

Arit hurried along the well trodden path leading to the festival grounds. She could hear the happy sounds in the distance and they made her young heart soar. She was glad John had persuaded her Grandfather, the village Priest of Oron, to let her be a part of the festival this year. It hurt to see the others going and coming back bubbling with excitement and stories each year since the annual festival was initiated by the Missionaries who wanted to unite the dueling villages in the inter lands of Calabar.

John had explained this motive patiently to Grandfather five years ago, but the old man, not one given easily to change had only listened with a troubled skeptical expression. John had assured him the missionaries understood the importance of traditions to the village life and did not seek to abolish any tradition. So far they had not interfered with the beliefs of the villagers and the festivals had become a celebration of different village traditions. If this was not so, Arit would never have crossed the boundary into Ekpo Village where the festival was taking place this year.

"Arit!" John's voice made her turn

A soft smile curled Arit's lips as she ran in his direction. She could tell that he had been waiting for her anxiously. He frowned as he said "where is Kubi? He should have brought you here"

Arit flung her slim arms around his bulk; John was a big man and he easily dwarfed her five feet four inches frame. She drew back to smile broadly at him, a hint of mischief in her eyes.

"I waited for him all day" she said earnestly "but he didn't show up"

"So you stole out of the house" John said dryly

Arit felt a stab of guilt. John was almost as bad as Grandfather when it came to protecting her and she didn't mind because she knew they both loved her.

But John was right; she shouldn't have sneaked out because Grandfather would be upset if he knew. And after all the pleading that John had gone through to convince him to let her not only attend the celebrations but also lead the main event for the evening; it was really wrong of her.

She would be the main star at the maiden-dance, John had said to Grandfather, and besides it was time he accepted that his granddaughter was almost a woman at sixteen. They had both looked at her in the little corner where she sat staring at them talk, her starry eyes filled with excitement. She had blushed and dug a toe in the sand, for all appearance, looking anything but a grown woman.

"I won't do it again" Arit promised. But she had to admit that even the sneaking out had been fun. Tip toeing past the napping Grandfather and going through the window instead of the noisy door. She had no idea of course that Grandfather had been awake and there was a smile on his face.

Her guilty eyes melted John's heart. "You won't have the chance to do it again because I'll bring you myself" he said tweaking her cheeks playfully.

He pulled her forward "let me show you your costume and tent. It was the first thing I set up this morning"

Arit skipped along John's side with barely suppressed excitement. He pointed out side attractions he had told her of in the past years- the fire eating man, the wrestlers, acrobats walking on thin ropes, traditional crafts- and Arit could only gaze about in wonder. She had never seen so many balloons and so many colorfully dressed people in her life. She felt slightly ashamed in her plain white wrapper, the cloth worn by the priest's lineage.

She loved the little tent that John had set up as her changing room; it stood a little away from the main tent where every other performer was to change and it had brilliant blue curtains decorated with colorful balloons. She was ushered inside to see the costume John got for her. She stood in wonder as she saw the glittering silky white material hanging in the room.

"That's not a costume" she said breathlessly. It was what she imagined the beautiful women in the novels that John brought back for her from the big cities would wear. She wondered if this was a practical joke.

"It's my coming out present for you" John said pleased at her reaction "I showed it to your Grandfather and he approved"

Arit's eyes widened, Grandfather had agreed that she wear this beautiful and worldly material that her hands itched to touch?

"Go ahead" John grinned "it won't bite you"

Arit let the material run through her hands. "This is so beautiful John" she murmured. It felt beautiful even to touch and Arit suspected it was very expensive. The other girls were sure to be wearing woven raffia fabric, how she would stand out!

"Thank you" she said flushing with pleasure

John smiled "I'll send some women to help you" he said as he left, inordinately pleased with himself.

Arit was still dreamily holding the material when three women entered. They bowed reverentially to her and Arit inclined her head. As a priest's granddaughter, Arit was treated almost like royalty.

"Your brother asked us to come" one of them explained

"Please come in" Arit responded politely, letting go of the material. John was not her brother, but for lack of another befitting word to describe their relationship, the villagers called him that and Arit was used to it.

When Arit was just a baby, her parents died in a car accident on a visit to relatives in the city and she was adopted by her grandfather, the village priest of Oron. The widowed old man in

seclusion to mourn his dead son had left her in the care of his servants who had no idea of what to do with a baby. On an occasion when she was left by herself, Arit was nearly bitten by a poisonous snake. Fourteen year old John was passing by, back early from a hunt, when he saw the danger and killed the snake. He had then made himself the unofficial guardian of the baby. The villagers had grown to accept the sight of Arit trailing after John and as the years passed, and it had grown from derision to respect and now it was considered normal.

Arit could hardly imagine her life any other way. John was her hero and when she was old enough she would marry him. That was what she told Grandfather when she was seven and finally got around to asking why John didn't live in their house. Grandfather had doubled with laughter, and Arit didn't understand why. She still thought, even now that it made perfect sense. She sat down as one of the women worked on her hair, another skillfully applied her make-up and the third, she saw with pleasure was working on the material, turning it into a suitable dress with her experienced hands.

John walked around the festival grounds, carefully observing that all protocols were in place. There was no doubt that people were enjoying themselves; some played games, men wrestled and the children ran around shouting and laughing, and there was plenty of food. John found himself exchanging pleasantries with people from both his own village and other villages. The missionaries' idea about organizing these events was no doubt a good one. Villages had reconciled, agreeing that they did not even know what their forefathers had been fighting about; they had just picked up the baton of strife and continued with it. As he told Arit's Grandfather, the objective was been met.

John knew the old man worried when it was time for the festival, he grew really tense and one could almost feel the presence of danger in the air. He was a man expecting something terrible to happen, what it was, John could not say.

He saw a lone young man standing apart from the crowd throw a cigarette on the ground and use the tip of his slippers to put it out. Seeing men like Afam made John appreciate the old man's fears, especially about the compromising of traditions.

Afam made one feel unsafe, not because he was from the village of Ekpo, but because he was the very epitome of a man to whom traditions, ancient rites and boundaries meant nothing. His eyes said he had nothing to lose and as such cared very little about anything.

It was said that Afam had been glad when the Missionaries first arrived because he expected them to wipe out the ancient traditions and rites that he felt held his village people back from any true measure of development, but he had been bitterly disappointed at the reverence they displayed instead. He couldn't be made to understand that some things in life are best left to evolve at their own pace.

The missionaries called him the un-teachable genius; they were awed by his abilities in the class room, his quick grasp of topics and his ability to creatively solve problems. But Afam was easily bored and knowing he was exceptional made him very arrogant, consequently, for all his abilities the missionaries were unwilling to teach him.

His irreverent ideas about life also offended the simple villagers and they simply avoided him. Afam pretended not to care but John knew he was very bitter.

He watched John approach him with a lazy expression in his watchful eyes. "What has light to do with darkness?" he quoted softly when John was close enough

John's pleasant expression did not change "how are you Afam?" he said politely

"I'm very well John" Afam replied. It was a time honored tradition in their respective villages that men did not call their seniors by name and John was ten years Afam's senior.

If he had hoped to annoy John, Afam only succeeded in bringing a puzzled expression to John's face.

"That's what I thought" John replied as he moved away. Afam was not worth the effort of been more than an acquaintance, he thought as he hurried towards the prepared stage, it was almost time for the Maiden Dance and Arit would be out soon.

Afam looked at John's retreating back with mixed emotions. He wished he hadn't been rude, and for Afam that was unusual. The only person he treated politely was his mother and this he did because she loved him no matter what he did.

He admitted to himself that he admired John tremendously. He liked the man for the quiet way he stuck to his ideals and wouldn't change it to suit anyone. John had converted to Christianity the year his age group was formally admitted by his village into manhood. It was a disappointment to his parents who were of the house of the ruling village Head because that meant he could never be short listed as a candidate for the position when it becomes vacant. But John did not care. He completed his secondary school in the village and won a scholarship to study in a University in Lagos. Nobody expected John to come back to live in the village after that but to their amazement John had returned. He brought with him his book sense, and had now put the little village of Oron on the map by helping the villagers become the major suppliers of Cassava and Palm Oil in Cross River State.

Everyone respected John including Afam he felt a certain kinship with the man. Only he could never be satisfied living the village life like John was; Afam felt made for bigger things, for wealth, money and a terribly high standard of living. He thought about leaving the village with excitement, there was danger out there and Afam's bored mind welcomed it. It was unbelievable that he had even remained this long in the village, at twenty, he felt terribly let down by himself.

But not to worry, his bags were packed, the money filched from the church box that his illiterate father kept was packed as well and the very next day, Afam was hightailing it out of the village. A growing excitement around the village square drew his attention. He looked dispassionately in the direction. He might as well go see what it was all about. Small minded village people and there small minded relic entertainments.

Tying the newly sown wrapper removed the last vestige of nervousness that Arit felt. It was almost like wearing a new personality, she thought. She felt bold and alive. The material felt sensuous on her body and when she moved it whispered around her knees.

Her thick long black hair had been smoothed out with the sharp edges of a broken hot clay pot. It was wrapped around her head and held together with shiny pins, and flowers that grew plentifully in Ekpo village. Her eyes were darkened with thick black pencils and some color was rubbed into her pale cheeks. When she moved the thin golden bracelets on her wrists and anklets on her bare feet jingled and glittered. This was the enchanting sight that greeted the villagers when she exited her tent.

That Arit deserved the centre stage was universally agreed on as she led the other maidens in the village dances. There was a hush in the crowd as they watched the fascinating creature moving gracefully. She danced in ways that no one had seen before and people couldn't bear to look away.

John watched breathlessly from the crowd. What a star! He thought, what complete success! And what beauty! How the old man was going to cope with the in-flock of suitors after this, he had no idea.

The applause following the performance was deafening as people stamped their feet wildly in excitement. The villagers demanded to know who she was, and young single men surrounded John immediately for the information. He watched Arit's disappearing back wryly.

Arit hurried to her tent and collapsed on the thin mattress placed thoughtfully there by one of the women. She was trembling and her heart pounded. It was comforting to hear the heavy footstep hurrying to her tent. John, oh John, she thought gratefully. She was about to invite him in when the curtain of the tent was flung aside and a total stranger walked in.

The first thing that Arit thought as she jumped up in shock and fear was that this man was trouble with a big T. He was tall and dark with a face that was not handsome but nevertheless drew one to him.

"Who are you?" She stammered

He was staring at her, almost as though he couldn't believe she was real. In truth Afam could not believe the girl was real, and more amazing was that close up she was even more beautiful. He

cursed his luck that he should discover she existed a day before his departure. He could never walk away from her, never.

Arit took an involuntary step back in fear, and Afam realized with surprise that he had been moving towards her.

"If you don't leave now I will scream" she said in a scared voice. To her amazement the stranger smiled in an insolent way

"Your reputation is more valuable than mine" he said impudently "it would be in your best interest not to scream"

Arit looked hopefully at the entrance of her tent; she hoped John would come. It was true what the man said about screaming. It could work either way. People could come in and chase the man away or they could draw negative conclusions and the village of Oron did not forgive a ruined reputation easily. At her age and in her position, she couldn't afford any stain on her reputation. It was bad enough to be encumbered by the shackles of tradition that bound every virgin in the village but for a virgin of the priestly lineage, the weight of the shackles was heavier. Afam followed the movement of her eyes. He wondered jealously who she was expecting.

"Please go away" she pleaded.

He seemed to suddenly make a decision; Arit could tell by the way he pursed his lips.

"I want an autograph from you" he said

"Autograph?" Arit repeated stupidly. Was that what this was about? She thought uneasily.

"A signature" the man clarified unnecessarily.

"I don't have a pen" Arit said

"I can help you" the man said. He moved very swiftly and caught her to him. Arit's panicked cry was swallowed as he crushed her lips to his.

Then he released her abruptly and walked away, bumping into John who was just about to call out to Arit.

"What the?" John began to exclaim in surprise. He reached out to grab the fleeing Afam but Arit's whimper within the tent distracted him and he hurried inside instead, his heart pounding.

Arit was crouched defensively in a corner holding a trembling hand to her lips. He reached out for her but she shrank back, then realizing it was him, she flung herself into his arms.

"He kissed me" she said trembling

John could see that. Her soft lips looked bruised and swollen and her eyes were filled with terror.

John wanted to find Afam and kill him.

"Shhhhh" he said comfortingly "its okay, its okay" he parted her back affectionately.

"I didn't want him to" Arit said

John's knuckles clenched. "You are safe now" he said

After Arit's brilliant performance, it was a curiously silent duo that returned back to the village of Oron. Arit could not shake away the image of the man and she could still feel his lips on hers. It gave her a strange feeling of doing something wrong. She also felt dirty and depressed. Things felt worse because every time she looked at John's face, she knew an unknown and unwelcome emotion had been driven between them; one they were not ready for.

John was angry with himself for not protecting Arit better. Arit's dance had been more successful than he could have imagined, and people would talk of nothing else but the debutante maiden dance of the priest's granddaughter. He had allowed himself to be relaxed because generally people were careful with Arit because of her powerful lineage. No one would dare assault her, well no one but a man like Afam who cared nothing about lineage and powers of the unknown.

Arit was unusually beautiful, even as a child she had been incredibly breathtaking. It was easy to lose one's head around someone like Arit and been totally unaware of her effect on people made Arit an easy target for men like Afam. John felt angry all over again. He vowed to get even with Afam for what he did.

Arit's grandfather was surrounded by villagers when they arrived, everyone was talking about Arit's amazing dance and John could see the quiet pride in the old man's eyes.

Arit's face softened into a shy smile as she walked forward to meet him. He enfolded her in his wizened arms but his eyes narrowed suspiciously over her head as he looked at John. John sighed, the priest of Oron was no ordinary man, and one could put almost nothing over his head. John made a sign to him that they would talk later.

Things fell back into place gradually after the festival and soon the normalcy of Arit's monotonous life made the singular event begin to fade from her mind. She even enjoyed her new fame as the best dancer and already a few brave souls had approached the priest for her hand.

As a priest's grand daughter, Arit's life was steeped in tradition –reciting chants in the mornings, cleaning the altars of the numerous gods of Oron, filling their holy pots with water- and so she had few friends. To add some spice to her otherwise boring life, John had bought her novels and would sometimes take her hunting, and even Grandfather had given her a plot of land on his vast land to farm.

It was there she was, removing the weeds threatening to choke her vegetables, when she saw the stranger again.

"No" she said automatically backing away

"I came to apologize" he said immediately

Arit looked around nervously. She was alone in the farm and was suspicious about his motives.

"Okay then, apology accepted" she said hurriedly "now you can go"

"I want to know you" the man said "I am Afam"

"My name is Arit" she said cautiously

"I want us to be friends" he continued emboldened. Arit did not reply. She had nothing to say to such a preposterous idea. He moved closer but Arit backed away. That seemed to anger him because his expression changed

"That kiss wasn't so bad was it?" he said tauntingly

The old feeling that she had done something wrong filled Arit again and her heart pounded.

Afam watched her with satisfaction "you did not hate that kiss" he said with satisfaction

Arit felt panicked. She didn't want anyone saying that, least of all this insolent young man. It was her first kiss and Arit could not tell if she liked it or not. That was what was so bad about it. How could she like a kiss taken by force? She was thoroughly confused.

"Please go away" she said firmly "it's against our traditions to be anything more than acquaintances"

Afam's face darkened and Arit shivered "I don't care about traditions and neither should you!" he exploded "don't you want to be free? Don't you want to wear beautiful dresses instead of these white wrappers?"

Arit's eyes widened. There were always disgruntled young men around, but none ever sounded this radical.

True, Arit wished for a little more freedom but she wasn't big on change, and knowing this she was quite contented with her life.

"I could take you away from here" Afam's eyes glinted with fanatical passion "I could show you the world"

Arit shrank away. She didn't want to leave her home, or grandfather or John. What would life be like without them?

"You are talking a lot of nonsense" she said coldly "I'm happy here thank you"

"But you could be happier" Afam insisted "I could make you happier"

"Look" Arit said urgently "I am happy as I am and I don't want to leave my home. Besides it is forbidden for our tribes to marry"

"Bullshit" Afam swore "traditions are nothing but shackles. You should free yourself from it"

There was a rustle in the bush behind Afam. He spurned around to see a hulk of a man wearing the red wrapper worn by the priest's servants. Arit sighed with relieve when she saw her cousin, Kubi.

"Are you ready to leave Arit?" Kubi asked, deliberately ignoring Afam

Arit nodded and hurried past Afam to meet him. Kubi had been there all the time and she hadn't known. It seemed John was not taking any chances with her safety anymore.

Afam did not like to be thwarted in the pursuit of his desires; the desire this time was Arit. He was not convinced that the priest's granddaughter was out of his reach, or that she was happiest in the village where she lived.

He employed his brilliant mind in creating different approaches for winning her affection, but every time he came within a mile of her, the hulk was there looking at him without saying a word. The woman herself made things difficult because she wore a frightened look when she suspected that he was near her and was constantly looking over her shoulder, although she couldn't have imagined the spots he hid to keep a close eye on her.

In his obsession, Afam came up with what seemed to him at that time, the perfect solution. It was true that one action could often set off a multitude of reactions and Afam was going to use that logic to his advantage. But when he set out that day, he had no idea of what kind of reaction he would be setting off. It was a lesson that Afam was never to forget.

Arit knew the minute he arrived behind her in the little farm she kept. She turned sharply and met his brilliant black eyes. She turned to search for Kubi, her silent shadow but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Your poor guard had an accident" Afam said "he stepped a little too close to the coconut tree" Arit turned to run immediately. It was just as she suspected it might happen. Her spirit had known everyday she exited her house that she was not safe. Afam was a man who would go to any length to get what he wanted.

Afam was taken unawares by Arit's flight but he was much stronger and fitter than she was and caught up with her easily. Deafening himself to her cries, he took her virginity in the grassy fields of her grandfather's farm.

The birds had stopped chirping and there was an unusual silence around John. He was taking the Bank officials around the new farmland to be used for palm oil production. It was important they should be convinced to part with the necessary loan to finance the project but John could not concentrate. Apologizing, he left them with an assistant and hurried to meet the priest of Oron.

Arit's grandfather was outside his house gazing at the sky in silent speculation. He looked at John curiously. "Where is Arit?" he asked with concern

"She is with Kubi" John said uneasily. "What is it?"

The old man shook his head. "Find Arit, John" he said "this is about her"

John's heart jumped and he raced into the forest. Arit's farm was deserted, but Kubi laid prostrate some kilometers away. Not too far from him was Arit lying down in the sand her white gown stained with blood.

For some unknown reason, John knew what had happened to Arit before he reached her.

When John spoke to the priest of Oron about marrying his granddaughter, the old man was perplexed. The gods had blinded his inner sight temporarily and he knew they only ever did that when they were sure his reaction to a situation might be contrary to their plans. But even this explanation of why he was in the dark didn't comfort him. Something had happened and no one was telling him what it was. He tried to joke about it, but his words came out testily

"I often say you should marry, but I wasn't insinuating anything"

John bowed respectfully "I know my father" he said "but you agree it is best this way"

The old man would have agreed in another situation. It was best that Arit marry a man who would take care of her. It was best too that when he died, his spirit should rest knowing someone capable like John was in charge of his responsibility.

Yet the old man was not happy. He could only acquiesce with a heavy heart.

When Afam heard of the intended nuptials, he was shocked. He had reasoned that by deflowering Arit, he had a legal claim to her. Any half wit could see that, and even though he didn't agree with all these traditions, was not that what *tradition* said? How then could John marry Arit?

On the wedding day, Afam stood outside waiting for what would vindicate him. Tradition that he hated so much might be his salvation after all. It was customary that the husband deflower the wife and a bloody sheet be carried around the village. If that was unavailable, the bride was openly shamed and chased away from the village. Afam knew that Arit would have no choice but to leave with him when that happened.

Arit herself lay in tears in John's home. John had saved her from committing suicide on the day of the rape and asked her to marry him. This part of the ceremony was what they had both avoided discussing. John might be a force to be reckoned with in the village but tradition was tradition and Arit could only wait for her moment of disgrace. She could hear the women singing outside, waiting.

She sat up when John entered the room. Her teary eyes widened when she saw the knife in his hand.

"What is that for?" she asked confused

John smiled at her wearily, and sat beside her. "I have always loved you Arit" he said

Arit nodded "I know that" she said

John shook his head "you don't know just how much" he said "I have loved you as a man in love should, and dreamed that one day I should be honored to be your husband"

Arit was speechless. She tried but failed to see John in this light. He was her big brother and not for one day had there been an action from him to the contrary.

"You must never believe that this marriage is out of pity" he continued "it is not. It is my dream come true and I won't have anything stand in its way"

He took the knife and to Arit's horror, nicked a blood vessel in his arm. The blood spurted on the newly laid bed-cloth.

Arit raised her eyes with understanding. She could only imagine how terrible life without a man who loved this much would be.

Afam could hardly believe his eyes as the women danced around with the bloody sheet. He watched incredulously. What was going on?

It finally sank into his mind that someone in the crowd was looking at him. His heart jumped as he saw the priest of Oron's curious eyes glued on him. He turned away and disappeared into the crowd. There was nothing holding him any longer in the village.