the front lapel of his custom made *dor-meiu*.

The younger girl looked right at Eenka then, & Eenka was positive there were words in the glance, but she couldn't understand them.

“Right away sir,” she said.

“I am sorry for the scene you must have heard,” he said, once the girl was gone. He glanced at Eenka & she realized her sitting position revealed her age, with her right foot tucked underneath her left knee, & her left foot dangling freely. A true *bei-hama* woman would never sit this way. She shifted quickly, embarrassed. She crossed her ankles, clasped her hands in her lap & pretended to know what to do with herself. The man seemed not to notice. He leaned in & lowered his voice, as if Eenka was a wise confidante with as many suns as himself: “You understand, of course, the trouble that

comes with these girls. Because of the way they have already been treated, they don't respond to kindness."

Eenka thought back to their journey from the market to this *soltra*. Twice she had asked the girl where they were going, & twice she wasn't given an answer. She shuddered to think what she might have had to do to get one. Now she understood why she saw so many masters shouting & hitting their *blem-ya* at the market.

"Do you like movies?" he asked. He gestured to a large rectangular swatch of fabric high up along the wall. It matched the dye on the rest of the fabric but Eenka could make out the reflective fibers that marked the parameters of the screen. She saw the arm of his chair was also a *sic-slau* & could project any film he chose from the *nulu* library.

Truthfully, Eenka had never seen a movie. They were forbidden until the age of 25 suns or more, to stave off the post-delusive episodes that had caused the ancient youth of the *Bebal* to forget themselves. Yet, a *bei-hama* would have certainly seen a movie by now. A *bei-hama* woman could handle it.

"I love them," she lied.

"So you won't mind if I turn this on?" he asked.

"Not at all," she said. "Please."

The man hit a switch on his *sic-slau* & the room came alive. Each of the six walls had reflective fibers built into the fabric, not just the one that Eenka saw. She was instantly entranced. Hours passed in minutes. Only when it was over, did Eenka realize how much time had gone. The room had been filled with light when she'd arrived but now the shadows had grown long. She thought of home, of Frenk stringing the *suttle-bulb* lights, wondering what kept her this long. The man sat watching her, saw her realize she was late for supper after a sneaky afternoon. His lips slid a centimeter of a grin but then went straight again.

“I completely lost track of the time,” Eenka said. She was surprised to see the skins had been filled & returned to the table long ago. An untouched mug of *calfe* & a snack of buttery *hap-lel* lay beside them. Both had grown cold.

“Of course! It's the way it is with movies,” he laughed. Then he winked at Eenka as if they shared a secret. “But that’s why we love them, no? They take our mind away for a while.”

Eenka stood up quickly, the ice of excitement puddled to shame. “Will your-” she broke off. She did not want to say *blem-ya*. “Will your... girl... take me back to the market?”

“Unfortunately she is busy with other duties.”

Eenka thought she might cry.

The man walked over & grabbed a set of keys from the dozens hanging on the wall behind his desk. “I can take you,” he said. “I can drive you in my *nisa*.” Eenka had never been in a *nisa* before, although she had read about them in books. Supposedly they could move faster than a *ghefe* could run. If she allowed him to take her, she could make up much lost time. Freck wouldn’t have to be worried long.

“Fine,” she said. “Thank you.” She thought of the movie she’d just seen, where adventure yielded good fortune beyond one’s wildest dreams. *I am having my own adventure*, she thought. Gathering her full wineskins from the table, she felt like the woman from the film: confident, independent, strong. She’d gotten the wine even though it meant breaking the rules. She’d done things *her way*.

And so it was with a grin of her own that she followed the man deeper into the chambers of his *soltra*. “This way,” he said, down that passage, “This way,” to the darkened room that smelled of blood & bone. He had called it a *gar-raj*, “Where I keep my *nisa*,” he told her. Then he shut the door & locked it.

& Although Frenk & Eenka’s family looked high & low for years, the poor girl was never seen again.