

Excerpt from To Find You by Cerece Rennie Murphy

Part I: In The Beginning

I wait for him here, at the place where the night sky and the earth become lovers. In the tall grass of our homeland, between two kingdoms, we meet.

Getting here first is easier than slipping away late, especially now when life in my village is bustling with the preparations for our wedding ceremony in just three days.

But as the reeds lick the backs of my calves, I know that this is only part of the reason I wait.

The truth is that I like to feel him coming. At this hour, when my imagination reigns over every shape and whisper, I can almost see him walking on limbs taller and stronger than mine will ever be. Cutting through the blue-black night that hides his slightly lighter shade, he stalks his prey. I cannot hear his approach, but I feel him drawing near, compelled by the same force that holds me where I stand – the scent of my desire in the air.

I close my eyes and breathe deeply, imagining I can taste him, too. The flavor is salt, sweet grass and home. It fills my senses and makes me thirsty.

On the outside my knees shake and my heart pounds, impatient for her mate, while the deepest part of me grows still – stretching towards the peace that only his presence brings.

And he's close now, so close.

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When we were children, he was such a scrawny thing. I used to like to wrestle him just to beat him, just to prove that I could. I was young and determined and more than a little jealous of the prowess of my older brothers. Secretly, I wanted to be like them, but my youngest brother was already 10 years my senior by the time I could walk. In Ekow, I could finally prove that no boy could match me.

My laughter rumbles in the stillness as I think of it. Oh, how mad he would be every time I beat him! And in the beginning, there were many, many times when I did. He would get so angry that his ears would twitch. He would stomp away from his defeat with his hands balled up in knobby little fists – eyes glaring, ears twitching while one of our elders cackled nearby and me sticking out my tongue. We didn't see each other often enough for me to beat him everyday, but I looked forward to it whenever I could. I was always stronger than I looked and even when he grew a little taller than me, his limbs seemed to flail awkwardly about him, so that he was

never quite coordinated. And in my delicious reign as his tormentor, time seemed to stretch on forever, until one day it stopped.

I remember the sun burned low in the sky that day as the dust and amber light conspired against me in swirling fits that stung my eyes. Rolling around on the ground, I was shocked to find myself panting for air. Suddenly, his legs overpowered me. I couldn't throw him the way I had been able to before. His grip was a vice that I had to sweat to free myself from and even then, he would catch me again, quickly - too quickly for my liking.

Unable to break free, I grunted and cursed as he pinned me down on my back. At first, I refused to meet his gaze. Beneath my eyelashes, I could swear I saw my own taunting smirk, the same one I had given him, year after year, curling the corners of his lips. Enraged, I shut my eyes to avoid my fears and kicked my legs furiously, all to no avail. I could feel the muscles of his powerful thighs holding me in place without the slightest indication of strain and I couldn't stand it.

As if sensing the scream that would send my brothers flying to my aid and gotten us both into a world of trouble, Ekow suddenly lifted his body from mine, then leaned over to adjust his grip so that our hands were stretched out above my head, palm to palm, fingers intertwined in the grass and the dirt beneath us.

*How did I not know, even then...*

Something about the gesture was so strange that it distracted me from my fury. The feel of his hands pressed firmly into mine made my stomach flutter and clench in a way that was startling, but not unpleasant.

"Ama," he called. "Ama, don't scream. Ama, please, surrender."

It must have been the "surrender" that made my eyes fly open to meet his in absolute indignation.

Sometimes, I like to think that if I'd never opened my eyes, it never would have happened, but this is, of course, foolish. I was meant to see.

When I opened my eyes, I found him staring down at me. The smirk I'd feared was nowhere in sight.

Instead, his eyes wore the same wariness I felt as I looked back at him, then quickly dissolved into something I'd never seen in him before.

He eyed my mouth with what I understand now as a mixture of surprise and captivation. Back then, I still had no idea what was happening, but as his gaze continued to linger over me, I became aware that I felt like someone was seeing me

truly for the first time in my life. I remember fighting the nameless emotion that closed my throat and pricked my eyes.

“Ama, surrender,” he whispered, “Please.”

And that’s when I understood that I held him in place as much as he held me. Neither one of us could leave without the other.

“Please,” he said again and I finally realized what I needed to do all along.

Seeing the answer there in my eyes, he released my hands and rose to his feet. I remember averting my eyes against the sudden sense of loss that came as he left. But at the corner of my vision I saw it, his hand extended out to help me up. He’d done it before, even as I beat him and he’d risen in defeat while I remained holding my belly in victorious laughter on the ground. I’d always ignored the gesture until that moment, when suddenly it felt like the most natural thing in the world to accept his help.

When I finally stood, I noticed for the first time that he was a full foot taller than me.

Despite my daze, I frowned. “You’re taller than I am,” I said in dismay.

“No, Ama,” he replied. Ekow’s voice was deep and heavy as he stepped forward to take my other hand in his. “We are now exactly the same height.”

I was 13 years old; Ekow was 16 and, after that, nothing between us was ever the same.