

The Dance of Shadows

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Rogba Payne

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In the old days we lived amongst you, in plain sight. You knew the names we told you and some of you knew the names we never told. We cared for you, protected you and taught you. The woe of love.

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Prologue

The Alaafin had always thought it would rain on the day he died. Instead, the sun stood at its full height above him with no opposition from the clouds. The heat made his dark skin glisten with sweat. Sunny days usually made him smile, but this was not a day for smiles. Before the day was done, he'd be dead.

'Don't die before you are dead,' Oya said, placing a hand on his chest. 'Be strong, my love.'

She peered up at him and smiled. To smile like that when she knew what was coming was an act of uncommon strength. He tried to smile back but it was in vain. He didn't have it in him. Not a true smile. Only she could do that.

She had skin like smooth earth, with a full head of braids that trailed down her back like thick black snakes. Her boubou of nine colours had loose-fitting sleeves and a bodice tight to her form.

Her love was like honey spooling in a bowl. Sweet and slow; thick and full. A gift he could never truly be worthy of. The Alaafin would have given anything to sing to Oya in the way she deserved, to praise her, to exalt her, and worship her. Now he feared all he would have for her would be screams.

No, I won't scream, I won't let her hear me scream. I have to be strong for her. He straightened.

Their house was no fortress. He'd built it himself with his hands, perseverance, mudbrick, and palm leaves. There was nowhere to hide, nothing to protect them.

They could run, but even if they did, they could not outrun *him*.

There had been a time when he could vault a nation with a stride, part the waters, call the wind to carry him and be sure it would obey. A time before all this; when men still called his name. A time when, if he dipped his toe in the ocean, the world heard the splash. That time was long gone.

It was a cruel way to die, awaiting slaughter like a goat on festival day. The whistle of the wind was like laughter in his ears.

Oya touched the small of his back. 'He is close. I can feel him.' The cord in his neck pulsed. The Alaafin could feel him, too. He drew in breath. 'I am going to get my double-axe.'

Oya's hand glided slowly from his back to his shoulder. Her touch still made his skin tingle. 'There is no sense in that, my love. Just hold me – for now.'

He bit down on his tongue and pulled her close, burying her head in his chest. Her nails dug deep into his back as he locked his fingers in her hair. For that small, eternal moment he felt whole; blessed and stout-hearted. But it was only a moment.

A disgusted squall from above drew their attention. A vulture, alone and unafraid, loomed overhead. Its wings stretched wide, as though expecting applause.

Oya glanced up at the bird, her gaze cold as the night sea. The vulture glared back. Daring them, almost. A normal vulture would not goad the living, but this was no normal vulture.

The Alaafin arched his back and stared up at the sky, then he called lightning by its name. A bolt from the heavens struck the bird directly. A shriek rang out as it fell dead to the ground.

If the Accuser wanted to kill them, they would not go quietly.

‘I am going to get my double-axe.’

This time, Oya did not disagree. He could almost feel her fury flare as her countenance changed.

‘I am with you, my husband.’

At last, he smiled. They would die as they had lived, and that was enough.

They gathered their weapons and adorned themselves with every charm they owned. *Damudamu*, to confound their enemy’s senses; *isora*, to blunt every enemy blade; and *afei*, to become invisible to the naked eye.

Oya washed her two-edged *ida* sword with pepper and poison to paralyse at a touch, then wore a necklace with the single black cowrie that warned her of danger. The Alaafin sharpened his double-axe and put on the amulet of Jarishma, which made his skin impenetrable. Their faces were painted with the blood of enemies long dead. Finally, the Alaafin donned his war helmet. Hard iron, wrought in the shape of a snarling dog. It made a sharp sound as he snapped it shut.

They stood as one. Ready to die.

The Alaafin let out a sharp breath. ‘Let him come.’

A ripple in the air announced the arrival of their executioner. He was dressed all in white with bleached, near-translucent skin, and pointy teeth like knives. He moved like he had all the time in the world, every step bereft of urgency. Like a man who owned the earth.

The Alaafin narrowed his eyes. *The Accuser*.

A boy appeared next, also dressed in immaculate white. The boy watched the Accuser with all the eager calm of an apprentice watching his master’s work. His smile was that of a hunting dog staring at cornered prey.

When he spoke, the Accuser’s voice was like water wrenched through an empty husk. A voice that came in an unsteady

drip-drop, with high and low notes falling with no rhythm. ‘The Alaafin and the Mother of Nine. I know you sensed that I was coming, yet you have not tried to run. Tell me, have you decided to serve the Son?’

The Alaafin parted his lips but Oya spoke first, her voice taut with rage. ‘Bind the Son to hell! Dara the Skyfather remains Lord of All.’

The Alaafin smiled again.

The Accuser’s stare was pitiless. ‘So, it is death. Will you die quietly?’

The Alaafin’s eyes narrowed to dark slits. Old strength reared up inside him. ‘It will be loud.’

The skies grumbled overhead. It *was* going to rain after all. He etched the crossroads sign of Dara the Skyfather across his sternum and raised a hand, calling forth his shadow. Sheets of effervescent black mist oozed from his skin as his shadow rose in a column of black froth. A sharp and sudden storm wind whipped black fumes into a spiralling updraft. Power flooded him, roaring through his bones and body, calling him to act. He hefted his double-axe in his right hand and stretched out his left. A night-black curved blade coalesced from dust in his outstretched grip. Clouds ambushed the sun, telling all things living to find shelter.

Brimming with the power of his shadow, the Alaafin raised his double-axe high and screamed his own name: ‘*Xango!*’

The Accuser’s expression was almost one of delight, a quirk in his lips the only response to the Alaafin’s show of power. They were amusing to him. He chuckled and raised his own hands to the sky. The Alaafin jerked back.

To the eye, nothing had changed – but to the Alaafin, it was a declaration. He could sense the foreboding press of the

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Accuser's incredible power. It was as though the air itself was being strangled.

The Alaafin cursed. 'Shege.'

A thin, grey-white sword materialised in the Accuser's hand and he started to chant.

'And the Son shall cast them down, erase their names, their seed in the land.'

Oya's arms quivered as her sword-grip went slack. Tears trailed down her cheeks, smearing the war paint. *This is not how it should end.*

She glanced at him and when their eyes met, she smiled, for the very last time. 'I love you... Xango.'

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I

A Pigeon Among Swans

RUMI

In this life, it is important to know the truth about yourself. It helps to resist the lies. A dead man told Rumi that.

Rumi knew at least three things about himself. He knew he was Odd down to his bones. Born under a bloodwood tree, with dark rosewood skin and dreadlocks that grew to his waist. He knew he had to keep his pride; it was his weapon and armour in an adversarial world. He knew the smell of Kuba people made him sick.

That afternoon, Rumi was sick.

The triumphal arch above bore the words ‘*The Golden Room*’. As he stepped forward, the floral stench of Kuba perfume jumped down his throat.

He cursed under his breath. ‘*Shege.*’

It was the scent of prosperity. Orchid, with hints of bergamot, honey and salt. Doubtless a delight to the local Kuba parvenu, but it made Rumi feel like a jungle wolf that had strayed too close to the village and caught the scent of a hunter.

Always keep a Kuba at least a spear's length away. That was his philosophy, but today, he was deep in Kuba territory with scant protection for his nose.

A short Kuba man stood beside the door. Shaped like a

cookpot, with a thick, obstinate jaw and the Golden Room's crest on his dark blue kaftan.

The doorman looked at Rumi the way a gatekeeper looks at a stray, sickly dog.

'Who you be?' the doorman called out.

Pidgin. He had spoken pidgin to Rumi. When a stranger speaks pidgin to you, it means they think you are a beggar, a village boy or both. Rumi *was* a village boy and he *was* no stranger to begging when the money purse was light, but he could speak the damn Common Tongue.

He forced a smile and replied in clean Common. 'I'm here to audition ... sir. I'm a musician.'

The doorman snorted. 'Do you have a reference?'

The moment of truth.

Rumi produced a small note and handed it over. 'From Tinu the Panther.'

The doorman read it slowly. Or at least, it seemed slow. Time always moved slowly in the big moments. Like the moment before the guillotine falls.

'Your name?' the doorman finally asked.

'Irumide Voltaine.'

The doorman blinked, eyed Rumi up and down, then nudged the door open. 'Take a seat in the waiting room. I'll call you when your turn comes.'

Suppressing a smile, Rumi brushed through the door. As soon as he was inside, he let out a silent breath, sagging against the wall. A chance. That was all he wanted. A chance to make some *real* money. The kind of money that allows you to plan your life. To leave leftovers on your plate.

He straightened as he looked around. The anteroom was opulence incarnate. A huge window dominated the far wall, bathing the room in sunlight. The curtains and carpet were

a shimmering honey-gold, and there was a large, gold-plated table at the centre with four candelabras. By the near wall, marble busts of musicians past stared down at him with stern, disapproving faces.

It was like being in another country. The Palmaine had brought a piece of their nation to Basmine; everything down to the candlewax looked imported.

Rumi was dazzled. Who wouldn't be? Yet, like an over-sugared butter cake, there was something a little sickening about it all.

The place was swarming with Kubas, dressed in colourful cashmere kaftans and soft-sole leather sandals.

Rumi had his best kaftan on, but beside them, he looked like a wretch who'd had an especially torrid year and been robbed on the trip down. A pigeon among swans.

His height – a gift from the father he'd never known – made him an easy target for their reproachful glares. His skin seemed to itch just from being in the room.

He glanced up and noticed a strange ceiling mural. It was a painting of pretty, pale angels having a naked frolic in the clouds. The angel at the centre of the painting was the prettiest of the lot, seated on a throne of clouds with a vulture perched on his shoulder. *Why ruin such a beautiful scene with a vulture?*

Instinctively, Rumi tugged the edges of his leopard-skin scarf to make sure it covered the tattoos on his neck. The last thing he wanted was for some prick to start screaming 'denier' if they saw his tattoos.

In places like the Golden Room, where wealth was a virtue and poverty a vice, Rumi was the devil and his *Darani* tattoos made him worse than the devil to some. Anyone with sense knew there was no place for the old gods in this shiny new world.

A soft sound behind him sent a tremor up his spine. Rumi glanced over his shoulder. A man was fingerpicking an oud;

tuning it. Finally, he relaxed. It was the first thing in the Golden Room to make him smile. Each touch of string was a subtle, delicate test. A search for the taut places.

The old Odu saying went, *'A man's hands tell his story'*.

If Rumi's hands told his story, they would say he had been whipped, that he had climbed trees and fallen from them. That he had scratched flesh when that was all he could do to protect himself. That he had burned his fingertips reading books by candlelight and that he had never caressed a woman the way Belize did in all his mother's secret books. Today was about his hands, nothing else. Not the Kuba, the Palmaine or anyone else.

He scanned the room for Odu people. The Kuba and Odu looked much alike, but Kuba were typically darker in complexion and thinner at the nose. To be truly sure of a person's tribe, you had to look them square in the face. Rumi wasn't in the habit of staring at Kuba, so instead he looked for other signs – well-worn kaftans or sandals dusty from walking.

One man seemed to fit the description. He stood near the marble busts with an easy slouch, in sandals not quite as new as the others.

Rumi made his approach. *'Hashiyeshi,'* he called out in greeting.

The man raised his chin, but his expressionless gaze did not change.

Rumi tried the Common Tongue. *'Hello?'*

'Oh, hello,' the man said, his lips curling into a vague approximation of a smile as he stepped close.

The man's accent made music of the Common Tongue. Soft and fluent. It was native to the man.

The man probably lived in the Citadel. He probably ate three courses at dinner. Soup for starters and the like. When Rumi