

SKINNED

by lesley nneka arimah

The unclothed woman had a neatly trimmed bush, waxed to resemble a setting sun. The clothed women sneered as she laid out makeup and lotion samples, touting their benefits. “Soft, smooth skin, as you can see,” she said, winking—trying, and failing, to make a joke of her nakedness. Chidinma smiled in encouragement, nodding and examining everything Ejem pulled out of the box. Having invited Ejem to present her wares, she would be getting a free product out of this even if none of her guests made a purchase.

Ejem finished her sales pitch with a line about how a woman’s skin is her most important feature and she has to take care of it like a treasured accessory. The covered women tittered and smoothed their tastefully patterned wife-cloth over their limbs. They wore them simply, draped and belted into long, graceful dresses, allowing the fabric to speak for itself. They eyed Ejem’s nakedness with gleeful pity.

“I just couldn’t be uncovered at your age. That’s a thing for the younger set, don’t you think?”

“I have a friend who’s looking for a wife; maybe I can introduce you. He’s not picky.”

Ejem rolled her eyes, less out of annoyance than to keep tears at bay. Was this going to happen every time? She looked to Chidinma for help.

“Well, I for one am here for lotions, not to discuss covered versus uncovered, so I’d like this one.” Chidinma held up the most expensive cream. Ejem made a show of ringing it up, and the other women were embarrassed into making purchases of their own. They stopped speaking to Ejem directly and began to treat her as if she were a woman of the osu caste. They addressed product questions to the air or to Chidinma, and listened but did not acknowledge Ejem when she replied. Ejem might have protested, as would have Chidinma, but they needed the sales party to end before Chidinma’s husband returned. It was the only stipulation Chidinma had made when she’d agreed to host. It was, in fact, the only stipulation of their friendship. *Don’t advertise your availability to my husband.* Chidinma always tried to make a joking compliment of it—“You haven’t had any kids yet, so your body is still amazing”—but there was always something strained there, growing more strained over the years as Ejem remained unclaimed.

The woman who had first addressed Chidinma instead of Ejem, whom Ejem had begun to think of as the ringleader, noticed them glancing at the clock, gave a sly smile, and requested that each and every product be explained to her. Ejem tried, she really did, whipping through the product texts with speed, but the clock sped just as quickly and eventually Chidinma stopped helping her, subdued by inevitable embarrassment. Before long, Chidinma’s husband returned from work.

Chance was all right, as husbands went. He oversaw the management of a few branches of a popular bank, a job that allowed them to live comfortably in their large house with an osu woman to spare Chidinma serious housework. He could even be considered somewhat progressive; after all, he had permitted his wife’s continued association with her unclothed friend, and he wasn’t the sort to harass an osu woman in his employ. True, he insisted on a formal greeting, but after

Chidinma had bowed to him she raised herself to her tiptoes for a kiss and Chance indulged her, fisting his hands in the wife-cloth at the small of her back.

But he was still a man, and when he turned to greet the women his eyes caught on Ejem and stayed there, taking in the brown discs of her areolae, the cropped design of hair between her legs, whatever parts of her went unhidden in her seated position. No one said anything, the utter impropriety of an unclaimed woman being in the house of a married man almost too delicious a social faux pas to interrupt. But as Chidinma grew visibly distressed, the ringleader called the room to order and the women rose to leave, bowing their heads to Chance, giving Chidinma's hands encouraging little squeezes. No doubt the tale would make the rounds—"the way he *stared* at her"—and Chidinma wouldn't be able to escape it for a while. The women walked by Ejem without a word, the message clear: Ejem was beneath them.

Chidinma tried to distract her husband by asking about his day. Chance continued to stare at Ejem while he answered. Ejem wanted to move faster, to get out as quick as she could, but she was conscious of every sway of her breasts, every brush of her thighs as she hurried. Chance spoke to Ejem only as she was leaving, a goodbye she returned with a small curtsy. Chidinma walked her to the door.

"Ejem, we should take a break from each other, I think," she said with a pained air of finality, signaling that this break wasn't likely to be a temporary one.

"Why?"

"You know why."

"You're going to have to say it, Chidinma."

"Fine. This whole thing, this friendship, was fine when we were both uncovered girls doing whatever, but covered women can't have uncovered friends. I thought it was nonsense at first, but it's true. I'm sorry."

"You've been covered for thirteen years and this has never been a problem."

"And I thought by this time you'd be covered, too. You came so close with that one fellow, but you've never really tried. It's unseemly."

"He's only seen me this *once* since you made it clear—"

"Once was enough. Get covered. Get claimed. Take yourself off the market. Until then, I'm sorry, but no."

Chidinma went back inside the house before Ejem could respond. And what could she say anyway? *I'm not sure I ever want to be claimed?* Chidinma would think her mad.

Ejem positioned her box to better cover her breasts and walked to the bus stop. Chidinma hadn't offered her a ride home, even though she knew how much Ejem hated public transportation—the staring as she lay the absorbent little towel square on her seat, the paranoia of imagining every other second what to do if her menstrual cup leaked.

At the stop, a group of young men waited. They stopped talking when they saw Ejem, then resumed, their conversation now centered on her.

"How old you think she is?"

"Dude, old."

"I don't know, man. Let's see her breasts. She should put that box down."

They waited and Ejem ignored them, keeping as much of herself as possible shielded with the box and the cosmetic company's branded tote.

“That’s why she’s unclaimed. Rudeness. Who’s gonna want to claim that?”

They continued in that vein until the bus arrived. Even though the men were to board first, they motioned her ahead, a politeness that masked their desire for a better view. She scanned the passengers for other uncovered women—solidarity and all that—and was relieved to spot one. The relief quickly evaporated. The woman was beautiful, which would have stung on its own, but she was young, too, smooth-skinned and firm. Ejem stopped existing for the group of young men. They swarmed the woman, commenting loudly on the indentation of her waist, the solid curve of her arm. The young woman took it all in stride, scrolling a finger down the pages of her book.

Ejem felt at once grateful and slighted, remembering how it had been in her youth, before her waist had thickened and her ass drooped. She’d never been the sort to wear nakedness boldly, but she’d at least felt that she was pleasant to look at.

The bus took on more passengers and was three-quarters full when an osu woman boarded. Ejem caught herself doing a double take before averting her gaze. It wasn’t against the law; it just wasn’t done, since the osu had their own transport, and the other passengers looked away as well. Embarrassed. Annoyed. Even the bus driver kept his eyes forward as the woman counted out her fare. And when she finally appeared in the center aisle, no one made the polite shift all passengers on public transportation know, that nonverbal invitation to take a neighboring seat. So even though there were several spots available, the osu woman remained standing. Better that than climb her naked body over another to sit down. It was the type of subtle social correction, Ejem thought, that would cause a person to behave better in the future.

But as the ride progressed, the osu woman squeezing to let by passengers who didn’t even acknowledge her, Ejem softened. She was so close to becoming an unseen woman herself, unanchored from the life and the people she knew, rendered invisible. It was only by the grace of birth that she wasn’t osu, her mother had said to her the very last time they spoke. “At least you have a choice, Ejem. So choose wisely.” She hadn’t, had walked away from a man and his proposal and the protection it offered. Her parents had cut her off then, furious and confounded that she’d bucked tradition. She couldn’t explain, not even to herself, why she’d looked at the cloth he proffered and seen a weight that would smother her.

At her stop, Ejem disembarked, box held to her chest. With the exception of a few cursory glances, no one paid attention to her. It was one of the reasons she liked the city, everybody’s inclination to mind their own business. She picked up the pace when she spotted the burgundy awning of her apartment building. In the elevator, an older male tenant examined her out of the corner of his eye. Ejem backed up until he would have had to turn around to continue looking. One could never tell if a man was linked or not, and she hated being inspected by men who’d already claimed wives.

In her apartment she took a long, deep breath, the type she didn’t dare take in public lest she draw unwanted attention. Only then did she allow herself to contemplate the loss of Chidinma’s friendship, and weep.

When they were girls, still under their fathers’ covering, she and Chidinma had become fast friends. They were both new to their school and their covers were so similar in pattern they were almost interchangeable. Ejem remembered their girlhood fondly, the protection of their fathers’ cloth, the seemingly absolute security of it. She had cried when, at fifteen, her mother had come into her bedroom and, stroking her hair, told Ejem that it was time to remove her cloth. The only

people who could get away with keeping their daughters covered for long were the wealthy, who often managed it until the girls could secure wife-cloth. But Ejem's father had grown up a poor man in a village where girls were disrobed as early as possible, some even at age ten, and it was beyond time as far as he was concerned. He knew what happened to the families of girls who stayed covered beyond their station, with the exception of girls bearing such deformities that they were permitted "community cloth" made from donated scraps. But if a girl like Ejem continued to be clothed, the town council would levy a tax that would double again and again until her father could not pay it. Then his girl would be disrobed in public, and her family shamed. No, he couldn't bear the humiliation. Things would happen on his terms.

The day Ejem was disrobed was also the day her father stopped interacting with her, avoiding the impropriety of a grown man talking to a naked girl. Ejem hadn't wanted to go to school or market or anywhere out of the house where people could see her. Chidinma, still under her father-cloth, told her (horrified, well-off) parents that she, too, felt ready to disrobe so that she and Ejem could face the world together, two naked foundlings.

Chidinma's parents had tried to spin it as piety, a daughter disrobed earlier than she had to be because she was so dedicated to tradition. But it'd had the stink of fanaticism and they'd lost many friends, something for which, Chidinma confided, her parents had never forgiven her.

A part of Ejem had always believed they'd be claimed at the same time, but then Chidinma had secured a wife-cloth at twenty, with Ejem as her chief maid. And then Chidinma gave birth to a boy, then two girls, who would remain covered their entire lives if Chidinma had anything to say about it. And through it all, Ejem remained uncovered, unclaimed, drifting until the likelihood passed her by.

She downed a mug of wine in one huge gulp, then another, before sifting through yesterday's mail. She opened the envelope she'd been avoiding: the notice of her upcoming lease renewal, complete with a bump in monthly rent. With the money she'd earned today, she had enough to cover the next two months. But the raised rent put everything in jeopardy, and Chidinma's abandonment meant Ejem could no longer sell to her wealthy set. If she couldn't secure income some other way, a move to a smaller town would soon be a necessity.

When she'd first leased the apartment, Ejem had been working at the corporate headquarters of an architecture firm. Though her nakedness drew some attention, there were other unclaimed women, and Ejem, being very good at what she did, advanced. Just shy of a decade later, she was over thirty, the only woman in upper management, and still uncovered.

Three months ago, Ejem was delivering a presentation to a prospective client. As usual, she was the only woman in the room. The client paid no attention to her PowerPoint, focusing instead on what he considered to be the impropriety of an unclaimed woman distracting from business matters. Ejem was used to this and tried to steer the conversation back to the budget. When the man ignored her, none of her coworkers bothered to censure him, choosing instead to snicker into their paperwork. She walked out of the room.

Ejem had never gone to human resources before; she'd always sucked it up. The HR manager, a covered woman who was well into her fifties, listened to her with a bored expression, then, with a pointed look at Ejem's exposed breasts, said, "You can't seriously expect a group of men to pay attention to pie charts or whatever when there is an available woman in the room. Maybe

if you were covered this wouldn't happen. Until you are, we can no longer put you in front of clients."

Ejem walked out of the building and never returned. She locked herself away at home until Chidinma came knocking with a bottle of vodka, her youngest girl on her hip, and a flyer for home-based work selling makeup.

Now that lifeline was gone, and it would be only a matter of time until Ejem exhausted her savings. She switched on the TV, and flipped channels until she reached an uncovered young woman relating the news. The woman reported on a building fire in Onitsha and Ejem prepared dinner with the broadcast playing in the background, chopping vegetables for stir-fry until she registered the phrase "unclaimed women" repeated several times. She turned up the volume.

The newscaster had been joined by an older man with a paternal air, who gave more details.

"The building was rumored to be a haven of sorts for unclaimed women, who lived there, evading their responsibilities as cloth makers. Authorities halted firefighters from putting out the blaze, hoping to encourage these lost women to return to proper life. At least three bodies were discovered in the ashes. Their identities have yet to be confirmed."

That was the other reason Ejem wanted to remain in the metro area. Small towns were less tolerant of unclaimed women, some going so far as to outlaw their presence unless they were menials of the osu caste. They had a certain freedom, Ejem thought—these osu women who performed domestic tasks, the osu men who labored in the mines or constructed the buildings she'd once designed—though her envy was checked by the knowledge that it was a freedom born of irrelevance. The only place for unclaimed women, however, as far as most were concerned, was the giant factories, where they would weave cloth for women more fortunate than they.

The town's mayor appeared at a press conference.

"This is a decent town with decent people. If folks want to walk around uncovered and unclaimed, they need to go somewhere else. I'm sorry about the property loss and the folks who couldn't get out, but this is a family town. We have one of the world's finest factories bordering us. They could have gone there." The screen flipped back to the newsmen, who nodded sagely, his expression somehow affirming the enforcement of moral values even as it deplored the loss of life.

Ejem battled a bubble of panic. How long before her finances forced her out into the hinterlands, where she would have to join the cloth makers? She needed a job and she needed it fast.

What sorts of jobs could one do naked? Ejem was too old for anything entry-level, where she'd be surrounded day after day by twentysomethings who would be claimed quickly. Instead, she looked for jobs where her nudity would be less of an issue. She lasted at a nursing home for five weeks, until a visiting relative objected to her presence. At the coffee shop she made it two and a half hours until she had to hide in the back to avoid a former coworker. She quit the next day. Everywhere she went heightened how sheltered she'd been at her corporate job. The farther from the center of town she searched, the more people stared at her openly, asking outright why she wasn't covered when they saw that she didn't bear the mark of an osu woman. Every once

in a while Ejem encountered osu women forced outside by errands, branded by shaved heads with scarification scored above one ear. Other pedestrians avoided them as though they were poles or mailboxes or other such sidewalk paraphernalia. But Ejem saw them.

As her search became more desperate, every slight took a knife's edge, so that Ejem found herself bothered even by the young girls still covered in their father-cloth who snickered at her, unaware or not caring that they, too, would soon be stripped of protection. The worst were the pitying *Oh, honey* looks, the whispered assurances from older covered women that someone would eventually claim her.

After a while, she found work giving massages at a spa. She enjoyed being where everyone was disrobed; the artificial equality was a balm. Her second week on the job, a woman walked in covered with one of the finest wife-cloths Ejem had ever seen. She ordered the deluxe package, consisting of every single service the spa offered.

"And may I have your husband's account number?"

"My account number," the woman emphasized, sliding her card across the counter.

The desk girl glared at the card, glared at the woman, then left to get the manager. Everyone in the waiting room stared.

The manager, a woman close to Ejem's age, sailed in, her haughty manner turning deferential and apologetic as soon as she caught sight of the client. "I'm so sorry. The girl is new, still in father-cloth. Please excuse her." The finely clothed one remained silent. "We will, of course, offer you a significant discount on your services today. Maria is ready to start on your massage right away."

"No," the woman said firmly. "I want *her* to do it." Ejem, who'd been pretending to straighten products on the shelves, turned to see the woman pointing at her.

Soon she was in one of the treatment rooms, helping the woman to disrobe, feeling the texture of the cloth, wanting to rub it against her cheek. She left to hang it and encountered the manager, who dragged her down the hall and spoke in a harsh whisper.

"Do you know who that is? That is Odinaka, *the* Odinaka. If she leaves here less than pleased, you will be fired. I hope I'm clear."

Ejem nodded, returning to the massage room in a nervous daze. Odinaka was one of a handful of independently wealthy women who flouted convention without consequences. She was unclaimed, but covered herself anyway, and not in modest cloth, either, but in fine, bold fabric that invited attention and scrutiny. She owned almost half the cloth factories across the globe. This unthinkable rebellion drew criticism, but her wealth ensured that it remained just that: words but no action.

Odinaka sat on the massage table, swinging her legs. At Ejem's direction, she lay on her stomach while Ejem warmed oil between her hands. She coated Odinaka's ankles before sliding up to her calves, warming the tissue with her palms. She asked a few casual questions, trying to gauge whether she was a talker or preferred her massages silent. She needn't have worried. Not only did Odinaka give verbose replies, she had questions for Ejem herself. Before long, she had pried from Ejem the story of how she'd come to be here, easing muscle tensions instead of pursuing a promising career as an architect.

"It doesn't seem fair, does it, that you have to remain uncovered?"

Ejem continued with the massage, unsure how to reply to such seditious sentiments.

“You know, you and I are very similar,” Odinaka continued.

Ejem studied the woman’s firm body, toned and slim from years of exercise. She considered the other ways in which they were different, not least that Odinaka had never had to worry about a bill in her life. She laughed.

“You are very kind, but we’re nothing alike, though we may be of the same age,” she responded, as lightly as she could, tilting the ending into a question. Odinaka ignored it, turning over to face her.

“I mean it; we are both ambitious women trying to make our way unclaimed in male-dominated fields.”

Except, Ejem didn’t say, you are completely free in a way I am not, as covered as you wish to be.

“Covering myself would be illegal—” she started.

“Illegal-smeagle. When you have as much money as I do, you exist above every law. Now, wouldn’t you like to be covered too?”

Odinaka was her savior. She whisked Ejem away from her old apartment, helping her pay the fee to break her lease, and moved her into a building she owned in one of the city’s nicest neighborhoods.

Ejem’s quarters, a two-bedroom apartment complete with a generously sized kitchen, had the freshness of a deep clean, like it had been long vacant, or had gone through a recent purge, stripped of the scent and personality of its previous occupant. The unit had a direct intercom to the osu women who took care of the place. Ejem was to make cleaning requests as needed, or requests for groceries that later appeared in her fridge. When Ejem mentioned the distance from the apartment to her job, Odinaka revealed that she didn’t have to work if she didn’t want to, and it was an easy choice not to return to the spa. The free time enabled her to better get to know the other women in the building.

There was Delilah, who seemed like a miniature Odinaka in dress and mannerisms, but in possession of only half as much confidence. Doreen, a woman close to forty, became Ejem’s favorite. She owned a bookstore—one that did well as far as bookstores went—and she had the air of someone who knew exactly who she was and liked it. She eschewed the option to self-clothe.

“Let them stare,” Doreen would declare after a few glasses of wine. “This body is a work of art.” She would lift her breasts with her hands, sending Ejem and the other women into tipsy giggles.

The remaining women—Morayo, Mukaso, and Maryam—were polite but distant, performing enough social niceties to sidestep any allegations of rudeness, but only just. Ejem and Doreen called them the three M’s or, after a few drinks, “Mmm, no,” for their recalcitrance. They sometimes joined in Odinaka’s near-nightly cocktail hour, but within a few weeks the cadre solidified into Odinaka, Delilah, Doreen, and Ejem.

With this group of women, there were no snide remarks about Ejem’s nakedness, no disingenuous offers to introduce her to a man—any man—who could maybe look past her flaws. Odinaka talked about her vast business, Doreen about her small one, and they teased each other

with terrible advice neither would ever take. Ejem talked some about the career she'd left behind, but didn't have much to add. And for the first time, her shyness was just shyness, not evidence of why she remained unclaimed, nor an invitation to be battered with advice on how she could improve herself.

Besides, Odinaka talked enough for everyone, interrupting often and dominating every topic. Ejem didn't mind, because of all of them, Odinaka had had the most interesting life, one of unrelenting luxury since birth. She'd inherited the weaving company from her father when he retired, almost a decade ago, which had caused an uproar. But if one of the wealthiest dynasties wanted a woman at the helm, it was a luxury they could purchase. And if that woman indulged in covering herself and collecting and caring for other unclaimed women, who had the power to stop her?

"I imagine creating a world," Odinaka often said, "where disrobing is something a woman does only by choice."

On Ejem's first night in the building, Odinaka had brought a length of cloth to her, a gift, she said, that Ejem could wear whenever she wanted. Ejem had stared at the fabric for hours. Even in the confines of the building, in her own unit, she didn't have the courage to put it on. At Odinaka's cocktail hour, Doreen would sit next to her and declare, "It's us against these bashful fuckers, Ejem," setting off an evening of gentle ribbing at everyone's expense.

"You really go to your store like that?" Ejem asked Doreen one afternoon. "Why don't you cover yourself? No one will say anything if they know you're one of Odinaka's women, right?" She was trying to convince herself that she, too, could don the cloth and go out in public without fear.

Doreen stopped perusing invoices to give Ejem all her attention. "Look, we have to live with this. I was disrobed at age ten. Do you know what it feels like to be exposed so young? I hid for almost a decade before I found myself, my pride. No one will ever again make me feel uncomfortable in my own skin. I plan to remain unclaimed and uncovered for as long as I live, and no one can say a damn thing about it. Odinaka rebels in her own way, and I in mine. I don't yearn for the safety of cloth. If the law requires me to be naked, I will be naked. And I will be goddamned if they make me feel uncomfortable for *their* law."

The weeks of welcome, of feeling free to be her own person, took hold and, one night, when Ejem joined the other women in Odinaka's apartment, she did so covered, the cloth draped over her in a girl's ties, the only way she knew how. Doreen was the first one to congratulate her, and when she hugged Ejem, she whispered, "Rebel in your own way," but her smile was a little sad.

Odinaka crowed in delight, "Another one! We should have a party."

She mobilized quickly, dispensing orders to her osu women via intercom. Ejem had yet to see any of the osu at work, but whenever she returned to her quarters from Odinaka's or Doreen's, her bed was made, the bathroom mirror cleared of flecks, the scabs of toothpaste scrubbed from the sink, and the rooms themselves held an indefinable feeling of having only just been vacated.

In less than the hour it took Ejem and the other residents to get themselves ready for the party, Odinaka's quarters had become packed. Men and women, all clothed except Doreen, mingled and chatted. Doreen held court on the settee, sipping wine and bestowing coy smiles.

Ejem tried to join in, but even with the self-cloth, she couldn't help feeling like the uncovered woman she'd been her entire adult life. Odinaka tried to draw Ejem into her circle of conversation, but after Ejem managed only a few stilted rejoinders, she edged away, sparing herself further embarrassment. Ejem ended up in a corner watching the festivities.

She was not aware that she herself was being watched until a man she'd seen bowing theatrically to Odinaka leaned against the wall next to her.

"So, you're the newest one, huh?"

"I suppose I am."

"You seem reasonable enough. Why are you unclaimed?"

Ejem tensed, wary.

"What's that supposed to mean, 'reasonable'?"

He ignored the question.

"Do you know I have been trying to claim that woman ever since she was a girl?" He nodded toward Odinaka. "Our union would have been legendary. The greatest cloth weaver with the greatest cotton grower. What do you think?"

Ejem shrugged. It was really none of her business.

"Instead she's busy collecting debris."

Stunned by his rudeness, Ejem turned away, but he only laughed and called to someone across the room. Suddenly, every laugh seemed directed at her, every smile a smirk at her expense. She felt herself regressing into the girl who'd needed Chidinma's tight grip in hers before she could walk with her head high. She ducked out, intending to return to her quarters.

She ran into Delilah, who held a carved box under her arm, a prized family heirloom Ejem recognized from their many gatherings. It was one of the few objects Odinaka envied, as she could not secure one herself, unable to determine the origin of the antique. She was forever demanding that Delilah bring it out to be admired, though Delilah refused to let Odinaka have it examined or appraised, perfectly content to let her treasure remain a mystery.

Ejem didn't particularly like Delilah. She might have been a mini Odinaka, but unlike Odinaka, Delilah was pretentious and wore her fine breeding on her sleeve. Ejem's distress was visible enough that Delilah paused, glancing between her and the door that muted the soiree.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

Ejem nodded, but a tight nod that said it was not. She watched Delilah's concern war with the promise of fun on the other side of the door. Delilah's movements, a particular twist in her shoulders, the way she clenched her fist, an angled tilt of her head, suddenly brought to Ejem's mind the osu woman on the bus. Something must have crossed her face because Delilah lifted a furtive, self-conscious hand to pat her hair into place—right where an identifying scar would have been if a government midwife had scored it into her head when she was six months old, and then refreshed it on return visits every two years until she turned eighteen. That practice was the extent of Ejem's osu knowledge. Her people lived side by side with the osu and they knew nothing of each other.

Looking at Delilah's box, it occurred to Ejem that an osu girl—if she were clever enough, audacious enough, in possession of impossibly thick hair—could take her most prized possession—say, a fine carved box that had been in the family for many generations—and sneak away in the middle of the night. She could travel farther than she had ever been in her life, to a

city where no one knew her. And because she was clever, she could slip seamlessly into the world of the people she knew so well because she'd had to serve them all her life.

Before the thought could take hold, the uncertainty in Delilah's face was replaced by an artificial sweetness, and she patted Ejem's shoulder, saying, "Rest well, then," before escaping into the party.

Ejem was awoken at dawn by the last of the revelers leaving. She stayed in her apartment till eight, then took advantage of Odinaka's open-door policy to enter her benefactor's apartment. If she hadn't been there herself, she would never have believed it had been filled with partiers the night before. In three hours, someone, or several someones, had transformed the wreckage of fifty guests—Ejem remembered at least two spilled wineglasses and a short man who'd insisted on making a speech from an end table—back into the clean, modern lines preferred by one of the wealthiest women in the world. A woman who apparently collected debris, like her. She wasn't exactly sure what she wanted to say to Odinaka—she couldn't childishly complain that one of the guests had insulted her—but she felt injured and sought some small soothing.

She found Odinaka lounging in her bed, covers pulled to her waist.

"Did you enjoy yourself, Ejem? I saw you talking to Aju. He just left, you know." She wiggled her brows.

Well. Ejem couldn't exactly condemn him now. "We had an interesting conversation," she said instead.

"Interesting," she says. I know he can be difficult. Never mind what he said."

Odinaka pressed the intercom and requested a breakfast tray, then began to recap the night, laughing at this and that event she didn't realize Ejem hadn't been there to see.

After ten minutes, she pressed the intercom again. "Where is my tray?" she demanded, a near shout.

Catching Ejem's expression, she rolled her eyes.

"Don't you start as well."

Ejem opened her mouth to defend the osu women, but shut it just as quickly, embarrassed not only by the unattractive revolutionary bent of what she'd almost said, but also because it felt so much like a defense of herself.

"You are just like Doreen," Odinaka continued. "Look, I employ an army of those women. They have a job and they need to do it. You remember how that goes, right?" Odinaka turned on the television. A commercial advertised a family getaway that included passes to a textile museum where the children could learn how cloth was made. Ejem recalled a documentary she'd seen in school that showed the dismal dorms to which unclaimed women were relegated, the rationed food, the abuse from guards, the "protection" that was anything but. It had been meant to instill fear of ending up in such a place, and it had worked.

When the program returned, Odinaka turned up the volume until it was clear to Ejem she had been dismissed.

Ejem decided that her first foray in her new cloth would be to visit Doreen in her shop. Doreen would know just what to say to ease the restless hurt brewing inside her. She may even know enough of Delilah's history to put Ejem's runaway suspicions to rest. Doreen had invited her to

visit the bookstore many times—“You can’t stay in here forever. Come. See what I’ve done. See what an unclaimed woman can build on her own.”

Wearing self-cloth in the safety of Odinaka’s building was one thing. Ejem dawdled in front of the mirror, studying the softness of her stomach, the firm legs she’d always been proud of, the droop of her breasts. She picked up the cloth and held it in front of her. Much better. She secured it in a simple style, mimicking as best as she could the draping and belting of the sophisticated women she’d encountered.

For the first time in her adult life, no one stared at her. When she gathered the courage to make eye contact with a man on the sidewalk and he inclined his head respectfully, she almost tripped in shock. It was no fluke. Everyone—men and women—treated her differently, most ignoring her as yet another body on the street. But when they did acknowledge her, their reactions were friendly. Ejem felt the protective hunch of her shoulders smooth itself out, as though permission had been granted to relax. She walked with a bounce in her step, every part of her that bounced along with it shielded by the cloth. Bound up in fabric, she was the freest she’d ever felt.

Ejem was so happy that when she saw a familiar face, she smiled and waved before she remembered that the bearer of the face had disowned their friendship some months ago. Chidinma gave a hesitant wave in return before she approached Ejem, smiling.

“You’re covered! You’re claimed! Turn around; let me see. Your wife-cloth is so fine. I’m upset you didn’t invite me to the claiming ceremony.”

The words were friendly but the tone was strained, their last exchange still echoing in the air.

“There wasn’t a ceremony. There was nothing to invite you to.”

Chidinma’s smile faded. “You don’t have to lie. I know I was awful to you; I’m sorry.”

“No, really, there wasn’t.” Ejem leaned closer, yearning to confide, to restore their former intimacy. “It’s self-cloth. I covered myself.”

It took Chidinma a moment to absorb this. Then she bristled, pulling back any lingering affection. Her smile went waxy and polite.

“You must be very happy with your husband.”

“Chidinma, I don’t have a husband. I’m covering myself.”

Chidinma’s look turned so vicious that Ejem stepped back, bumping into a man who excused himself.

“Are you, now? A self-cloth, is it? Someone from a good family like yours? I don’t believe it.” Unlike Ejem, Chidinma didn’t lower her voice, earning startled glances from passersby. Ejem shushed her.

“Oh, are you ashamed now? Did something you’re not entirely proud of?”

When Ejem turned to leave, Chidinma snatched her by the cloth. Now she whispered, “You think you’re covered, but you’re still naked. No amount of expensive ‘self-cloth’—how ridiculous!—will change that.”

It was a spiteful and malicious thing to say, meant to hurt, and it did. Ejem tried to pull her cloth from her old friend’s fist, but Chidinma didn’t let go. She continued, her voice cracking with tears.

“You don’t get to be covered without giving something up; you don’t get to do that. It’s not fair. After everything I did for you, it’s not fair.”

Chidinma cried openly now and Ejem used the opportunity of her weakened grip to twist away, near tears herself.

It had been easy, Ejem thought, in the opulence of Odinaka's house, to forget that they were breaking laws. Easy, too, to clink glasses night after night. What had some woman given up so that Ejem could have this cloth? Was she a weaver by choice or indentured, deemed past her prime and burdened to earn the care of the state? The fabric felt itchy now, as though woven from rough wire.

Ejem hurried back the way she had come, to the safety of Odinaka's building. On the verge of panic, she fumbled with the keys to her apartment and let herself in. Once inside, she leaned against the door and slid to the floor, head to knees, catching her breath. She felt... something, that made her look around, and that's when she saw the osu woman standing in the corner. Her skin was light, almost blending into the dusky beige of the wall, her scar a gristly, keloided mass on the side of her head. She appeared to be Ejem's age or older. She held a bottle of cleaning solution and a rag. She was naked.

It was clear by the hunch of her shoulders and the wary look in her eye that it was not a nakedness she enjoyed. How long had it been since Ejem had carried that very look on her own face? How long since she'd felt shame so deep she'd nearly drowned in it?

The day she'd lost her father-cloth, she'd pleaded with her father, fought him as he'd attempted to rip the fabric away. Her mother had cried to her to bear it with some dignity, but Ejem had gone mindless. When her father had finally taken all of the cloth, uncurling her fingers to snatch even the frayed strip she'd held on to, Ejem had curled into herself, making a cover of her appendages. Each day since had been a management of this panic, swallowing it deep in her belly where it wouldn't erupt.

The osu woman nodded to Ejem, then slipped through a panel in the wall and disappeared. The panel slid back into place soundlessly, and when Ejem went to the wall she could feel no seam. She clawed at it, bending and breaking her nails, trying to force a way in. Finding no entry from her side, she pounded and called out, seeking a welcome.