

TOMORROW'S SUN by Sharia Kharif
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*For love and those fortunate enough to have known it.
Na le kowa.*

I draw people near me and wonder
what they see if the life they encounter
was deemed worthy
or tossed away again like peelings
my insides are missing
my insides are missing
I walked out this morning and left them at home
forgot my soul when I picked up my keys
left my heart but brought the memories
forgot the love and convinced myself
it was unnecessary...baggage in a world
where love is painful at best
absent at worst replaced by apathy
renamed something it can never be
destiny
wonder what they see
if they find me lacking
or just another mystery to be
cracked open and left to rot on the front steps
bitter fruit rejected

---Nawe

Tomorrow's Sun - Chapter 1

Why do I keep doing this?

If I die tonight, I'll be the laughing-stock of the morgue.

Nawe glanced down at the head cradled between her thighs and wondered how she'd fallen into this trap...again. Her free hand traced the slope of his jaw, while the other smoothed aloe at the base of one last ebony strand then let the loc slip from her fingertips. Nearly delirious from fatigue, Nawe rested her head against the wall and tried to talk herself out of doing anything silly. Like that would happen. If I kiss him again, he'll probably freak out again and I'll probably cry and my eyes will be as red as these walls and he'll pull me close and give me another there-there pat and I'll die of embarrassment and wouldn't that be fitting? Crazy fearless me crying over a kiss and dying 'cause the boy touched me. She sighed and pressed her cheek against the plaster, relishing the chill like the long-awaited caress.

Not two months after she'd returned, Nawe had found herself sweating in paint-splattered coveralls helping Andre faux-finish the room. Smoothing and waxing plaster in shades of rust and burgundy. Somehow seduced by his deep voice and the way he seemed to peer into her soul when he said please. Goatee framing thick lips curving against sparkling white teeth pink tongue peeking between the rows. Nostrils slightly flared, lids heavy. Or maybe it was the way he'd murmured the word against her throat. Either way, they were both elbow deep in Venetian plaster by noon.

The moment that word fell from his lips, Nawe knew she would agree to whatever had been asked. Okay, so she hadn't really been paying attention. Did she really have to? No one ever bothered to say please. Just demanded what they wanted and expected her to deliver. Had always been that way, at least for as long as she could remember...which wasn't saying much...considering. Nawe hadn't remembered much in a long time. Days blurred until one was no longer distinguishable from the next. Hours passed with no recollection of how the time was spent. Just minutes and seconds of memories she had to fight for. One more thing to fight for.

"You finished?"

Andre tilted his head in the light and 151 pencil-thin locs tumbled over his shoulder. She'd counted. His eyes caught the glow of mulberry candles and chocolate irises deepened into mahogany. Nawe kept her eyes closed. She'd seen it all before. Had prepared herself for his words and didn't need to see him to know what was coming. Besides, if she kept her eyes closed it would make the rejection more bearable.

"You can stay here if you want."

Damn. His words still caught her off guard. If I want? What I want, boy, is to pin your sexy behind to this carpet and find out if your skin is as sweet as it looks. What would that hurt? The thoughts fought their way to tongue but, as always, were suppressed. Mouth closed. Eyes closed. Just say no. She snuggled deeper into the pillows she'd helped pick out and forced her eyes to remain sealed. She didn't have to look at the man to know he was looking at her hungrily. She could feel his eyes burning through her clothes. Lingering on her face and gradually making their way to her bare feet.

Andre wanted her...but only because of Chester. Short, stocky, uptight Chester who seemed to emerge without warning from her poetry. Chester who spoke her thoughts and dreams, making promises she knew he couldn't and wouldn't keep even if the time was right and he didn't have a girlfriend. Chester Wakefield, a wanna-be afrocentric yuppie who thought he was down by moving to the hood and wearing imitation kente. Said he "worked for the people" but talked loud and reprimanded everyone he thought wasn't perfect, so no one wanted to work with him. And he honestly believed they'd get married. Nawe chuckled but kept her lids sealed.

"Yeah baby, I'm finished." She yawned and rubbed first one eye then the other. "Damn I'm tired...been running all day, first with the kids, then the family, now you. You'd better not kick me out." As if she'd stay. She rarely stayed...not that she didn't want to. Still... She opened her eyes and stretched long sinewy arms wide enough to accept the embrace and goodnight peck she'd learned to expect, only to be caught by Andre's gaze. Arms up. Sides bared. "What?" His plump lips slid up at the corners revealing nine perfect pearls and Nawe thought surely this was the time to die. So what if the other corpses laughed at her expense? She could deal with that. What she couldn't take was another night imagining those lips on various parts of her anatomy.

"Oh God," she moaned and Andre lunged forward, running long tapered fingers up and down her trim torso. "Andre..." Chuckling, she fell from the red suede couch knocking

silk and kente pillows and the natural hair gel she'd mixed especially for him to the floor. Desperate to get away, Nawe crawled to what was supposed to be safety. Blow drier. The thought came too late. The shiny instrument clattered to the floor as her left knee caught its cord. Habit made her turn to make sure all was okay and, jerk that he was, Andre seized the opportunity.

One tiny foot had remained within reach and he quickly conquered it. Nawe's face pressed deep in the plush beige carpet, one hand locked around the cherry coffee table that had on too many occasions served as dining room and setting for many a fantasy. "Stop it boy! I'm too tired for..." Unable to complete her complaint, loud hiccupping laughs erupted from her throat. Andre wriggled his fingertips against the giggling girl's instep. She was so small. Her entire foot lay concealed in his palm. Her tiny fists wrapped around the table legs as if she were bracing herself. For what? For me, a fleeting thought as his eyes slid over her caramel frame too long to be supported by such miniscule feet.

"Scream."

"What?!" Nawe went still but her tongue shattered the silence Andre's request had provoked, "I aint 'bout to surrender! You forgot you're ticklish too, huh? Oh...I'm gon' getchu when I get up. Just wait..." Another feathery touch cut off the threat and another round of laughter ripped from her throat, deep and unladylike. Andre chuckled and continued his assault. When the attack progressed to the tender spot behind her knees, Nawe's struggles increased until she had flipped onto her back. Long, red-brown locs fanned around her head. Most snaked around her neck while others stretched to caress the hand-woven raffia mat that lay beneath the coffee table. Vibrant golds and reds intertwined, welcoming the stray locs into their midst.

She was beautiful. High cheekbones and stubborn chin. Lashes too long to belong to a real person. Everything about Nawe defied logic, including how she insisted on pushing his name between her teeth like she was savoring the word. She was growling it now. Murmuring the name like some sort of prayer while forcing herself not to scream. Stubborn. Unlike anyone else he'd ever met. He returned his attentions to the toes still cradled in his palm, a low growl his reward. Very stubborn. At only twenty-five years old, she'd long since mastered the art of disappearing. Blending into her surroundings without changing a thing about herself. Somehow, by being different from everyone else, becoming invisible. Right, he smirked. Invisible.

She thought she was ugly. Nawe's foot jerked in Andre's palm and he leaned closer to her body. Okay. Not ugly. He wouldn't hesitate to hurt anyone stupid enough to call her ugly. She wouldn't hesitate to hurt anyone stupid enough to call her ugly. How many times had he heard, "I've seen enough trolls in my day to know I aint one of 'em. I might not be the cutest thing ever created, but this heifer is ridiculous"? Then she'd roll those big brown eyes and point one short, unpainted nail toward the offender and they'd both laugh at the ugly girl...or boy. No. She didn't think she was ugly. Just didn't realize how beautiful she was.

Could be a model if she wanted. Not that she wanted. Not that he could see her traipsing down a runway in one of those fluffy costumes designers sold for the price of a good used car. A good used car, not one of these rust buckets littering corner parking lots and side streets. Something inspected and certified like a Honda or Toyota. Not that she'd let anyone dress her up. Not that she'd be caught dead in heels...or makeup...and definitely not nail polish. The idea of Nawe Salaam, artist, poet, and eternal tomboy with a French manicure was enough to make Andre forget what he was doing. Nawe's hands always looked as if they'd been attacked by kitchen shears, and probably had. Her nails were dirty

crooked things that seemed to collect paint and grease, mud and who-knows-what-else from down at the Center.

Still, he liked them just as they were. Small wrinkled brown sculptures that were always quick to soothe away his hurts. They reminded him of Great Granny Ruth, his father's grandmother, who had massaged Glovers into Andre's scalp every night until he was thirteen and considered responsible enough to handle the stench on his own. Not the sexiest thought but true. They were healing hands. Had it not been for the many folds and scars, Nawe's would have seemed too childlike, too...too...something. He again contemplated the French manicure, trying to envision long square nails on those fingers. No. They were perfect as they were.

Nawe jerked her foot in Andre's grasp and his thoughts jerked just as quickly from the image he'd conjured of his girl's manicured hands swinging a shiny chrome blow drier at some defenseless screeching hairdresser. Poor thing didn't know not to touch her locs. Andre ran his finger along Nawe's instep.

"Scream." No way was she going to scream, but he wanted to keep her close. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and forbid her to go home, but she'd look at him like he was crazy and roll those big brown eyes. He could see her now; hand on hip, neck swiveling, eyes narrowed, "Forbid me? I know you aint say you for...bid me?!" He'd never see her again. But the idea of releasing Nawe's foot and allowing her to leave his home wasn't one he wished to entertain. So he instead leaned closer, then gave in and gently placed her right foot beside the other, resting his weight on his palms.

"I thought about you today," the words no more than a growl.

"Did you?" Nawe inhaled the scents around her and tried to forget where she was, where he was, tried to pretend Andre wasn't too close. That his nearness wasn't making her sweat. Aloe. Mulberry. Macadamia nut oil. And something else that had been driving her crazy all night. Eyes closed. Mouth closed. Just say no.

"Yeah..." He leaned closer until well-muscled chest met softer one.

"And?"

"Stay." Andre brought his lips to her neck and whispered again, "Stay."

