

The sun had already begun its descent into the jungle when Sifiye stoked the fire for the evening meal. She rushed back and forth from the small hearth to the table, wanting to have the food ready when her husband Shomari returned. Shomari had watched for their son Shinda all afternoon. Working alone, he had to struggle to complete the chores before sunset. Now he was out trying to locate Shinda. He had been quite angry when he left. There would be hell to pay when they returned.

Sifiye went to the crude opening that provided access to her storage. The storehouse was a wooden frame covered with a blanket. It masked the opening into a dead tree that had been hollowed out by a lightning strike long before she was born. It was cool and clean and stable, and provided her with a place to store vegetables and supplies and did not take up space in the small hut she and her family occupied. The opening was half again as wide as she, so she could slip in and out of the tree easily. She was gathering vegetables for the evening meal when she heard the clear ringing voice of her son singing.

She stepped out and looked in the direction she thought he might be coming from, but she did not see him. With the sun directly behind the trees, the dense foliage of the jungle was a looming darkness this time of day as. Sifiye shifted her cabbages to one arm so she might shield her eyes from the intense glare where the sun's rays found a path for escape.

Her son came into view as a cloud passed between the sun and her obscured sight.

"Shinda! Son, please, come quickly. Your father has been searching for you for hours," she called.

Shinda responded by running the remaining distance to the house. "Yes, mother. I am coming." He reached the door in two long strides, lifted his mother into his arms and spun her around.

"What is the matter with you, Shinda? Put me down." She tried to sound terse, but she couldn't keep the smile from her face. The joy of her life held her high in his arms, his radiant smile bringing light into her world. She could never be angry with him for long.

"Shinda, please. Your father is very angry. You could not be found and there was much to do this afternoon. Where were you?"

Even before he answered, she knew. His father would be furious. Time and again he had warned his son to stay away from those people. "Please tell me you did not go to see THAT girl."

"Mother, her NAME is Kainda, and of course I went to see her. I love her and she loves me. I asked her to be my wife today and she said yes. YES!" He spun her around again.

"Stop it, Shinda. Stop it! You do not understand. Those people – those people are the first ones. They are cursed. Do you hear me? Cursed! They will end this world. You cannot, you must not, go there again."

"Mother, did you not hear me? She said yes. I proposed and she said yes. As soon as I speak to her father, she will be my wife."

"Your wife? Your wife! You are mad and your father will end your madness with a big stick."

“I am a man, Mother. Father can no longer tell me what to do.”

Sifiye wriggled from her son’s arms and stalked out into the yard behind the hut. The last rays of the sun streamed through the trees and the sounds of the village settling in for the night drifted on the breeze. They were a poor, hard working people; but they did not beg nor seek what did not belong to them. The village of the old ones had wealth and prosperity, but the people were different, strange. She would not have her son mixing with them.

His hand on her arm, Shinda turned his mother to look at him. “I do not understand. Why do you and father hate them so? They are good people, nice people. Everyone treats me kindly. I made friends in the village. Racdair, Daud and I are best friends. They introduced me to Kainda. I loved her from the first moment. Mother, please. If you met her, you’d love her too. She is so beautiful.”

She jerked away from him. “Yes, they are all beautiful. Did you not notice that? All the people there are beautiful. Is that not strange? They have no ugly ones among them.”

“So, Mother, do you think they kill the ugly babies, or do they just eat them?” His eyes danced as he teased her.

“You think this is funny? Those people are not, not – they are not normal. There are legends about what goes on there, things I will not tell you now because you are of no mind to hear them. But I’ll tell you this. If you mix your blood with theirs, you will be changed. You will never be the same. Stay away, my son. Just stay away.”

Shinda regarded his mother with eyes so much like hers, then bent to kiss her on the forehead. “Mother, I will love you always; but I must do what I must do. I will be back soon. I am meeting my friends at the river.”

“But your father . . .”

“I will be back before he gets home.” He waved at her as he went around the corner of the house.

“Come back here, Shinda!” Her voice echoed slightly in the evening air and she knew only the trees heard her.

The river was almost a mile away, but Shinda could always make the trek in record time. His long legs took him quickly long the trail, and even though it was near dusk, he could still see well enough to run most of the way. He heard the voices long before he broke the tree line.

He smiled. *We will celebrate tonight.*

The voices, however, were not raised in merrymaking. When his friends were finally visible, he could see something was wrong. Daud was pacing up and down before a small fire and Racdair was sitting on a log

with his arm around a crying Kainda. His descent down the slope to the river was so fast Daud had to grab him to keep him from continuing into the water.

“What is happening? What is wrong?” He went to Kainda and Racdair stood to let him take his place. No one said anything and Daud turned and walked away to the river. “Kainda, tell me why you’re crying.”

“Shinda . . .” Blubbering sobs interrupted her words and he couldn’t understand what she was trying to say. He pulled her into his arms and rocked her slowly, waiting, albeit impatiently, until she calmed enough to explain.

Racdair fidgeted a bit, but said nothing. Shinda noticed how Racdair would look at his feet whenever he tried to catch his eye.

*What is going on here?*

When she showed no end to her tears, Shinda gently pushed Kainda away so that he could look into her face. “What has hurt you so? Tell me. The person that did this will pay by my hand. Tell me what happened.”

“My mother . . .”

“Your mother? What?”

She burst into tears anew, and Shinda found all semblances of his patience evaporating. “If SOMEONE doesn’t tell me in the next second what I want to know . . .”

“Tell him,” Daud shouted from the river’s edge. He was throwing rocks out into the water, his back to the group, his tone angry. “Tell him now.”

“Daud, stay out of this,” Racdair said.

“Why?”

Daud was striding back up the shore toward them. To Shinda, he seemed to grow as he approached the fire. It was hard to tell which was hotter, the fire or Daud. Shinda knew here was the answer to his questions.

“Daud, tell me what is going on. Why is Kainda so upset?”

“Daud . . .” Racdair seemed intent to keep the peace. Daud, however, did not share his concerns.

“Why shouldn’t he know the truth? Kainda would tell him if she wasn’t afraid. Shinda, the *Miandai* will not allow you and Kainda to marry. When she told her mother, she went straight to the council. They immediately told her it was impossible. Kainda cannot marry beyond the village.”

” Shinda shot up so fast he almost let Kainda hit the ground. “What? Why?”

“Because they are old and stupid. Our future lies not within the village, but without.” Daud was pacing.

“Oh, here we go again,” said Racdair.

“It’s the truth. We hide among superstitions and lies and the world is passing us by. There is so much we could do – can do, if the *Miandai* would allow it. He has ALL the power, but does nothing with it. We could make life good not just for ourselves, but all the surrounding villages. We could trade, build better homes, reroute the river so . . .”

“Daud!” Shinda knew to interrupt this tirade or he would never find out what happened. “I understand your passion for all this, but what does it have to do with Kainda and me? Why can’t we get married?”

“Because the village’s secrets must stay in the village. If Kainda married you, she’d leave the village,” Daud said. “She would take the family secrets and spread them around the world.”

“Daud, your sarcasm is not necessary,” Racdair said. “It is not helping.”

“What can help?” Shinda turned his attention back to Kainda. “Surely we’re not going to let them stop us. My parents are talking crazy, too. They say your people are cursed and will bring about the end of the world and all matter of foolishness. I do not intend to let that stop me.” He took Kainda by the shoulders and lifted her to her feet. “Look at me. I love you, and no one, nothing will stop me from being your husband.”

“Shinda, you do not understand. The *Miandai*, he can do anything. I am afraid he would harm you if we went against his decision.”

“What are you talking about? I am not afraid of an old man. How can he stop us from doing what we want? He is not your father and I do not care what he wants or thinks.”

“Shinda . . .” Racdair was pushing a pebble about with his toe. “Shinda, she is right. It could be dangerous.”

“How? You three might be scared of old stories and legends, but I am not. Kainda, look at me.” He lifted her chin so she could look into his face. “We will leave here tonight. We can take the raft and go down the river to Sawia. I can get work and we can stay there or move on to build a home elsewhere. Whatever it takes, I will be your husband.”

“We should calm down and talk about this,” Racdair said.

“Racdair, now it is your turn to stay out of it,” Daud said.

“No, Daud, Shinda does not know the truth – the real truth. He cannot know everything, but he must be told enough to stop him from doing something he will regret.”

“I regret nothing, Racdair,” Shinda said. “I will go to Kainda’s father and speak to him. He is the only one who matters. He likes me. If he says yes, I do not care what your *Miandai* has to say.” He took Kainda by the hand. “Come, we will go now.”

“Shinda . . .” Racadair called out to him as Shinda took Kainda and started up the path in the direction of the village.

“Let him go, Racadair,” Daud said as he started after the pair. “It is time someone stood up for what is right.”

The two young men sprinted to catch up and the four traveled the rest of the way to the village without speaking. Racdair finally broke the silence just as the torches of the village came into view. “Shinda, please speak carefully when you talk to Kainda’s father.”

“Do not worry. I have a good relationship with Abasi. He will listen to what I have to say and see the reason in it. I will be fine, Racdair.”

The homes in the village lay in a circle around the village common. Two roads cut through the center, dividing the village into north, south, east, and western quadrants. Kainda’s family lived in the “north”, in the second row from the common. The group took the path between the homes, bypassing the common, allowing them to reach Kainda’s home without passing the *Miandai’s* lodge. Shinda knew he was being kept out of sight, but he didn’t care. He wanted to talk to Kainda’s father. How he got there did not matter.

Daud stopped a few feet from the door and turned to face Shinda. “I want you to know I think you’re doing the right thing. It’s been too long . . .” Loud voices from within the house interrupted him.

There were several people inside, all engaged in a heated argument. In concert, the four of them moved closer to the house, stopping near a window to listen.

“If something happens to my daughter, you’ll pay for it. Who she marries is my decision, not yours. How dare you make such a decision without consulting me?” It was Abasi, Kianda’s father, and his strong voice literally shook the building when he spoke.

“Please calm yourself, Abasi. Your wife did not mean any disrespect. She sought our counsel merely to understand the law in this matter.”

Racdair whispered to Shinda, “That is Shomari, the village *Miandai*.”

Shinda nodded. The smooth tone from the man irritated him. Shomari spoke to Abasi like an adult speaks to a child. Shinda leaned closer to hear more of what was being said, but there was no need. Abasi’s voice got louder.

“Disrespect? Of course it is disrespect. You both disrespect me now. I will decide when I speak to Kainda what will or will not happen. I like Shinda very much, but I also know he has nothing. I am concerned for

the type of life he could give my daughter. The two of us will sit down and discuss his future plans. Then I will make a decision.”

“Abasi, please reconsider what you are saying. We must remember who we are. There is much to lose if we are discovered. The time of *the coming* is near. This is not the time for our people to start leaving the village. When the *Masih* comes –”

“Stop. I know my wife believes what you say; but Shomare, I tell you now that I put no stock in myths. That white elephant of yours has been dead almost fifty years. We are still here and I think we are all doing well. I don’t believe we need another elephant to continue. Secrets? There are no secrets. Just lies. Your lies. You may have my wife bemused, but I am not subject to your charms. Now, leave my house. Get out! I have to find my daughter.”

Kianda’s mother cried out. “No, please don’t!”

Kianda broke and ran into the house and Shinda followed.

When Shinda entered the house, he was met with a scene of the impossible. Abasi was suspended six feet in the air, his body pressed hard against the ceiling. The man Shomare, if that was what he was, was holding out a hand that was bathed in white fire. Kianda and her mother were screaming, and Racdair and Daud were trying to pull him from the house.

“What . . .” Words failed him and Shinda’s feet would not move him.

“Come on!” Daud grabbed him roughly by the arm and dragged him back out into the night. They ran until they reached their campsite by the river.

“I did not . . . I did not see what I think I saw. Did I? What did I see?”

“You are babbling, Shinda. Sit down and rest,” Racdair said. “I’ll build a fire.

“Shomare . . . the *Miandai* . . . How did he do that?”

“Shinda, there is much you do not know and probably will not understand. Just let it go for now. Tomorrow . . .”

“Racdair, please. Things will be no better tomorrow,” Daud said. “Shomare sits on his power until he needs it, not when the people need it. He is protecting his kingdom, not the village. If Shinda learns the truth, we might move closer to changing things for the . . .”

“Listen to yourself, Daud. Do you honestly think we can just tell everyone about the *Masih* without starting a war? They will come for it, and us. We will never be safe again.” Racdair continued to throw sticks onto the fire, his face set and grim.

“What are you two talking about? What is that word you use, Daud? I am so tired of asking that question. Tell me or leave me!” Shinda kicked sand onto the small blaze Racdair built before collapsing onto the log. “Will someone please tell me what I saw back there?”

Racdair busied himself rebuilding the fire and Daud turned his back to Shinda and contemplated the river. Night birds carried on a conversation in the distance, and somewhere on the shore the river lapped up softly on the sand, gurgling softly as it returned home. Shinda waited. He knew they had a decision to make, and if he wanted information, he would have to be patient.

The small blaze grew into a nice fire before Racdair spoke. "Daud, what do you think?"

"You already know what I think." Daud came back to the fire and gave his friend a long, hard look. "Shinda is our friend. If we cannot tell him, we truly can tell no one."

"Then I guess we might as well get comfortable," Racdair said. He went to the edge of the woods and pulled branches from some saplings, then returned to the fire. "Here." He handed several to Daud and Shinda, then settled on his makeshift pallet next to the fire. "Where do we start?"

Shinda shrugged. "The beginning is always a good place."

The sun crested the horizon before the three young men finished their conversation. Shinda had spent the night alternately incredulous, shocked, and amazed as Daud and Racdair told him the mysteries of their people. So many of the myths were true, and a few of the legends, though not completely accurate, got close enough to shake Shinda's belief in what could and could not be real.

"So, you see," Daud said, "the *Miandai* is blessed, that's why he is leader of the village. Shomari, however, has no one's best interest at heart but his own."

"Will he continue to be *Miandai* after the new *Masaish* is born?" Shinda asked.

"No. Someone else will be given the power," Racdair said. "Our friend here thinks he has a way of making sure it is he."

"Daud, do you really think you can become the *Miandai*?" Shinda shook his head in disbelief. "How? You're too young."

"Age has nothing to do with it. How old do you think Shomari is?" asked Racdair. "He's over 200 years old. The *Miandai* lives as long as the *Masiah*. He was probably young when he started."

Shinda hugged himself and continued shaking his head. "This is more than I can take in."

Daud threw another branch into the fire. "I know. But if I open my eyes to the flames during the *Masiah's* birth, I can be the next *Miandai*. I'll end our hiding, secrets and lies and use the power for all the people in the valley."

"Then I could marry Kianda. But when will this happen?"

Racdair stretched and yawned loudly. He kicked a branch into the fire before answering. "We don't know. Nobody knows. Anytime in the 50 years following the death of the *Masih*. That's what my granny says. And there is no guarantee Daud will be chosen."

"You mean it could all be for nothing? Daud, what will you do if you're not chosen?"

Daud looked at him, defiance on his face. "I'll do what I have to do. There's always the dark legend."

"Daud. No." Racdair sat upright. "You do not mean that."

"What legend," Shinda asked.

Daud ignored Racdair's half uttered protest. "It is said that the power of the *Masih* is in its heart. The man that kills the beast and eats its beating heart will take the *Masih's* power."

"You would . . . could do that?"

"He would not," Racdair said.

"I would," Daud retorted. "I will do whatever I need to do to help our people. We will die if we continue to isolate ourselves. The time for change is now."

"There is nothing I can do," said Shinda, "except pray you are right. I hope this *coming* happens soon."

For the rest of the year, Shinda continued to sneak away to meet Kianda near the river. The four would gather at the river to talk, but Daud and Racdair would eventually depart to give the two some time alone. "I don't think I can wait for the *Masih* to be with you, Shinda," Kianda said one night in the spring. "I love you too much."

"I love you, too, but we have to wait. Now that I know the truth, I believe Shamori could find us wherever we go. Daud is our only hope."

"He must be chosen. Anyone else would be like Shamori. Daud is the only one that will help us." Kianda snuggled deeper into his arms. "If I could, I would become the Miandai. Then we could be together forever."

"Has anyone from outside the village ever been chosen?" Shinda asked.

"No. It is always a man and always a man from the village."

Shinda remembered what Daud said about the dark legend. "What if an outsider killed the *Masih*?"

Kianda rose up on her elbow and stared at him. "Shinda, you know that's just a legend, right? Besides, the man that kills the *Masih* will be cursed. He would never know peace. Please, promise me you would never think about doing something so vile."

"No, never. I was curious, nothing more. Just curious."

"Good. Now, stop talking and come here."

The wind howled in the trees and the clouds swept across the face of the moon as if fleeing for their lives. Shinda huddled under the ridge, looking down toward the river. He was waiting for Kianda, as he had waited for the last three nights. He fought his instinct to go to the village. If something was wrong, she would find a way to let him know. For now, all he could do was wait.

He drew his robe tighter and shivered as the wind whipped sand up the face of the ridge. Cold weather was an unusual occurrence in the valley, especially so early in the fall. Shinda pulled sand up around his feet, trying to keep them warm. *Kianda, if you only knew what I go through for you.*

At some point he dozed, but the sound of footsteps scrambling up the ridge woke him. It was barely dawn and the breath of the person coming near hung in the morning mist. *Kianda!*

Shinda scrambled to his feet, only to be slapped down again. "Oh, it is only you," he said.

"Well, I am pleased to see you, too." Racadair stood over him with a grin that did not mask the worried lines about his eyes.

"What has happened? Tell me!" Shinda leaped to his feet.

"Shinda, please sit. I have much to tell you."

"I do not want to sit. I sat here all night. I sat here for three days. I want to see Kianda. Where is she?"

"There is no way to say this," said Racadair, "except to say it. Shinda, she will not come. She cannot come. Kianda has been betrothed to another."

"What? You lie. Racadair, if this is one of your jokes, it is not funny. I want to see . . ."

Racadair shoved him back down on his back. "Shinda, be still. There is more and this is not easy to say. Just listen. I spoke to Kianda last night. It was the first time she could leave her home. Her mother discovered she is with child. Do you hear me? Kianda is pregnant. Her mother barred her in the house and would not allow her to see anyone."

"I have to go to her – now. They have to let us get married now."

Racadair flopped down on the ground beside him. "Shinda, she is going to be married . . . but not to you. They have selected a man from our village to be her husband."

"Who? I'll kill him!"

"No, you won't. I don't know who it is. No one does. Kianda says she is to marry the new *Masih*, whoever he is."

"What? Who made that decision?"

"Her mother." Racadair got up and handed Shinda a necklace. "Kianda says Shomari and her mother felt it was best she not see you again. Shomari did something to her father to make him go along with it."

“How much time do we have?” Shinda asked.

“Time?”

“Before the *Masih* is born? Racdair, I have to get her out of there.”

“I do not know. No one does, though Shomari says it will happen before the end of this moon’s passage. The great book of days in the council chamber shows an eclipse of the moon tonight.”

“Then we have to hurry. Can you get Kianda out of the village?” Shinda was searching through a bag he pulled from the underbrush. “I will take her down the river.” He pulled a large hunting knife from the bag.

Racdair eyed the knife. “What do you plan to do with that?”

“I do not plan to use it at all, but if anyone tries to stop us . . .”

“Shindar, have a care. I will not help you harm anyone.” Racdair planted himself in front of Shindar. “We will do what we can, but there can be no violence.”

“Racdair, I will not live my live without her. No matter what.” Shindar pushed past him back up the hill into the woods. *Nothing will keep her from me. Nothing.*