

The All-Seeing Prophet of Fortune and Love

By Nick Hayden

I. The City of Hazek

In the country of Calikar, beneath the meager shade of a palm tree, sit a Human and a Ronkar. Yes, a Ronkar, just as the ones who travel the mountains speak of, a lumbering, emotionless brute, as wide as two men, and taller than any born to men. A Ronkar, with his hunched back and his thick skin. That sort of Ronkar. But there is a Human as well, and simply because we see these more often, we must not forget that they are also intriguing. For it is this Human who breaks the silence by saying:

“Have you ever been in love, Otaka?”

The Ronkar turns his bored face toward the Human. “Have you?” he asks.

“Of course, my dear friend!” The Human answers loudly, as Humans tend to do. “I cannot walk the streets of any city without being touched by the beauty of a dozen young damsels. The question for me is not ‘Have I been in love?’ but ‘When haven’t I been in love?’”

“You’ve never been in love,” the Ronkar decides.

“Did you hear me? What are my words, just dust in the wind? Maybe you don’t understand. I have been drunk with love, mad with it! Should I climb this tree and shout it?”

“You may climb the tree if you wish, but you are loud enough.”

“You are in a foul mood today, Otaka.”

“And you’re a rogue. The world is as it should be.”

They sit silently for a long time after this. The city of Hazek rises a short distance away, a jumble of dusty stones in the desert, awaiting them. It is hot here, but it is hot everywhere in Calikar, and you never quite get used to it. When the sweltering pattern

of silence and sweat is firmly established, the Human, no longer able to sit idle, jumps to his feet with the spring of a child.

“Come, my Ronkar friend!” he declares, and he flourishes his cape. It is the most wind the Ronkar feels that day. “We have work to do!”

“You haven’t done an hour of work in your life,” the Ronkar replies, but he lumbers to his feet and shoulders their supplies. He stands now half again as tall as the Human.

“But I *do* work ... the hearts of people everywhere!”

“You mean ‘pockets.’”

“Some things need not be spoken, my dear friend, to be understood.”

“Then why do you continue speaking?”

The Human wags a finger at the Ronkar and smiles his grandest smile, one he often uses. “Because,” he says, raising his arms and embracing the image of the city, “my words ring like gold coins among beggars!” He clicks his heels, spins in a circle, and jaunts merrily toward the wavering HazeK.

“Clang,” the Ronkar says. “The word you’re looking for is *clang*.”

And so it is that Oscar Masquino, Human, charlatan, and lover, wearing his voluminous robes of many colors, and Otaka, his faithful Ronkar bodyguard, enter the unsuspecting city of HazeK.

Before the sun again rises, they will be driven from town. This is their custom.

Meanwhile, within the city, unbeknownst to the Human and the Ronkar, a heart cries out in anguish:

“O, I shall die! My heart is troubled beyond grief and sorrow, and I shall die! Is there no end to my bitter torment? Shall I be forever plagued by this burden for which I did not ask? O, how great and deep and incomprehensible is my woe! Woe is me!”

These are the words of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa. It is her beauty that is her burden,

and her bitter torment is the marriage proposal of three men. She flings her tortured body now to the window, into the blazing heat of the rising sun, and prays that her flesh might be seared from her face so that she might be ugly and happy.

But so powerfully is Fate's Hand against her this day that the sun steadfastly refuses to sear her flesh and instead betrays her, illuminating the features of her face to the crowd below. And this is what they see:

They see her face, and it glows like fine bronze work, more praiseworthy than any craft made by men. They see her lips, and they are red and full, an alluring fruit to all mankind. They see her hair, and it is the deep black where the cool of shade resides forever. And they see her eyes, wide and expressive, oases of pure water, a reflection of the desert's beauty with none of its cruelty. There is not a drop of sweat upon her face, for she is a beautiful woman and cannot sweat.

She continues her plea to the cloudless sky and glaring sun above:

"O, cruel, unrelenting fire, why do you spare me? Your unyielding gaze sets equally upon all men, so why not upon me, a woman? O, that I might wither away like the elinian flower upon the dunes after a rain, that my beauty might be brief, and that I might die!"

And with this she flings herself again into the cool dimness of her room. Below her balcony, a quarrel, then a fight, breaks out among the crowd as each man claims her beauty as his own. Inside and in anguish, Adhana Alanna Aoluwa wraps a veil about her face so that none might know her and what she is about to do. She hurries from her room and down the stairs and from her house and into the streets of the city she no longer loves.

And yet, by the time the sun passes around the world once more, she may again know peace and love.

II. The Camel Emperor

The souls of some men dwell upon the tongue. One such man will soon appear in the house of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa. But until he comes the house is quiet. Adhana's father sleeps in the cool shade of his room on a chair. If he hides the seed of his daughter's beauty, he hides it in his childlike face, which is now content as he dreams of dowries and his daughter's smile, not daring to dream the reality he will soon discover.

The tongue-souled man cometh.

"Where is my wife?"

Her father slips from his chair as he wakes with a start, and he opens his eyes upon the face of Kazik Kalzula. It is an unpleasant face, and it belongs to an unpleasant man.

"You have no wife, Kazik."

Kazik resembles the camels he sells with one exception: his hump protrudes not from his back, but from his belly. His grimy fingers grab her father's robe. "I will have your daughter. Where is she? I have come for her."

"Now, now, my friend. We have been business associates for many years. A deal is a deal — my daughter will choose her husband."

With a great noise, Kazik spits. He releases Adhana's father and begins to pace, and with each step, the ground trembles. "It is not wise to let a woman choose. They do not know what they want. She needs a man to tell her." He turns to her father. "You know that my choices are wise. I was an orphan. I lived in the streets. But I built myself a fortune, first grooming camels, then leading the caravans. Now, there is not a merchant who does not owe me money. But if your daughter were mine, I would owe you much."

I can sometimes read the minds of men, but the mind of Adhana's father, in this moment, I cannot. It is common knowledge that he loves his daughter, and it is

suspected that her beauty, having worked upon him since her birth, has made him weak. He does not answer Kazik. The dreams of dowries, if they play in his mind, are not evident. He smiles beneath his black beard and escapes.

“Man! Stop that humming!”

The smile fades. “I was humming?”

Kazik snorts. That is his answer.

“I apologize.” Adhana’s father scratches his beard. “Could you remind me what we were discussing?”

“My wife. Your daughter. Many riches for all.”

“Adhana will choose tonight. She must choose the one whom she can love and who will love her.”

“Melusha, my friend.” Kazik wraps his arm around the other. The sweat spot beneath his arm stains the other’s robe. “You know that I love your daughter. I have promised to build her a mansion worthy of her beauty. Imagine it, stretched across the barren desert.”

“Yes, yes, I see it.” Her father frowns at the image. “It looks hot.”

“Look again, there are palm trees and date trees wrapping it in shade. And there, to the side, is a wide oasis. Now enter through the doors....”

Her father looks up. “Lovely border on the frame. Kazik, I didn’t know you had any love of artistry.”

“I am marrying your daughter, am I not? But, look, see the many rooms? See how they are filled with cool water? I have imported plants from every country. Birds sing in their cages.”

“Oh, it’s a tiger! Is it friendly?”

“Yes, yes, Melusha, my friend. All the animals here are friendly. They have been tamed by your daughter’s beauty. See the many rooms, see the fountains, see the curtains and the sofas, see the tiles and statues and vases, see the wide bed!”

“I see! It is magnificent, Kazik. It is ... but what is this room? So many women....”

“Mind it not! They are servants for your daughter! Now, let me have my wife!”

Adhana’s father blinks and he returns to his dim room. He looks to Kazik — Kazik’s face looms large, its imperfections magnified by proximity. Her father shakes his head slowly. “It sounds wonderful, but ... I told Adhana that it would be her choice. I’m very indecisive.”

“It is your duty as a father to choose a husband to provide for her. Can that sniveling, womanly twig provide for her? He is no man! Can that white child from the north clothe her in finery? Ha! He wears your rags and eats your crumbs. I will build a palace for your daughter, where she can serve me, and you and I will be bound.”

As Kazik speaks, his fat pressing against Adhana’s father and swallowing him, the smile returns to the father’s face, and a song, short and cheerful, rises up. He retreats from the blows of the tongue-souled man. Kazik calls him back. Events occur as before. The father apologizes and asks the topic of conversation.

“I am going upstairs to marry your daughter. Will you stop me?”

“Yes, I must.”

But as Kazik braces himself for a fight, the melody of detachment reaches his ears. He leaves the father and, with great steps, proceeds to the room of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, calling her by her name, and by the name of many fruits and desserts.

He waits at the curtain to her room and calls her. He waits, proclaiming his love. He presses back the curtain a sliver and peers into one corner, teasing her. He booms that he is entering and that he enjoys chasing his women. The second level shakes with the force of overturned furniture and angry, endearing shouts. A mirror cracks. The balcony shudders with anxious fury. The stairs crumble as he bounds down.

Adhana’s father responds to the fingers digging into his shoulders: “It is a pleasant day, isn’t it?” As his mind awakens and he is jumbled, skin and bones, by the force of Kazik shaking him, he returns fully.

“Yes?”

Kazik’s chest heaves with wrath. “Your daughter, where is she?”

“Upstairs.”

“Where is she?”

Her father, at Kazik’s tone, becomes uncertain of himself. “Upstairs?”

Again, the stairs shudder beneath Kazik’s weight as he drags the other by the collar of his robe. Kazik throws him among the shattered furniture. “She is not here!” he cries.

Her father crawls about the room. “My dear, my darling...” He touches a necklace, a dress, a fragment of mirror. “She isn’t here.” He begins to wail.

“We must find her,” Kazik says, lifting the other from the floor.

“Yes, yes, we must,” the father says, as he descends the stairs, suspended by Kazik’s hand.

The two leave the empty house and enter the heat of the day.

III. The Treasure Hunter

The great masses of men who have lived, if collected in one place, could not lessen the isolation of misery. So it is that Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, passing veiled through the market of Hazek, cries bitter tears known to no other. She moves quickly through the streets, pushing desperately past the forms around her. To her, they are not people but mirrors trying to reveal her beauty, and she will not look. Her eyes are on the ground, and she loses her feet with the feet of the mirror stands and watches as the tears fall from her veil to become small pools that try, in vain, to catch her reflection.

But though Adhana may not look up, we must. If you have been to Hazek, you know the smells — the roasted nuts, the sweaty bodies pressed together, the perfume sprayed and sold, the ripened fruit and rotten fruit, the camel spit, the baking sand,

the tanned leather, the fires laden with meat — but that is only a part. The great industry and creativity of the Western Alliance is displayed here, and the stolen relics of that nation Derhalia. I could list the many wares — the vases, the tools, the furs, the beasts and their tamers, the cloth, the curtains, the knives and swords, the maps, the books, the chairs, the carpets, the works of glass, the hired men, the wine — but I will not. We do not have time to peruse, for we look up not for these many images, but for the presence of a man, the second of Adhana's suitors. He gazes over a table of jewelry, his fingers tugging on his long, smooth nose. It is part of a long, smooth face, with eyes like a fawn's and lips like rose petals.

The owner of the booth speaks to him. "Yes, sir, you are interested?"

The suitor, with a dashing smile, removes his purple cap and uses it to point at a tremendous emerald. "How much is that, my good sir?"

"It is too much."

The suitor replaces his velvet hat over his thin, pale hair and precisely adjusts it. "I am Pierre Agapa, treasure hunter and adventurer. If this jewel were worth the lives of ten men, I would still buy it. What is the price?"

"It is pledged to another. He is coming tonight to pay."

Pierre leans forward, placing his slim hands on the table and smiling beautifully. "My dear man, I will pay you double what this other has offered. Do you not believe me? I have purchased a pearl the size of your head for the price of 100 gold bars and a manta tail. It sits on my dinner table. It looks exquisite."

"Yes, I see."

"I know that you do. What is the price?"

"Sorry, I cannot sell it. It is reserved for another."

Pierre presses his fingertips gingerly against his forehead, grimacing. "My dear man ... I am looking for a jewel worthy of the living jewel I will receive this evening. She is a rare and beautiful creature, lovely in every detail. This jewel here is nearly worthy of

her. You must understand my desire. Look, I will make it plain.”

Pierre turns on his booted heels and surveys the crowd. He spots the object of his search, strides gracefully between the people, and returns with the hand of a young girl in his own. She is blushing.

“I will keep you only a moment, my lovely,” Pierre reassures her, scratching her back absently. His other hand motions to the booth owner. “Please answer my questions for this gentleman. If I told you that you were beautiful, would you believe me?”

The girl giggles. Her dark cheeks flush with red.

“Now, if I took this emerald....” He removes it from the table. The owner squeaks. “And if I knelt before you” —he does so— “and said, ‘I have searched the world for an object equal to your beauty. I have found only this, a pale reflection of your ravishing presence. Please, have it. It is the smallest token of my heart.’ If I said that, would you feel more beautiful?”

The girl’s eyes are wide with joy. Her gaze, though focused on Pierre, flickers to the booth owner. She breathes with ecstatic difficulty. She reaches her hand for the jewel, but the booth owner snatches it from Pierre’s hand.

“Thank you, my dear.” Pierre kisses the girl on the cheek and turns to the booth owner. The girl, in an impulse, grabs Pierre’s hand and kisses his cheek. He pats her on the head. “Now, you see why I must have this jewel. I will pay whatever you ask.”

“It is for her?” The owner indicates the girl with a motion of his head.

“What? No, no! She was an example, so that you might understand my need.”

“You kiss my daughter and do not mean it?”

A change comes over Pierre’s face and posture, much as if he is growing quickly wizened. He forces a smile and says in his most pleasing voice, “Now, see here, my dear man, this is a rather curious misunderstanding....”

Behind him, unknown to him, and he unknown to her, Adhana Alanna Aoluwa

passes swiftly, hearing his voice no more than the others. She moans now, from the wretchedness of her soul, and she prays, feverishly, that she be unmade and delivered from the world.

“What future have I beneath this sun that will not hide me? What joy is there in my beauty when the earth is teeming with ugliness? O, that I might sink to the grave and rest! But it is forbidden — it is forbidden that I taste the sweet juice of that fruit! This market cannot satisfy me. There is no pleasure in these things. O, that I must languish here, in this barren life, divided from the sun that hates me, from the moon that haunts me, from these endless sands that will not swallow me! Woe is me!”

And she, stumbling beneath the weight of her agony, falls to the ground. The calloused hands of an old woman pull her up, and the gentle voice of that same woman comforts her.

“Where are you going, young one?” the older asks when her other inquiries are met with tears.

“I know not, kind lady. But I am going away, for I cannot bear the woe this city holds.”

“Will you stay with me awhile?”

“Do not ask me, for I will refuse. Let me be on my way! The sun drives me forward, and I must not stop.”

The old woman shakes her head. “If you will not be stopped by me, then, please, listen. There is, beyond the city a little, a tent of bright colors. It is a fortune-teller’s tent. I do not trust the lot of them, but perhaps he has arrived just as you are leaving for the comfort of your soul. The best of them are wise, if not in the manner they claim. If nothing can stop you, perhaps he can.”

Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, filling again with anguish at the kindness of the lady, mutters her thanks and runs forward, breaking from the woman’s feeble grip, the ground swallowing her tears, the hot, languid wind providing no relief.

IV. The Boy from the North

It is at the edge of the city of Hazek — it is identified on any map — that a tent of green and of yellow and of red stripes is erected that day. Otaka stands before it. His arms are crossed upon his wide chest, and his pachydermatous skin creases at his elbows and bunches at his shoulders. His neck is the thickness of his large head, and his head thrusts forward and hangs down — but that is a Ronkar. You know this already.

A young man stands before Otaka, and he is small. “Ex, Excuse me, sir?” He mops his red face. The skin on the back of his hands and on his nose is peeling in large flakes. “Is this the tent of Oscar Masquino the Magnificent, the All-Seeing Prophet of Fortune and Love?”

Otaka stares at the young man. His eyes are black and merciless. “This is Oscar’s tent.”

The young man nods, and the nod becomes a small bow. He lifts his eyes furtively. “Is he ... I don’t mean anything by asking, but is he ... good at what he does?”

“He could be better.”

“The future is an uncertain thing,” the young man replies hopefully. The Ronkar does not smile or chuckle as a Human might have. “No one can be expected to be perfect, can he?”

“He isn’t perfect.”

“I like humility. I ... I think it would make him more honest.” The young man looks to Otaka for a response, but the Ronkar gives him none. “Would you trust him in matters concerning ... love?” He whispers the last word reverently.

“Would you like to see Oscar?”

The young man nods vigorously, and sweat flies from his face and hair. Otaka watches as the sweat lands on his crossed arms and as the young man rubs the arms with his rag, apologizing. The rag is already soaked. “I’ll ask if he’ll see you.”

Otaka lowers his head and enters the tent. It is misty inside, like dusk on a swamp. Lamps are placed haphazardly about the room, and they shine like the Ignis Eyes that haunt the fens to the north. Oscar sits cross-legged on a mound of pillows, enthroned in shadows and cheap incense.

“It’s hot, Otaka.”

“There’s a young man to see you.”

Oscar waves his hand to dismiss the words. “Yes, yes. I heard him. Skittish fellow. You didn’t answer his question, Otaka.”

“I answered what was required.”

“He asked you if you would trust me in matters concerning love.” Oscar smiles gallantly. “Would you?”

Otaka stands silently for a moment. “I’d trust only myself.”

“I wish I knew you better, Otaka.”

“I wish I knew you less.”

Oscar laughs, but it is a laugh tinged with sadness and regret. “I bet you do! But you don’t mean it.”

“I’ll send him in.”

Otaka turns and lumbers from the tent, beneath the fraying flap. As he leaves, Oscar wipes the sweat from his face and assumes a countenance of supernatural wisdom. It is well-practiced.

The young man enters, tripping on the edge of a rug. When he stands again, he looks about wildly to reorient himself. He stops. His eyes travel upward, up a mound of pillows, up to the shining presence of Oscar Masquino, the All-Seeing Prophet of Fortune and Love. A golden turban balances on the prophetic head, reflecting the light of candles.

“Yes?” The voice seems to emanate from the turban, but the young man discovers the small shape of a head beneath and there, eyes, imperial, flaming, looking down

upon him. The young man falls to his knees and begins to speak, holding his hands before his face as a shield from Oscar's terrible gaze.

"Sir, my name's Emere Donka. From Tyra originally, up north. I came down 'cause my dad thought I should see the world. It was nice, I guess, while I had some money, but I'm not sure I like it now, being poor and moving from place to place. I try to find work when I can, bu—"

"I know." The turban leans forward and threatens to crush the young man. "What is your request, Emere Donka from the North?"

The young man presses his face to the ground, inhaling the dusty carpet as he slows his breathing. "I love her."

"That is not a request."

The young man turns his face to the side so that he can breathe. The carpet beneath his cheek is damp with sweat. "It is a request. If you had seen her — she is beautiful. She has a smile like water in the desert. I have asked her father; he has given me work these past months, but two others have asked also. O, prophet, whom will she choose? I pray that she might choose me, for I do not hope to find another like her, though I climb Mount Aginsar and enter the heavens."

"Is that, then, your request, to know if this woman will choose you as her husband?"

The young man does not answer at first. He pushes himself to his knees and, with hesitation, directs his eyes to the turban flickering gold and red above him. The two eyes peer at him like glimmering jewels. He opens his mouth. He swallows and opens again. The words come as a whisper.

"Which of the three will make her happiest?"

The turban leans back. The ceiling dances with reflected light. On the mound of pillows, a hand is raised to the turban. The small eyes close. "I see...." The turban shudders with the words. "I see...." Clouds of incense swathe the turban in thick thoughts. Then, with the ferocity of passion unleashed, the turban springs into the air

and the pillows birth Oscar's body. "I see!"

The young man lies slain in fright.

"Emere!" Oscar and the turban proclaim. "Emere, your fate is thus: She will be yours for a little while, and, if your arms are strong, for evermore!" The young man shivers. "Now, go! Seize your woman! And as you leave, pay the Ronkar, or some curse may fall on you."

The young man nods, muttering many thanks as he stands shakily and leaves. The flap reveals a ray of sunlight for a moment; it cuts through the fog; the flap closes and it is lost.

V. The Queen of the South

Otaka still stands at the entrance to the tent when Adhana Alanna Aoluwa approaches with tentative steps. He watches her as he watches all who pass, with black, unfeeling eyes. Many have never seen a Ronkar, and he frightens those whose world has always been small. Adhana herself feels a quickness of breath in his presence.

"Noble creature," she says, looking up at him through her veil. "Is this the tent of the prophet whom I have heard tale of?"

"His name is Oscar Masquino."

"I had not heard his name, noble creature. I am greatly distressed, and I know not where to turn. O, but I am wretched, noble creature! My sun is hot, but I drown in sorrow. What is this wicked thing they call love? It is a plague. My sorrow must lessen, for I cannot live with this burden. It is too terrible."

A strange thing happens when Adhana says this — I do not know if I can describe it, but — Otaka's face, cracked like sun-scorched clay, seems to soften, as if that drying heat had been reversed. "You can live with the burden," he says. "But it is

terrible.” He unfolds his arms, appearing now less formidable. “Oscar has no answers for you. Seek them elsewhere.”

“I have nowhere else to turn! O, that I did, perhaps my torment would be lessened! Do not stop me, noble creature!” Adhana flings herself onto the wide body of the Ronkar. “My mind is a sandstorm. I cannot think. I must see the prophet, for the sun drives me, but I do not wish to go with it into the night. Dear creature, let me pass!”

Otaka, as still as the ruins in the desert, remains unmoved beneath her tears and pleas. Adhana slips to her knees; she bows before his feet; she rises heavily. Otaka speaks.

“I will inform Oscar that you wish to see him.”

Oscar is at the flap as Otaka enters, his head to the ground as he peers beneath the tent to view Adhana. He jumps to his feet with a smile. “I must do my research.”

Otaka grabs him by his blue-green-yellow-red sleeve and pulls him away from the flap. “Promise her nothing.”

“Otaka, how can you say such a thing?” Oscar’s smile slips a little. “She is in distress! I am a chivalrous man, you know. I cannot help but aid a beautiful damsel.”

“You aid with lies,” Otaka rumbles. “Comfort her if you must, take her money, and be done with her. You cannot deal with this.”

“You’re hurting my arm.”

“I know.”

“She is waiting, Otaka.”

Otaka’s black eyes scrutinize Oscar’s face. He releases the charlatan’s arm. “Get to your place.”

Oscar scurries up the mound of pillows. “You are a lousy bodyguard. You’re supposed to *protect* me from injury.” Oscar positions himself, places his turban snugly on his head, and flashes his smile. “How do I look?”

“Ridiculous. Speak empty words. I’ve heard plenty from you.”

Otaka leaves, and soon Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, the desire of many hearts, enters. “What is your wish, my lady?” the turban, and the smile beneath it, asks.

“O, most noble prophet, I have come praying that you might balm my bleeding soul, for I must choose my husband this night. But I am beautiful, more beautiful than any created creature. My lips are fruit, that the man I choose may feast upon them. My skin is heated bronze, that the man I choose might never again feel the cold bite of night. My hair is clothing, my voice is drink, my eyes are light, my breasts are shelter. Do you see how cursed I am?”

At that moment, Adhana cannot see her prophet’s face, but it is one transported into paradise, where every sight pours forth joy. He struggles to speak. “Yes, you are most mightily cursed,” he says softly. “But there is nothing hidden from me. Remove your veil. You come here already revealed.”

Adhana obeys. Oscar watches as the veil is lifted, and, as the fullness of the sight washes over him — the precious tear-stained cheeks; the sorrowful, fragile eyes — his heart stumbles and swoons.

Adhana ends the silence with an awful moan and plea. “O, you see my mind and my tortured soul! I cannot choose. They do not love me. I wish to flee from their eyes and from the eyes of all men. But....” She looks to Oscar in desperation. Her voice is a whisper. “I do not think I can be alone. I will die. I cannot survive in the harsh desert. O, what a choice I have been given! Can you grant me wisdom? I perish for the lack of it.”

“What does your heart tell you?”

“O, curse my heart! It is a foul, fickle thing!” Adhana, filled now with fury, sweeps across the room, disturbing the clouds of incense. She hunts restlessly, but there is no object on which to release her rage. “Prophet! Answer me! What am I to do? Or will you be as silent as the sun and the moon and the numberless stars? My heart is flaming, but the deep waters will soon engulf it.”

But Oscar is not celestial. He is mortal, and he answers her. “Choose a spot this night that only you know. When darkness falls, the choice will be made for you.”

Adhana Alanna Aoluwa falls to her knees and weeps with relief. “You are a great man, prophet. I will do as you say. O, how wonderful it is to feel the foundation of earth beneath me once more and not the shifting sands. How can I repay you?”

“You may pay Otaka as you leave. Take care my lady — love will find you tonight.”

VI. The Hunting Party

Adhana is just gone when Otaka enters the tent and finds Oscar on his back amidst the pillows, softly singing.

“I’m in love, Otaka.”

“I told you to promise her nothing.”

“Oh, no one cares,” Oscar says irritably. “Stop being a grump and follow her.”

Oscar raises his head to view the Ronkar. “You’re thinking it, but you won’t ask. You *are* stubborn, Otaka. ‘O, Oscar, pray tell, why should I follow her?’”

“I don’t want to play your game.”

“Glad you should ask,” Oscar answers his own question. “I wish you to follow her so that I might make the words I spoke true.” He lowers his voice conspiratorially.

“And now you say, ‘I don’t understand.’”

“I don’t understand.”

“Very good, just like that, but with more feeling next time. Well, you *don’t* understand. My dear friend, you must learn to think like a Human. You discover the secret spot she chooses for her destined meeting, and I shall present myself, and we shall live happily ever after.” Oscar, who has risen to his feet with emotion, sits again.

“And now you say, ‘O, very good, master. How stupid I am.’”

“I’m leaving.”

“Taking initiative. I like that. Don’t let her see you following.”

“I may not return.”

Oscar jumps to his feet as Otaka leaves the tent. He scrambles down the mound of pillows and stumbles through the flap into the hot sun. He blinks his eyes against the glare and dust, shielding them, as he makes out Otaka, walking toward the city.

“Otaka! Otaka, come back here, you ogre!” The Ronkar does not listen. “He’s joking, he’ll return,” Oscar tells himself. “He has such a strange sense of humor. He’ll be back. He can’t leave. He’ll be back.”

Oscar watches the thick, brown body of his bodyguard until he enters the streets, turns a corner, and disappears.

Adhana races though the baking streets, her bosom burning with the flame of hope. Her dress flaps behind her; her veil presses against her face; she leaps over trash and dung and seems one of the brilliant birds of Apelego. She slows little as the crowds thicken but weaves effortlessly through the gaps. As she passes, the people stop and their heads turn to follow, as if they are spouts of dust thrown up by the speed of her wings.

But if you look farther down the street — she is fast approaching the place — Kazik leads a dozen of his guards in search of her, and her father follows uncertainly.

Adhana Alanna Aoluwa soars, her burden lifted by the man she, in her misery, deems wise. She flies; she dives and dashes; but the wall of Kazik’s men is too tight and too wide. She collides and flutters to the ground.

Hands grasp her, and she hears her father’s tremulous voice. “My dear, my darling....”

“Father ... I am fine.”

“My love.” These are not the words of her father, but of Kazik Kalzula. He wipes

slobber from his lips as he appraises her. “We were concerned for your safety. We didn’t know where you had gone.”

“I am a grown woman,” she replies, looking now to her father. “Why are these men here? Were they looking for me? O, father, if they were...!”

Her father, upon hearing her voice fill with despair, and seeing her face darken like a desert dusk, can manage no words, but turns away to wipe his eyes.

“These men are mine,” Kazik says, taking her hand in his. When she pulls away, he takes it again, more forcefully. “They will soon be your servants. Men, bow to the lady.”

The bare-chested men do so awkwardly, holding their swords as politely as they know how.

“Now, where have you been, my love?”

Kazik asks the question, but Adhana’s father turns to listen after wiping his sleeve across his face one last time. She speaks to him when she answers. “My heart was troubled by my choice. I went to see the prophet. He has arrived just today. He has a tent outside the city. He spoke wisdom to me, and I am returning with its whisper in my heart.”

Her father leans forward intensely, “My darling, what did he say?”

She jerks her hand from Kazik’s meaty grasp and straightens her back. “I will decide tonight, as we have agreed, father. I will speak no more of it.”

Adhana continues toward home, more slowly now, her father clinging to her arm and talking softly. Kazik begins to order his men to follow when one speaks to him: “Look there.” Kazik looks and sees a wide, bestial face peering at them. The face rises above every head, and its dark eyes, when Kazik follows them, lead to Adhana. The hired man continues: “That creature arrived with the prophet. I saw the tent erected this morning.”

“Confront him,” Kazik orders. “Discover the message this prophet gave to my

wife.”

The hired man salutes and, gathering a few fellow soldiers, pushes through the crowd. The Ronkar does not move as they surround him.

“Do you work with the prophet on the edge of the city?”

“I travel with Oscar Masquino,” he answers.

“Why are you not with him?”

“Because I’m here.”

“Are you following Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, the future bride of Kazik Kalzula, our master?”

“I was trying to.”

“We thought as much. We should punish you for your insolence, but if you tell us what the prophet reported to our master’s beloved, we will be merciful.”

“What he said is of no consequence.”

“We will decide that. Now, tell us what he said.” The leader steps forward as he speaks, raising his sword to intimidate the Ronkar. The others, watching carefully, imitate him.

“You can ask Oscar if you want to know.”

“We’re asking you.” The crowd has cleared now, and a circle of spectators surrounds the Ronkar and his inquisitors.

“And how is that working for you?”

The leader is a student of diplomacy under his master Kazik. He attacks. The Ronkar’s hand grasps the man by the head and flings him aside. The other bare-chested men, imitating their leader, attack and, imitating their leader, are flung aside. They regroup and begin another assault. The Ronkar, in his lazy way, swings and tosses them away, repeating brutal swats until they no longer rise. The results of the fight: thirty-two bruises, seven broken bones, and one concussion — none of these Otaka’s.

VII. Daydreams of Unimaginable Beauty

The minds of some men are incomprehensible — they delve deeply into the workings of the world, reveling in science and philosophy; they pierce the masks of creation and glimpse its fullness; they uncover fingerprints in the random events of life and find comfort in inexplicable purpose; they consider eternity and shudder.

But the mind of Oscar Masquino is not one of these.

After Otaka leaves, Oscar returns to his tent, already convinced that his bodyguard will return and with news of the woman. He can think no differently, for his mind now has but one object. Lying on his throne of cushions, he smells the cheap incense, and it is the closeness of her skin. He watches the wavering flames of his candles, and it is her graceful, swaying walk. The cushions are her words and the dimness, her black hair. He thinks long on her many excellent beauties, and I — if I may give an opinion — believe the creature in his mind is soon a flat, wrenched facsimile of the true woman; and Oscar's glory lies not in the remembrance of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, but in the artistry of his own creation.

He stirs. "I will win her heart," he declares nobly to the smoke-filled ceiling. He collects his gold, ties the tent flaps closed, and enters the city, passing in a haze the many sights and sounds. The allure of the exotic, usually touching that nature of extravagance in him, has no effect this day, for he is enthralled with something greater.

By unconscious clarity, he finds the market, and, as he looks it over, the woman Adhana Alanna Aoluwa is nearly driven from his mind by the many wares — but I have already described the sight. By force, he recovers the image of the woman. "Oscar, how weak you are!" He reminds himself of his mission and begins to scan the booths and the carpets spread on the ground, the tables and the portable displays. He knows not what he is searching for, but he knows the substance of it — it is an object to heighten the beauty that has been raised to the heavens in his mind. The seller of a violet gown addresses him, but he, uncertain of womanly sizes, moves on.

Hawkers of exotic birds flock to him, but he, uncertain of her love of animals, continues. Merchants, selling bracelets, anklets, earrings, nose rings, and necklaces, surround him, and he, imagining the jewels upon her body, stops.

Circles of gold, silver, and bronze dangle before him. Eyes of sapphires and rubies stare at him. He touches many, imagining each upon her arm or neck. “Trinkets,” he mutters, laughing. “Nothing but trinkets on her fair skin.”

Then he sees a jewel, as large and green as a melon, sitting on a table. He walks to look at it. How he imagines Adhana wearing it, I do not know, but he nods to himself and interrupts the booth owner, who is talking heatedly to another.

“I’d like to buy this.”

The two — owner and customer — turn to him. “Is this the man?” the customer asks. He is no other than the world-famous (in particular cities of the West) treasure hunter, Pierre Agapa. His voice is high-pitched with tension.

“No, no. This is not him,” the owner replies. He turns to Oscar. “This jewel is already sold. Please, leave me alone, and take this man with you.”

“I tell you, I must have this jewel,” Pierre says. His rosy lips are pursed, and pink spots of anger have blossomed on his pale cheeks. “I will not leave without it. I have outwitted better men than you.”

“Do you break their daughters’ hearts also?”

Oscar notices then a young woman within the booth, wiping red eyes.

“She was an example, an illustration!” Pierre whines.

The owner stares blankly at Pierre, and Oscar, being a reader of men, senses that Pierre has repeated himself many times, and the owner, unthinkingly, unfeelingly, always reacts the same.

“Why do you desire the jewel?” Oscar asks.

“To glorify a creature so marvelous that the sun herself rises each day to see her.”

“You exaggerate.”

“I do not!” Pierre declares. “Her beauty is unimaginable. Her hair covers the great beauty of her face like the clouds that clothe Mount Aginsar. Her walk is like the breeze across the fields of Manarim. Have you seen the great statue of the Goddess Sara-Jin in the Temple at the Edge of the World? Of course you have not. But she is nobler than that piece of art. She is more precious than any jewel or artifact, more bountiful than fields of crops and trees, more full of life than the Wellspring of the Gods!”

“I cannot imagine it.” But Oscar, suspecting that he speaks of his own heart’s desire, studies the jewel, saying softly, “No, it’s a little bigger, but not so well-cut.”

“What do you speak of?” Pierre asks.

Oscar straightens from bending over the jewel. “This is a flawed work. Don’t let its size deceive you. I brought better with me from the Ronkar mines.”

“The Ronkars have mines?” Pierre’s lips quiver exquisitely.

“They live in the mountains, don’t they?”

“Can I see this jewel?” Pierre removes his velvet hat and twists it nervously. “I will pay you any price you ask ... if the jewel is suitable for my purpose.”

“It is precious to me. I’m not certain I would want to—”

Pierre replaces his hat. He speaks confidently once again, flourishing with one hand, resting the other lightly on his hip. “If this jewel were worth the lives of ten men, I would still buy it.”

At these words, the owner spits on Pierre’s slippers and closes his booth. He drags his daughter away, telling her harshly to stop her crying.

“Well, I am finished here,” Oscar tells Pierre. “You might as well come and have a look.” As Oscar leads him to his tent, he pays little attention to Pierre’s tales of treasures — he is planning how best to remove this obstacle to his love.

VIII. Peace

As Oscar lures Pierre from the city, Emere Donka, that boy from the north, approaches the house of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa. His heart throbs, his hands hurt, he is unquenchably thirsty. He can still hear the prophet's words — *She will be yours...* *Seize your woman!* He is a sunburnt, flaking child among the bearded beasts of this southern land, but now, at this moment, he feels he is their equal.

But he discovers guards before the entrance to the house of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, and he turns away, shrinking, deflating. *She will be yours for a little while, and, if your arms are strong, for evermore.* The prophet's words echo in his head, but his arms are not strong. He imagines them splintering in a fight.

To the weak-hearted, the streets of Hazek, with its throngs of wild men and wilder animals, are a place of terror. To Emere, it has often been such, and the walkways paved in flat rooftops have become his favored route of travel. There, a boy with nimble feet can pass above the city unhindered, bare to the sun just as the crowds below are bare to his own eyes.

Recovering his wits and his courage, Emere returns to the rooftops. Many residents use their roof as a patio, and Emere has learned to be quick passing from one to another. He uses the stairs of a friendly neighbor, and from there he maneuvers swiftly, silently, until he is above Adhana Alanna Aoluwa's balcony. There are stairs from the roof into her house, but he fears guards, and rightly so. Instead, he jumps down to a narrow ledge that girds the house. From here he can crawl onto the balcony. He listens. He hears the passing of the human stream below, but he hears nothing from the room of his chosen love.

How shall I describe this moment? It is an ordinary one. True, his back is pressed against the wall and his body hidden in shadow, as if he is a thief. But are not all decisions the same? He is undecided, at that moment, between left or right, yes or no. It is an easy thing for him to sneak into the room. It is easier still to remain as he is.

What is that force that moves mankind? When two paths lie before a man, why does he choose one and not the other? And though the prophet speaks to Emere still, as he waits, he can choose to walk away.

He does not. His feet traverse the thin ledge, his hands pull him over the railing, and he enters her room, searching quickly for his love, that he might reassure her and not startle her. She is asleep on a small couch. She does not wake at his entrance. She does not even readjust her beautiful body.

Cautiously, Emere approaches. He cannot take his eyes from her face — it is beautifully bronze, the lips are ... but you have heard these things. Emere does not focus upon any part, but upon the whole. Were you to ask him at this moment what is beautiful about Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, he would not understand your question. What is beautiful? There is no word for it. It is not a thing, but a person, and not a part, but the living completeness, in all its complexity and contradiction. It is Adhana herself.

She is at peace. She breathes slowly, and Emere thinks that perhaps he has never glimpsed a person more alive than this woman, utterly abandoned to contented sleep. He has seen her in her wild joy, in her maddening fits of activity, in her desperate despair. He has never seen this.

Momentarily, he desires to shake her awake — he is fidgeting, wiping his face with his rag. He desires to wake her, to end her sleep and lacerate her with his turmoil. He steps toward her. His hand reaches for her. He stops himself and begins to pace.

The choice is before him. The prophet's words are in his head — he whispers them to himself. He looks at Adhana. He stops, pacing no longer.

No, his arms are not strong. He turns to leave, envisioning his lips kissing her cheek, her eyes opening, her lips curving in a smile, and his questions answered and answered as he knew they should be. But it is only a vision.

He looks over the balcony and, cautious of guards and onlookers, returns the way

he came. Determinedly, he walks away, over the roofs of the city.

IX. Unrest

It is one of my great desires to reveal in words the intricacies of expression. In this, I am still a novice. So now, as I watch Otaka lumber from the marketplace after his brawl, how do I begin? During the fight, his face changed not at all. Now, with the thing accomplished, his wide mouth, always turned down, seems to lower further. His eyes, always black and impassive, seem harder still. Unless I misunderstand the Ronkar, he is not pleased. Perhaps his misery will soon be made clear.

But it is not soon to lessen. I can see him approaching the tent of Oscar Masquino, but that tent is trembling, for Oscar has led Pierre to his tent, and now they are within. The flaps are closed tight. The sides shudder. A form presses against its bright colors, stretching it, then disappears. A support falls away. The top sags and collapses. Somehow — what violent activity must be hidden inside! — the sides cave in. The tent dwindles to a brightly-colored sheet of fabric. It rolls, it thrashes, it pants and groans and shrieks.

No, Otaka will remain unhappy this day.

From the wreckage of the tent emerges Oscar. His hair is a whirlwind. His garish clothes are twisted and torn. Blinking in the light of the falling sun, he reaches to adjust his turban, but finds that it is gone. He sits on his knees for a time breathing hard. Now he lifts the edge of the ruined tent and tugs something from beneath. It is Pierre Agapa, bound and gagged. He does not look unconscious — his eyes are open wide — but he does not resist. Perhaps he is in shock.

Oscar struggles to stand and rests leaning forward, his hands on his legs. Groaning, he lowers himself onto Pierre, sits, and wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. Soon he spies Otaka where he stands, a distance away, stock-still. Slowly, the Ronkar

approaches.

“The tent,” he says, standing very near Oscar and looking down at the raddled figure.

“We can repair it. We’ve done it before.”

“Yes, too often. On whom are you sitting?”

“He has a name I suppose. I know he told me it. What did you learn about the fair lady?”

“Nothing.”

Oscar laughs. “You said you would never return, and yet you have. How am I to believe that you have discovered nothing? I want to hear what you have found, Otaka.”

“I said only that I might not return.”

“True enough!” Oscar says loudly, waving a finger at the Ronkar. “True enough. But tell me, my friend, what have you discovered?”

“Do not pursue her.”

Oscar’s smile disappears. “Do not tell me what to do. I am the master, and you are the hired help. I am in love, Otaka. You must know that. My heart is throbbing; my palms are sweaty; I gasp for air at the thought of her—”

“You have had a fight.”

“Let me speak! Have you never known a woman who seized your soul and twisted it in knots? Even Ronkars must be in love sometimes. There are female Ronkars, I hope. I bet you loved a beauty once yourself, and she rejected you. That’s why you’re such a morose, monstrous creature. Why, your face is too rough to attract even ugly, desperate Ronkars. What do you say to that — Otaka?”

To understand this last panicked cry, you must know that Otaka has lifted Oscar by the front of his robes. Oscar’s legs waver uncertainly. However, Otaka’s action is not done in rage, but deliberately — his words are cold. “You do not understand Ronkars.”

“Well, no, not exactly,” Oscar says, his head slipping into the robes. “Could you set me down?”

“I could, yes.” He does not. “Who is this man?”

“What did you learn about my woman?”

“Nothing. But I know her name.”

“Her name? Confound it all, I forgot to ask it! Tell me!” Oscar’s head rises as he struggles to see into Otaka’s face. “Is it a lovely name? I know that it is.”

“What is the name of that man there?”

“He doesn’t matter. We had a dispute. He tore down my tent. Look at it.”

“I see it. What did you say to him? It is your fault.”

“Otaka! You don’t even trust me! What a fine bodyguard you are! Where’s your loyalty?”

“Where is your civility? You are not a beast, Human. Control your passions.”

“That’s too far! Let me down and I’ll fight you. Come on, let me down. I’ve had enough of the way you look at me. Oh, how great and knowledgeable are the Ronkars! They know but one emotion — sorrow — and trudge through life guided by the narrow limits of their imaginations!”

This argument may have continued far longer had it not been interrupted. Just as Otaka begins to reply, both he and Oscar become silent. Otaka lowers his companion. Thirty men with swords have surrounded them, and Kazik Kalzula is with them.

Oscar straightens his clothes and sets his feet on each side of Pierre so that his robes hide him. “Gentlemen, welcome. I am the Prophet Oscar Masquino. How may I assist you?”

“Do you know this creature?” Kazik asks.

Oscar looks at Otaka in surprise. “Him? A little. We are acquainted.”

“He has injured a number of my personal guards.”

“Really?” Oscar looks at Otaka admiringly. “I didn’t know. We are only briefly

acquainted. Why did he do this?”

“He was following my bride Adhana Alanna Aoluwa. We tried to detain him and he charged us like a bistank.”

“He was following your bride?”

Oscar’s robes begin to billow at the bottom, and he squeezes his feet together to stifle it.

“She will soon be my bride. Now, will you protect this beast?”

“No, no, no, NO, NO, NO!” Oscar dances a little as he repeats the word with increasing intensity. “No, please, do as you want with him.”

The soldiers stare at him, and Kazik, though his eyes are enclosed with fat, peers intently also.

“I feel a great wind rising!” Oscar proclaims, raising his hand. “Beware, be gone, see how I shiver and shake at its coming! It is nearing, it is growing stronger, it will sweep me from this desert place, it will lift me unto the heaven—”

Two Ronkar hands lift him from Pierre and place him down again. The treasure hunter is rolling and yelling through his gag. The soldiers untie him before Kazik realizes who he is.

“She hasn’t chosen, has she?” Pierre asks shrilly. “I’ll murder you if you have stolen her from me. I have ways of doing it, Kazik. I have a splendid collection of weapons. I would not mind blood staining their gold and diamond hilts.”

“Bind them all,” Kazik orders. Pierre is again gagged and bound. Oscar, already restrained, is treated the same. The soldiers hesitate with Otaka, but he holds out his hands for the ropes. Together, they are led to the house of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, for her decision is near.

X. The Decision

This night, though soldiers stand outside the house of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa wielding scimitars and glares, many people gather round, for they hear inside such a scene of passion and ferocity that few can ignore it.

It begins with the entrance of Kazik Kalzula and with the blast of his tongue.

“Melusha, my associate and friend, you cannot withhold your daughter from me any longer. I will prove my claim — look at the shame these two would bring upon you and your house!”

Adhana’s father, startled from a daydream, looks around bewildered until Kazik palms his head in his hand and turns it to Oscar and Pierre. “Look!”

I am afraid to say, as I view them in the lamplight, Kazik’s words hold some small truth. Oscar, his bright colors laughable in certain situations and his clothes already disheveled from his encounter with Pierre, appears still worse for the blood dribbling from his nose. (Kazik’s soldiers interrogated him on the way, which was shortened by Otaka’s willing cooperation.)

Pierre fares no better, for his fine skin is already bruised, and his uncovered head with his wispy hair and outstretched neck — he has lost his purple cap — resembles a bald bird. At first, Adhana’s father cannot recognize him.

“Master Agapa?”

“I have been sorely mistreated, sir. I had in my possession a great treasure for your daughter, but I was attacked.”

“Attacked?” the father gasps, turning to Kazik. “I am shocked! I can’t conceive—”

Kazik’s hand reaches the father’s head once more and directs it to Oscar. “That is the scoundrel, the prophet whom your daughter visited and who has deceived her with lies. He has his eyes upon her! And that,” Kazik raises the head to view Otaka, “is his guard, who disgraced me.”

“Oh, my apologies, I didn’t see you there,” the father says to Otaka. “Welcome to

my house.”

Otake nods. “Thank you. I am hard to see because of my size.”

“It’s true, we all bear our own burdens. Have you been in the city long? The market is a treat for foreigners, I’m told.”

“I arrived this morning. The market may have been pleasant, under different circumstances.”

“My friend!” Kazik says angrily, squeezing the other’s head tightly and turning it to face his own. “This creature injured a dozen of my guards this afternoon.”

The father’s face changes quickly to shocked terror. “A dozen soldiers ... are you sure? This creature? He seems such a pleasant fellow.”

“Will you give me your daughter?”

The shocked terror has not left the father’s face. “She must decide.”

“These two are not worthy of her. Look at them! They are unruly, foul-mouthed, evil-minded, uncivilized rogues! Do not tell me that your daughter, the daughter whom you love above all things, would be happy with either of them!”

The father looks as Kazik commands. He sees nothing different from before, except he notices a gag in Pierre’s mouth and blood dripping from Oscar’s chin. He begins to hum but is distracted by intense pressure on his temples. “Perhaps we should hear them speak,” he says.

“They are ruffians, cowards, thugs, and liars!” Kazik insists.

The father nods. “But if they are ... who knows what may make my daughter happy? I am an old man. Perhaps we should hear them speak.”

Kazik restrains himself and relents. He is foremost a businessman, and he must maintain, in this particular situation, an appearance of cordiality. Pierre speaks first, once the gag is removed. His words are muddled by the injuries on his face, and he coughs wretchedly as he begins.

“Master Aoluwa, my love is for all things beautiful. I have a collection of such

wonders that none can view it and be unaffected by the majesty of this world — the glitter of gold, the sparkle of sapphires, the glint of steel, the spark of captured flame, the strength of mounted beast, the parts and pieces of past history, the sophistication of time pieces, the — oh, I am too full of it!” Pierre cries in exultation, and the father with him, wiping tears of joy from his eye. “But your daughter — listen, Master Aoluwa, I mean this truly — your daughter is more precious than any of these, more finely-wrought, more carefully crafted. She can have no equal. The gods themselves envy her! My collection shall clothe and house her, and she shall be its master and its crown. For Beauty is...!” But Pierre is seized by tremors of great joy and cannot finish.

“Kazik, my friend, he must be present for my daughter’s decision,” the father pleads. “Did you hear his words? He is worthy, if she finds him so. Now, let the other speak.”

Kazik, his face red, his belly trembling with anger, makes the motion for Oscar’s gag to be removed. Oscar wipes the blood from his face, and it disappears into the crimson of his clothes. He bows, flourishes his cape, and speaks:

“Master Aoluwa, let me introduce myself. I am Oscar Masquino, and I am a prophet. I have come to this fair city to offer my services, for I serve the meek and the poor, those burdened by the troubles and uncertainties and chaos of life. Your daughter came to me, neither meek nor poor, but burdened by the terrible weight of her decision. I know you are a father who loves her, and I know also that neither of these men is worthy of her. I see, Master Aoluwa, all things.

“And yet, how was I, though I have been granted wisdom and can fathom the knowledge of others’ futures, to know my own? When I saw your daughter, her beauty overcame me — no, I do not mean it as my fellow suitor has expressed it. While I agree she is most attractive, her beauty is of a different kind. I speak not of her physical body, but of the exquisiteness of her emotions and the soaring heights of her spirit, not of the shell but of the animated being. I desire not her soft skin but the

woman herself — the fire that lights the eyes and ignites the passion of her words. In her, Master Aoluwa, I find Woman as she was created to be, not the object of worship but of the purest love.

“I am a stranger, but I have seen her and I would be false to my very self were I to let her slip through my fingers, though I am treated ill because of it.”

Oscar bows again as he finishes, and such is his skill that even Kazik is for a moment silenced. Adhana’s father’s face is rapt with joy.

“You are still false.”

The moment is broken. All look to Otaka. “What do you mean?” the father asks.

Otaka shrugs. “He lies.”

“But his words!” the father exclaims. “They are so transparent, so true to my own feelings for the girl.”

“Ronkars do not understand love,” Oscar explains. “Otaka, please, you are embarrassing me.”

The Ronkar replies: “No, you do that without my help.”

“These creatures, they have no fine feelings,” Oscar says, grinning widely. “They are mountainous creatures, you know. As stiff as stones.”

“You know nothing of love.” And though Otaka says it first to Oscar, his lifeless gaze meets Kazik’s.

“Don’t tell me I know nothing of love!” Kazik roars. “You are not welcome in Human lands!”

“Do not tell me what I already know,” Otaka replies.

Kazik has reined his tongue too often this night — a soul-tongued man must speak, and if he does not speak, he must act. He rushes forward, hands outstretched. It is fortunate that his soldiers restrain him before he reaches Otaka.

But as the soldiers are distracted, Oscar pulls away from their grip. His hands are tied behind his back, but he runs from them. Kazik is booming. Oscar calls to Otaka,

who pays no attention. Pierre struggles to follow Oscar's example and is quickly subdued by a blow to the neck. The guards begin shouting orders to one another; Pierre cries out in pain; Oscar screams for Otaka as he races around the room, destroying vases in his haste. And the father of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa hums, louder and louder, a dancing song from his youth for which he still remembers the steps.

XI. The One Who Isn't There

Kazik is the first, but he leads the others by only a few steps. He ceases to struggle against the saving hand of his guard and turns, avoiding the twirling father of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, dodging the swift figure of Oscar, outrunning the great Ronkar hand. He bounds up the stairs. Behind him, as if he is the first drop of water through a growing crack, follows a frenzied rush of figures — flashing swords and the colors of bright clothes; arms and legs and heads without distinction; crowded, sweating bodies; shouts, screams, a roar. They reach the top. Adhana's curtain is torn from its place, and the room floods with men.

She is not there.

She is on a ledge of the house, in the corner near her balcony. She weeps, trying to remain silent. But she has heard their mad clatter, and her heart cannot remain unexpressed. She whispers in feverish anguish:

“O, I hear their terrible voices, like demons tormenting me! They are wild, wicked, loveless men! Prophet, did you not see them? I wait as you have commanded me! O, I am tortured by all things under the sun! Did you see the malice in their eyes when you looked at me? You must have, for I could see nothing but the awful glare of fire as it consumes all men. I have a secret. Do you know it, Prophet? You must have known it. I can hide it from no man. I am that sun! It is I who inflame all mankind! I am cursed. The gods have burdened me from birth, but I hoped, I dared to hope, my dear,

blessed Prophet, that they had seen my misery, that I had moved them to pity by my wretched tears, and that they might grant me escape. Is this my freedom, to hide from all men as they tear like beasts at the very scent of me?”

A great sob shakes her breast. In despair, she screams, walking to the edge. “Vile Darkness, do you hope to hide my unending torment? Can you hide my beauty in your folds; can your cold grip steal my warmth and extinguish the flame that licks my body? I will be yours if you can! I am to make a decision this night. What man can I choose? For all men are slaves, and I, their taskmaster, scourging them with dreams and visions. Terrible, unending Night, can you break these chains that hold captive master and slave alike? Can you slake the consuming fire of men’s unrestrained passion? How awful is your face! I tremble before it, but the sun mocks me. The stars laugh in the heavens above. Take me, rend me to pieces, deliver me from the unending cycle of days. You are Lord of all the Lost, and I am their Queen!”

Adhana takes a step forward, into the air, and she waits for the ground to rise and crush her. Arms encircle her. The ledge is again beneath her feet.

“Do not stop me!” she screams. “I cannot live. I am alone, and I cannot bear it.”

The arms tighten. She struggles; she weeps. Exhausted, she slips to the ground. Her hair hides her face from the world, and she asks weakly, as if she were dying, “What do you compare me to? Am I your oasis in the desert? Am I a tree laden with fruit? What am I? Am I a jewel? A statue? A daughter of the gods? Can you tell me what I am?”

“I think ... you are a lost child waiting for someone to find you.”

Adhana’s tense body falls utterly into the arms of the one who speaks, and she sobs. The din in the room nearby continues, and now din from the streets, of murmuring and laughing and shouting, rises upward. But the night is silent for Adhana. She cries no longer in the vast emptiness of her soul, but in the cradled compassion of another.

She tries to control herself. “Who are you?”

“It doesn’t matter, it ... you scared me. I saw you standing at the edge.... I felt terror, I never felt so weak....” The man cannot continue.

Wiping away her tears with her hair, Adhana turns in his arms for she hears a soft, sad sound. “You are crying,” she says in surprise.

“No, I’m not.” He tries to turn his head to hide it from her. He loosens his arms, but she grabs them and pulls them tight around her.

“Emere Donka,” she rebukes, “I will not let you leave now that you have me.” The body against her trembles at the words. “I have made my decision. Were you in wait for me, you clever boy?”

Emere, as most young men, cannot comprehend the sudden change of emotion, but he will learn, slowly, in the days to come. For now, he answers as best he knows — with abashed honesty. “No, no! I’ve been wandering the roofs of the city since the afternoon. I started to return to see you with the rest, but I had wandered too far. I saw you, here, as I approached. I heard your words, I saw you on the edge....”

Emere grows silent, and Adhana weeps again, more powerfully than before. He holds her tightly. It does not occur to him that the prophet’s words were true, nor does it matter. In such a situation, what is knowledge, if there is no love?

XII. And Each Goes His Way

Of what the future holds for the participants in this affair, I cannot fully say. I hold little power of foresight, and though I may guess, as a one who understands Man might, I will not. My place is not to pierce the fog of future events. I deal with the present. It is more full of mystery than most will admit, and as grand as Eternity, which is its foundation.

The particulars of the brawl in Adhana’s room I will not detail. It is enough to say

that if Otaka had been absent, Oscar might have woken naked in the middle of the desert next morning. When things go badly, it is not always the guilty who are punished (though I do not presume to judge Oscar's culpability in the matter) — the fresh face gets the welt.

But Otaka was present, and too few of Kazik's soldiers. But more came, and still more, and the city, awake and listening, rose in passion, and Otaka escaped, running heavily through the streets. Oscar lay over his shoulder, and he yelled at those who followed, though only between groans of pain.

Now it is morning. Kazik is scouring the city with his every guard, and with many more whom he has hired in recent hours. The city is garrulous in the talk of Adhana Alanna Aoluwa, and though Kazik is offering a reward, some think of keeping her if they find her first.

Pierre Agapa, sick from exertion, is making surreptitious inquiries from his bedside concerning transportation south across the sea — the sooner the better. He is motivated by a number of persistent questions that reach his ears: someone is trying to find him. A certain man, reports Pierre's host, claims that Pierre is engaged to a daughter of his. Moreover, this certain man is planning to force the union. Slipping coin after coin to his host, Pierre assures him that this man is a liar, but would he please keep quiet?

Adhana's father lies in the dim, cool isolation of his room, alternately weeping for his lost daughter, sleeping, snoring, and humming blissfully. It is here that Emere, sneaking into the house by the roof and slipping down the stairs, finds him and hands him a note from his daughter.

After a prolonged embrace, he urges Emere out of the room, already beginning to change from his bedclothes, which, though it is late morning, he has not removed. He arrays himself in a white robe, washes his face and hands, and dances up the stairs. His daughter's room is a wreckage of broken furniture and discarded clothes. He

wanders here for a time, fingering cloth and carvings. Tears fill his eyes.

But when Adhana enters from the roof, Emere beside her, he laughs abruptly, wiping away the tears. He holds her and hugs her and quickly, at her insistence, marries her and Emere. Then he dances with her, and with Emere, and with a dress from the floor, each in turn, singing:

*My love is lovely,
My dear is darling,
My heart is singing, sighing, sobbing.*

*She was a girl,
She was a child,
She is a woman, wife, lover, mother.*

*I had no son.
I had no heir.
I am a patriarchal presence, a new-made father,
A mad happy fool!*

He has never sung the song before. None that I know has ever sung it. It springs from his lips rough-hewed, and he finds no need of embellishment. Perhaps it is quaint, as he repeats it again, and now another time, but who am I to judge the worth of a joyful song?

Somewhere in the desert, Otaka trudges, his skin baked and cracked in the blazing heat. The land before him spreads everlastingly, the air shimmering as if another world is wavering behind the one that assails the Ronkar.

Oscar sits upon his shoulder, sweating, but smiling. "It is really very good of you to carry me, my friend. My shoes can't handle the heat, and my leg is still sore where they hit me." He moves his leg gingerly and grimaces.

Otaka continues walking. The landscape does not change.

"You wouldn't have left me, would you have, Otaka? When I told you to follow

Adhana, you said you might not return. You were only joking. I know you were.”

“You do not understand Ronkars.”

“You keep saying that. I find it very annoying.”

The sun moves a little. Or they do.

“Do you suppose I was right? Emere wasn’t there last night. Do you think she chose him? I did prophesy that she would be his, before I knew how beautiful she was.”

“If you were right, it is no thanks to you.”

“Why not? Perhaps I have a gift after all.”

“Have you ever heard a donkey speak?”

“A donkey? What *are* you talking about?”

“Have you ever heard a donkey speak?” Otaka repeats.

“No, of course not. Have you?”

“If you heard a donkey speak, would you congratulate the donkey for a job well done?”

“You’re right. I don’t understand Ronkars.”

“Do you want to walk?” Otaka asks, reaching to remove Oscar.

“No. Fine, I’ll answer your question. A donkey is a dumb beast. I would think it was a trick of some kind if it spoke, a very clever trick.”

“Yes, very clever.”

Oscar slaps the top of Otaka’s head. “I hate it when you repeat me. Explain what you mean.”

“You are clever,” Otaka replies. “But you are not *very* clever.”

“Then what?” Oscar demands. “Do the gods really speak to men? And through me?” Oscar laughs gleefully. “What a wondrous idea! You are absolutely absurd. You Ronkars are the clever ones.”

“Do not say that.”

The day passes slowly, unchangingly. The sun is not easily deposed from her throne. Oscar's torn robes stink with sweat. He shifts on Otaka's shoulder, trying to find a comfortable position.

"Do you understand love, Otaka?" Oscar asks suddenly. "As we Humans do, I mean. I said before that you do not. I might not have meant it."

"As Humans do? I hope not. Are you thirsty?"

"No. I've been collecting my sweat and drinking it."

Otaka reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out a flask, handing it to Oscar, who takes it greedily.

"Otaka, my friend, you are the most delightful bodyguard in the world."

THE END

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